

VISUAL ART

Greg Curnoe

by Patrick Mahon

A small but important exhibition, “Greg Curnoe ’61–65” appeared this winter at London, Ontario’s Michael Gibson Gallery. It was an entry on the list of retrospective exhibitions of the hallowed London artist’s work presented in the 22 years since he died tragically doing what many of his most iconic artworks made him known for: riding his bike. A few larger exhibitions have secured Curnoe’s place in the pantheon of Canadian modern art. “Life and Stuff,” at the AGO in 2001, offered a comprehensive look at a career that was purposeful and highly inventive. And the recent “CUTOUT: Greg Curnoe, Shaped Collages 1965–68,” 2011, at Museum London (Ontario), curated by former Londoner and current Toronto artist Robert Fones, gave us an astute view of Curnoe at his sly and poetic best. Following from those, “Greg Curnoe ’61–65” came as a welcome curiosity. Presented just around the corner from the site of one of the artist’s earliest studios on Richmond Street, it felt as if it were truly ‘at street level,’ conjuring a picture of the artist in the place where he made his artwork, where he helped establish the legendary London art scene, and where he fell in love.

At the centre of the exhibition was a little-known triptych, *Three Pieces*, 1965. Hotly coloured and wide open, it looked as if it had always been intended to welcome a winter-weary art seeker. Accompanying the free-standing pop painting was a series of boldly hued wood constructions entitled *Sheila’s Legs*, and several other figurative works. And presented in an inner room of the gallery was an array of Curnoe’s studio



effects playfully used to restage his workspace, complete with Woody Guthrie ballads playing jauntily in the background.

To encounter this show in 2014 (speaking personally now) after having lived in London, Ontario for almost 20 years, but never having known Greg, was to be reminded of the grief, the remembrances and even the hagiography that I encountered when I moved to his hometown in 1995. Yet the show was also a chance to take a fresh look at the early work of a young, self-admittedly regional-minded Canadian ‘comer,’ who in the early ’60s returned from art school in Toronto to the place that had shaped him to begin a life as a

working artist. Of singular interest in that regard is the figure–emblazoned *Three Pieces*–with its verso bearing cheeky invocations of rock idols The Rolling Stones, and a more sober image of political hero Louis Riel.

Given the painting’s two-sided character, it appears as both an amorous, light-filled reverie and a populist manifesto. As such, it acts predictively to tell us about the future. Not of the artist’s life, but of his art. In that regard, I would adopt the mindset of early 20th-century German theorist Walter Benjamin, and call *Three Pieces* an allegory, a picture of the past that foretells the future in all the ways it did and did not come to be.

The gallery publication accompanying the exhibition offers commentaries from a number of vantage points, including by former National Gallery Director, Pierre Théberge, and a wistful piece by Greg's widow, Sheila Curnoe, appropriately titled *Sheila's Legs*. The *Curnoe Chronology* of the years '61 to '65, juxtaposed with a list of world events from the same years (including that in '65 Bob Dylan released "The Times They are a-Changin'," and troops entered Vietnam) was helpful in pondering what Greg was up to.

Greg Curnoe was 29 when the work was made. His newfound and passionate connection with Sheila (which would become a sustaining bond for the rest of his life) is portrayed through his picturing of her three times. Each figure is languid and juicily coloured, or occasionally striped over. Stenciled in the corner of one of the panels are Greg's own jottings: "Sunday morning...the sunlight bluish through the white curtains...the smell of your hair." The contrast between this and other sides of the pieces, with his penchant for using words and pictures as a form of aesthetic activism, gives the work its remarkable punch. An example of the activist tone: just beside the head of Riel are two plastic crucifixes, one pink and one blue, irreverently glued on, still bearing price tags from the Metropolitan store which only recently closed its doors down the street from the Gibson Gallery. Near the crosses, Greg has painted the names Louis and Jesus, accompanied by opposing directional arrows that suggest he was diagrammatically working out a radical political ideology (or was it a 'theology?') in public.

To view *Three Pieces* only regarding the artist's life story would

fail to recognize it as an icon of a modern moment now past. More importantly, the work's structure and aesthetic character make it a compelling art manifesto. A foldable painting, it can be both wide open and closed up. It can hide the intimate depictions from the artist's life, or allow them to be seen. But always his public aspirations and allegiances remain animated on the object's exterior.

Three Pieces asks if some things are meant to be private and others public. And, whether beauty is meant for certain subjects and the firm edge of the text for others. Just prior to turning 30, and a mere 27 years before his untimely passing, Greg Curnoe was working these things out. As great artists do, he was using his work as a means to say what and who art is for. With *Three Pieces*, he seemed to say that art was for himself (and his family), but it was also for the community. Occasionally those spheres might need separating, but implicitly and flexibly, they would mostly live together, at the same time. ■

"Greg Curnoe '61-65" was exhibited at Michael Gibson Gallery, London, Ontario, from January 10 to February 22, 2014.

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