

CAMPUS ART ATTACK

By Megan Lawson
PHOTOS BY ALEX NURSALL

PREACHING ART

Every Saturday afternoon for the past thirty years Dan Donovan scours local galleries for the latest in contemporary art.

The 73-year-old priest has a penchant for contemporary Canadian art and a personal collection of over 300 pieces.

But the best ones of all are hanging on walls across St. Michael's campus. The hand picked artwork is in hallways, study spaces, and offices. And every piece was selected by Donovan.

"This is what art was meant for. The whole point of art is not to go to a museum, or above all to go into some great storage room; it's meant to be lived with," he says.

What began in 1980 as a seemingly one-off donation of a Kosso Eloul sculpture, Zen West, has flourished into a lifelong passion for the priest and theologian who now teaches in the Christianity and Culture program at St. Michael's.

"It wasn't particularly religious or spiritual," Donovan says of Eloul's glinting sculpture of stainless steel rectangles that now sits on the college campus. "I just thought it looked great and it looked good at St. Mike's and so I bought it and donated it. That's when I started going to the Toronto galleries."

Donovan's zeal for the contemporary style has steered the St. Mike's collection in a decidedly different direction from other colleges at the university. "I've very self-consciously tried to get things that would be appropriate for certain areas and what's going in those areas, and what students are doing," he explains.

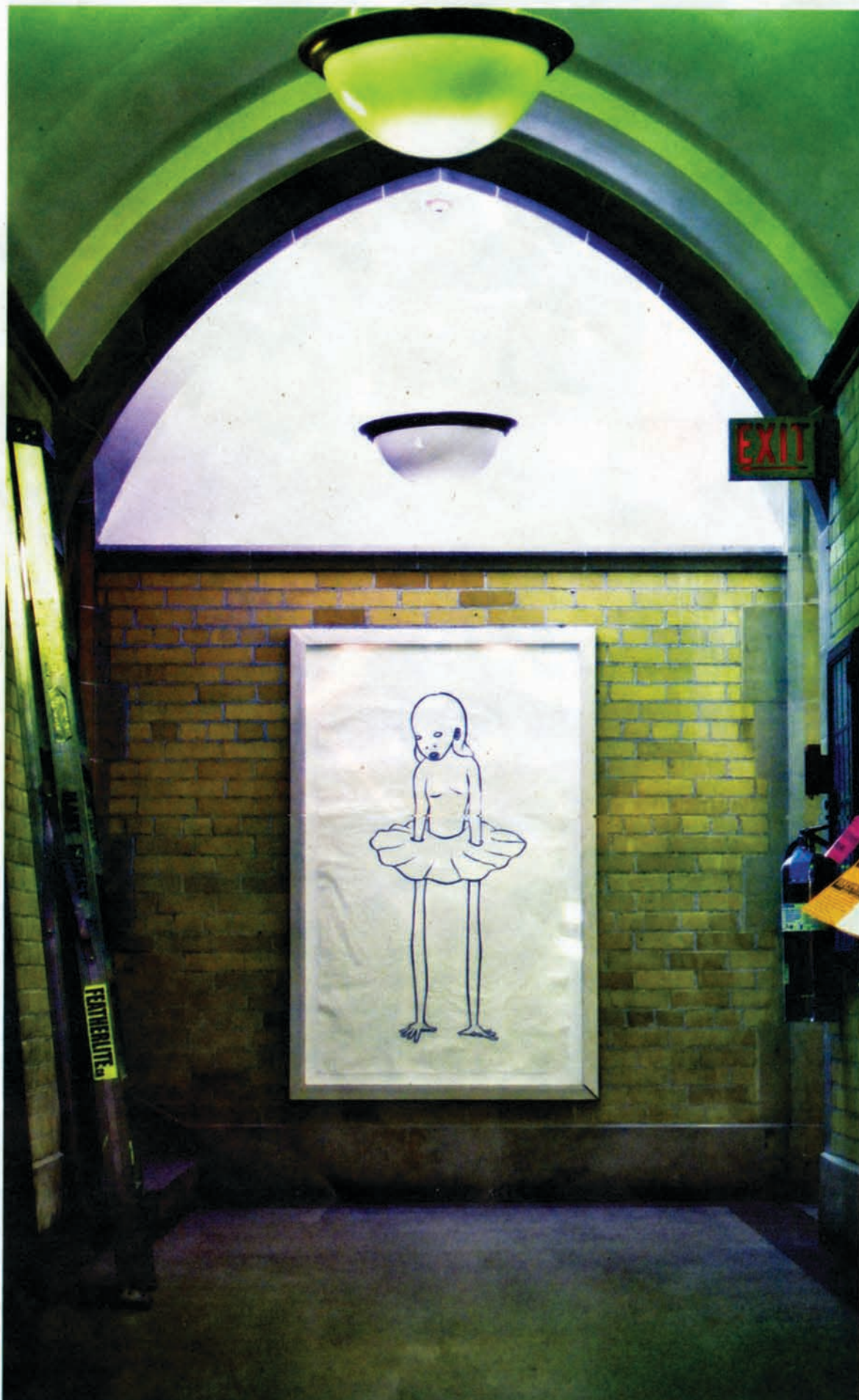
The Donovan Collection, as it is now known, spans the corridors of nine buildings at St. Mike's, and has swelled the college's holdings from a handful of outdoor sculptures to some 338 works.

