



Bernice Vincent, *Picnic* (1981), acrylic, 1.1 x 1.2 m, collection: The Blackburn Group, London, photo: Jack Grimes

**Bernice Vincent**  
**McIntosh Gallery**

London  
March 5 to 30

When I first became aware of Bernice Vincent's work in the mid-1960s, I saw it as handsomely conventional – framed paintings and drawings, meticulously “realistic” (well before Jack Chambers had developed and published his theory of *perceptual realism*), small in size, and often framed in or incorporating the bright, primary colours of the local Regionalists, of whom she was a charter member. I was moved by what I sensed about its content rather than what was actually being portrayed – an obliquely placed wood and cane-backed armchair, flowers appearing to erupt in full bloom from the upholstered seat; a comfortably settled black cat looking straight at the viewer; a dead mouse in the corner of a striped carpet; a tipped-forward view of a round oak table set for three; a cup and saucer teetering on the edge. They conveyed a sense of the world turned upside down, the moment of the picture threatening certain disarray and inevitable, irreparable loss made all the more powerful by the pressing *flatness*, which restricted the space of the objects to the picture's surface, giving them little room for manoeuvre except into the viewer's space where, in the mind, they would explode. Nevertheless, and for a long time, Vincent's work remained for me somewhat playful objects of perception; it was not until the mid-1970s that I began to see it as a body of complex and demanding experiences expressing more about life and less about art.

Other artists here had painted their wives and arriving children, friends and relatives, homes and studios, doing important work large in size and scale; needless to say, they were prolific. Vincent, also married with young children, living in a suburban home, provides no such ambitious imagery. For a while, she painted sporadically, focussing on what was close at hand, frequently used and observed, in many versions: tea kettle, tea pot, milk jugs, toaster (with her own distorted image reflected in its shiny metal surface), the iron, a melon halved, cut apples, pears, strawberries, peaches, and walnuts.

With *Pearscape* (1975), she moved outdoors imaginatively, painting a large, pale-green landscape of halved pears, reclining on their sides, seeds forward and exposed, forming (ambiguously or ambivalently) mounds and hills receding into the distance or advancing toward the viewer, the clouds overhead creating the same effect. In *The Smell of Oranges in Winter* (1975), she crammed the foreground at eye (or nose) level with a huge bowl of gigantic apples and oranges, cutting the bottom of the canvas to conform to the shape of the container, in a complex, three-part study of her childhood home and her suburban residence. In *Picnic* (1981), she is formally less obvious, the ripe summer setting easing gently into the winter landscape.

What to make of all this? Profoundly observed ideas of confinement and liberty, time and space, fixity and accident suggest psycho-social dimensions in her work that invite interpretation and resist it at the same time. Always

an artist at odds with the dominant art practice, Vincent's work is best understood in terms of feminism; while not a critical/radical feminist, she has always been cognizant of her position as a woman in an active community of mostly male artists, many of whom now have national reputations. In her formative years, she was one of the seven artists in Region Gallery whose avowed purpose was the re-integration of art and life in the most direct way possible – by staying home and working from their own experience. In the teeth of abstract expressionism, the dominant art-style of the day, this was a radical idea, especially in Canada where very little art was not made in the American vein and when some of Canada's best artists were leaving for New York. Vincent, at that time, had been struggling with abstraction and she says, “I felt as though I were a real rebel when I got back to painting realistically.” Regionalism provided her with the support system that facilitated the break and permitted her to stay with her own ideas of what she wanted to do and say.

Within a short time, the heavy emotionalism of abstract expressionism was countered by the cool terms of minimalism, strongly affecting the procedures and critical standards of the London group, if not their choice of subject matter. Vincent was at once the beneficiary of its theoretical precepts and its victim. On the one hand, she found a critical rationale for the close looking she was already doing, and on the other, she was criticized in a new, exclusively masculine, discourse for not being distanced enough, not objective. The reason, plainly, was not because she was not a good artist, but because she was a woman, not serious. Her work remained unknown outside the city and was seldom reviewed. With this exhibition, *Changes*, Vincent's work can no longer be overlooked; those who see it will be compelled to re-evaluate what really constitutes quality in art, if not the very character of art itself.

Goldie Rans