

Big Av's art world

SARAH MILROY

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In the current Toronto exhibition *Regarding Av*, a small cartoon-like drawing on brown butcher paper from 1964 is on display, the handiwork of the artist Dennis Burton. Burton was a key contender in the rambunctious Isaacs Gallery stable, and his cartoon imagines the prominent players in the Toronto art scene as a school of fish, swimming toward lapping waves of dollar bills, over which he has inscribed the phrase "international market."

At the centre of the composition, Burton has placed an enormous whale bearing the distinct countenance of Avrom Isaacs, Toronto's leading art dealer of the day, and around him, a school of his gallery artists (Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Gordon Rayner, Richard Gorman, Graham Coughtry, William Ronald, Tony Urquhart and so on), each one a skillful caricature. Above them, a school of sharks represents the critics: Robert Fulford, Paul Duval, Betty Kilbourn and Pearl McCarthy.

In retrospect, the drawing is bittersweet. As fate would have it, few of these fish managed to swim further south than Lake Ontario. (Only Snow did and, briefly, Ronald.) But something perhaps more important did get achieved in those years; the dawning of a sense that Toronto was a place where significant art was made, talked about, bought and cherished. Burton's drawing expresses the bond of a creative community making history together, with Isaacs at its core.

This summer, the 79-year-old Isaacs, who retired in 2001, is being feted with *Isaacs Seen*, which consists of four interconnected shows. *Two on the Scene*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, will showcase the photographs of Michel Lambeth and Tess Taconis, who documented the gallery and the lively social interface between its artists and the public. *Closet Collector*, at the Textile Museum of Canada, documents Isaacs's fascination with textiles, from Pakistan to Baker Lake. At the University of Toronto Art Centre, Gallery ReView presents major works by leading Isaacs Gallery artists. (The exhibition includes one of Snow's great *Walking Woman* paintings, a molten Coughtry nude, Greg Curnoe's diaristic text work *24 Hourly Notes*, Jack Chambers's canonical *401 Towards London* and

Wieland's *Water Quilt* of 1971, an eco-feminist masterpiece.) Meanwhile, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Hart House is presenting *Regarding Av*, a private view of Isaacs the collector that is jammed with the evidence of his singular vision of art. Freelance curator Megan Bice was the organizer of the overall project and Isaacs's partner Donnalu Wigmore compiled the excellent 166-page scrapbook-style catalogue that accompanies it, which provides a vibrant record of the gallery's history and its cast of characters told through photographs and first-person recollections.

Several themes emerge. Isaacs's love of vernacular culture comes forward in his fascination with what he calls "found art," evident in his personal collection -- whether it be a massive pair of luxuriously sculptural tailor's scissors, or an Oh Canada hooked rug, festooned with maple leaves.

Culture was for everyone and came from everyone, and sometimes it was the gallery that had to rethink itself to accommodate a fuller understanding. In this, Isaacs was an intuitive postmodern, decades ahead of the pack.

His patriotism, too, comes forward. You see it in Burton's gloriously silly re-drafting of the *O Canada* anthem, exhibited at Hart House ("Oak and Dada, Glow rye us dan free"), in Curnoe's cherry-red, politically piquant Christmas-tree ornament ("No more nationalism. No more violence. Help wipe out the USA"), and in Wieland's embroidered crest at the Textile Museum, emblazoned with the words "The White Snow Goose of Canada. Protect Creatures."

At times, circumstances forced Isaacs into the role of defender of artistic liberty. The police crackdowns on his exhibitions of Mark Prent sculptures in 1972 and 1974 were causes célèbres, and at Hart House you can read some of the letters of support that came in from Canada and abroad. Wandering over to the U of T Art Centre, you can then judge for yourself what all the fuss was about. *Armistice* (1978), a typical work for the artist, consists of Prent's likenesses of two semi-decomposing male combatants, recumbent on a metal stretcher. The two are dressed as if for fencing, their rapiers lie at their sides, but they are unclad from the waist down -- all the better to observe their genitals, purple tinged and eerily alive. Clearly, Isaacs had a strong stomach for controversy.

Aboriginal culture is the other great theme in these shows. Isaacs's Inuit Gallery was the first gallery in the world devoted solely to the sale of Inuit art, and in addition to several great Inuit pieces -- such as a whalebone carving of a shaman by Judas Ullulaq at Hart House, or the enormous Jessie Oonark quilt at the Textile Museum -- there are wonderful Cree weavings, Mi'kmaq baskets and a Northwest Coast button blanket from

1950. A large photo blown up on the wall at the Textile Museum shows Wieland seated next to Oonark in the Isaacs Gallery, evidence of the kind of pioneering cultural exchange that Isaacs made possible.

His efforts went beyond simply serving his own artists and their markets. Hart House is showing a photograph of the legendary 1968 chess game between Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, held at the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (organized by composer Udo Kasemets and Isaacs, who appears in the background), and a vitrine displays evidence of the poetry readings held at his gallery in the early sixties -- gatherings that drew leading American poets Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Frank O'Hara and Robert Creeley to Toronto, where they read alongside Canadians Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy and Louis Dudek. You can't help but wonder if Toronto has ever again enjoyed such an ambitious moment, fuelled by civic pride and the rising wave of Canadian nationalism.

There is so much exuberance in the Isaacs vision, but the show also reveals a quieter, and sometimes darker side. The Hart House show includes excellent works by the mystical Jack Chambers and William Kurelek (who worked for many years as Isaacs's framer), as well as two paintings by Christiane Pflug -- one, a still life of a dead songbird and dried roses, and the other a riveting portrait of Isaacs. Pflug's painstaking realist work is haunting, made more so, in retrospect, by the fact that she took her own life in 1972. Her version of Isaacs is uncharacteristically sombre -- no merrymaking here -- but it reveals the strength she saw in him, a force in her world.

Behind all of this, you can feel Isaacs's deep humanism, expressed in his curiosity for his fellow man of all cultures, his frolicsome love of creativity, his compassion for the underdog and his love of truth. When Isaacs finally closed his gallery, in 2001, his last exhibition featured the work of Toronto photographer Richard Harrington. Harrington documented the great Keewatin famine of 1946 to 1950, a period when the caribou-migration patterns inexplicably shifted, leaving a wake of suffering and death for the aboriginal people of that region.

One photograph at Hart House gives us a starving Inuit woman in her tattered sealskin parka. She holds her baby up to her face, nose to nose -- a tiny victim of a harsh fate -- and we feel her passion to infuse her life force into her child.

Isaacs has a sensitivity to this kind of reality that has set him above the fray of the art world, making of his project something greater than even he probably ever expected. In his drawing, Burton made him a whale, and visiting these shows you can see why. He's just bigger than the rest of us.

Regarding Av continues until Aug. 18 at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, 7 Hart House Circle, University of Toronto; Gallery ReView continues to Aug. 5 at University of Toronto Art Centre, 15 King's College Circle (416-978-8398 or <http://www.utoronto.ca>).

Closet Collector continues until Sept. 25 at the Textile Museum of Canada, 55 Centre Ave., Toronto (416-599-5321).

Two on the Scene: Photographs by Michel Lambeth and Tess Taconis runs June 1-Sept. 25 at the Art Gallery of Ontario (416-979-6656).