In Kelly Library the recent installation of pieces by contemporary artists like Barbara Steinman and Harold Klunder break the monotony of stacks, while black and white photographs by Larry Towell and Dianne Bos hang outside of classrooms in Carr Hall.

"I've never bought anything because I should have a name," Donovan emphasizes in an interview. "Every piece that's in the collection has spoken to me. And because it's spoken to me, I hope that it will speak to other people."

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Such a deliberate, not to mention modern, focus is an anomaly among colleges at U of T. Only steps across campus, Trinity College is a world apart in its approach to art acquisition. "It's not a question of divvying up funds for



NORMAL-Ed Pien (Hart House)

Often without our realizing it, at UofT we are surrounded by public displays of art. Here's a quick glance at some of the places where, if you look close enough, it's easy to be inspired by the wallpaper.

purchase," explains archivist Sylvia Lassam, who adds, "we didn't really set out to acquire things."

Instead, the growth of Trinity's art collection, which is dominated by a who's who of 20th century Canadian artists, is largely a product of some serendipitous donations.

In fact, Trinity's most prolific donor never even attended the college. George Larkin built a fortune as the longtime head of the Salada Tea Company, and reinvested much of it into the bricks and mortar of the college.

For Lassam, Gerald Larkin played a unique role in amassing what are now considered to be some of the jewels of the Trinity collection. "There's nobody who could touch him," she says, pointing out that "he really had a huge impact on the way things look around here."

With nearly 650 pieces, almost all of it on display, Trinity's collection is more like an anthology of 20th century Canadian art. A landscape by A.Y. Jackson hangs over the fireplace in a residence common room; Aba Bayefsky's *Tastemakers* brightens a faculty meeting room; a luminous portrait by Fred Varley stares out from the hall of the Provost's lodge.

Clearly, this haphazard approach to collecting has paid off.

Such serendipitous acquisitions are nothing new at Victoria College, where archivist Gillian Pearson continues to uncover paintings and objects around campus and the quirky stories that accompany them.

This past November, Pearson discovered an antique sword and tapestry in a residence house on campus, objects that were likely brought back from Asia in the 1930s or 1940s by a college faculty member.

"Sometimes you find treasures - things you don't really know about or think aren't real and then all of a sudden they're actually genuine," she muses. "For me, and probably for Vic, the stories behind it [the art] are really important."

Pearson explains that when she took on the archivist position over two years ago, much of Vic's art collection, now numbering some 950 pieces, was in disarray. "We spent the entire summer going through nooks, crannies, closets, you name it, and found a lot of things that we didn't have on the list."

At one point, the ongoing search even uncovered a work by a member of the Group of Seven. Pearson recounts how a painting by group member Frank Johnston was discovered amongst the leftover belongings of a retired professor.

Like Trinity, Victoria's generous donors have allowed the college to compile a prolific collection of Canadian art and so-called *objets d'art*.

While St. Mike's also relies on patronage, the donor pool is on a much smaller scale. In effect, the college's newfound wealth in contemporary art is funded entirely out of the pocket of Dan Donovan.

"Because I'm a priest I don't have a family, I don't have a home; I'm paid by the university but I don't really need the money to any great extent. So what I've basically done is given everything back to St. Michael's in the form of the art," Donovan explains.

I really should . . .

I really should-Kelly Mark (Hart House)

Despite these different approaches, the purpose of each college art collection remains much the same.

"Not having a gallery here means the entire campus is our gallery," says Pearson. "I think if you took 10 people and said what does this art mean to you, half of them would say 'What art?'—it's just on the walls." And yet, she concludes: "but many others can be inspired by it."

Lassam is equally aware of the limited reach of art collections in a university setting. "It's the usual stratification of things. There's always going to be a certain percentage of people who are keenly aware of their visual surroundings," she says.

Even so, the enriched learning environment is a payoff in itself. "Even if you can have some kind of an impact on 10 per cent of the people who come through it's significant, it's worth doing."

For Donovan, art and learning are inseparable. "Art, including and perhaps especially contemporary art, belongs in a university setting," he reflects. "Contemporary Canadian art provides a window into our culture and into the personal and societal preoccupations that animate and give direction to it."



Escalator-Michael Awad (Carr Hall)

A BUNCH OF ART FOR A BUNCH OF STUDENTS

Over at Hart House, there's the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, located in the north end of the building. The gallery has hosted a number of critically acclaimed shows, including Mark Lewis's *In a City*, Shuvina Ashoona and Shary Boyle's *Noise Ghost*, and most recently, Will Kwan's *Multi-Lateral* (some of which is still up in the Great Hall.) But for those looking to interact with the art in a more casual setting, the walls of Hart House are themselves a constantly fluctuating gallery, each room hosting works from across Canada. Each year, the students that make up the Hart House Art Committee carefully add pieces to the expanding collection.

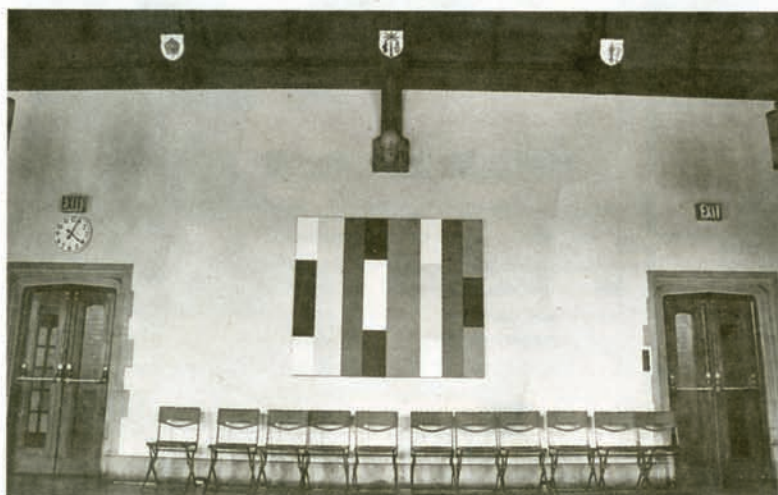
Hart House's constantly fluctuating assemblage can only accommodate about 400 pieces. "We try to change art maybe every few weeks, maybe one piece at a time, so the House gets renewed," says Christopher Regimbal, Curatorial Assistant for the Barnicke Gallery. "We're switching all the time. We switch one room at a time, and even if I have a long-term plan, I may only do one or two pieces at a time."

Regimbal notes, that although the collection consists predominantly of traditional media, "we've been trying in recent years to fill it out with things other than paintings. We've been trying to add multimedia installations, and we've purchased some video and photographic works."

It should also be noted that while most institutions centralize the best of their collections, several rooms in Hart House are themed. Two of the standouts here are the Music Room (lyrical abstraction), and the Debates Room (geometric abstraction).

With the tones of a grand piano constantly resonating through the Music Room, its bright and fluid artwork lies in stark contrast to the more formal room across the hall. "This room and the Debates Room are kind of in conversation with each other because they both have abstract works throughout," Regimbal explains.

While most of its art is cared for by the HHAC, Regimbal is quick to point out that there is a difference between how students should interact with art in Hart House than in a conventional gallery. "We're not a museum—we're a house, and we have a bunch of art that belongs to a bunch of students."



Untitled-Guido Molinari (Hart House)