

FREE

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Art SCAPE

LONDON'S MONTHLY JOURNAL FOR THE VISUAL, PERFORMING & LITERARY ARTS

Christmas Group Show

Meghan Daughinee
Vicki Easton McClung
Candy McManiman
Heather Bunting
Tim Cosens
Beth Stewart

Exhibition & Sale

Dec 1 - Dec 24

Opening Reception

Saturday Dec 6, 10-5 pm

The Art Exchange,
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Vintage Group Show

David Lewis, James Kemp
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Exhibition & Sale

Dec 1 - Dec 24

Opening Reception

Saturday December 6th, 10-5 pm

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"Reach for It" by Bernice Vincent.

Photo: Jan Row, courtesy Theilsen Gallery.

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ArtSCAPE Muse - 'Dog'

Art
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Bernice Vincent: Up close and personal



Bernice Vincent, circa 2006, working in her studio.

To Bernice Vincent, the saying “home is where the heart is” is anything but trite. For “home” has been the foundation for her paintings and drawings for some 40 years. Inspiration for her art comes from familiar objects and places – domestic items, her backyard, fields around London, the city itself, and holiday trips to Port Stanley. “You don’t have to go somewhere [exotic] to find something interesting,” Vincent says. “Every time I step out the door, it’s the beginning of an adventure.”

The artist’s singular sense of adventure finds exquisite form in her ultra-realistic work. Even though she revels in ordinary things, she paints them in such vivid detail it heightens their often-overlooked beauty. But there is something more in Vincent’s paintings than is immediately apparent, a profundity beneath the surface waiting to

be mined. It’s clearly a case of the more you look, the more you see.

Born and raised in Woodstock, Vincent’s artistic bent began early, in kindergarten in fact, when she discovered she could “colour between the lines better than anybody else.” With little formal art training available, she taught herself by copying and took a course that introduced her to a lifelong love of painting outdoors. In 1952, she moved to London to take the art program at H. B. Beal Technical School.

At Beal, Vincent studied commercial art, but her two years there also proved pivotal to her subsequent career in fine art. She studied drawing and painting with Herb Ariss and fell under the spell of his energy and enthusiasm. She won a scholarship to study at the Instituto Allende in Mexico for a year. And, in an extracurricular drawing class, she met her future husband, Don Vincent.

While in Mexico, Vincent became well versed in the tenets of abstraction. After returning, she worked for a time doing window displays and design work before becoming a homemaker. During the late 1950s and early 60s, she painted copiously but struggled to discover her own painterly voice. “Everybody was really into abstract painting and I tried to work in that style, but it didn’t work for me,” says Vincent. “When I came back from Mexico I had to undo what I learned there, find myself again, which took a long time.”

During this difficult period, the concept of regionalism, which promoted looking to the local “soil” for artistic inspiration, found fertile ground in London. Through Don – who was a painter and, later, a noted photographer – Vincent became friends with one of regionalism’s main proponents, Greg Curnoe, and, through him, other leading artists. It was her seriousness as a painter, however, that ensured her place in the city’s lively art scene. “Not a lot of women were making art then, so I’d hang around with the guys,” she says. “I was



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finding my own way, but their energy and way of looking at the world was significant."

In 1965, when Vincent was pregnant with her first child, her style began to gel. One day the family cat placed a "present," a dead mouse, at her feet. Vincent had the urge to paint the scene and for the first time a clear vision of how to do it. The resulting *Cat and Mouse* portrayed a realistically painted black cat and rodent framed by blocks of red stripes. Another insight, after a hiatus from painting when her two children were small, set her artistic course. "I was at home with the kids and one day I had a real revelation. Why don't I make pictures of the things that are around me, the things I use every day?" she says.

Through Vincent's paintings, household objects became works of art, sometimes with a surrealistic turn. In *Tea Ceremony*, the viewer looks straight down at a kettle on a stove, with cups on a counter, ornate tile below. In *The Elements*, the backdrop for the same kettle is a cloud-filled sky and soaring airplane. A dress awaits ironing in *Ironing Board*, while in *The White Sheet* a laundered sheet hangs from a clothesline in front of a green hedge.

The hedge, which borders Vincent's backyard, has often been used to depict her fascination with familiarity and change. In the four-panel *Portrait of a Hedge for Pieter Bruegel and Jackson Pollock*, the shrub evolves through the four seasons from bare branches to autumnal colours. Each panel portrays a different segment of the hedge, so the painting moves simultaneously through space and time.

The sky is another way Vincent conveys change. Her painting *In July the Sun Sets Thirty-one Times* is one of several works portraying the skyscapes that occur during man-defined periods, revealing snapshots of their splendour and the futility of our urge to control the world. Vincent explores this theme again in *Changing City*, currently underway. Six panels depict construction of a high-rise building at different stages, from various viewpoints. Over a blue sky with

clouds, Vincent has drawn a crane, the building, and adjacent vistas in graphite so the sky shows through. In one stroke, the paintings reveal the birth of man's creations and their final dissolution.

Vincent also paints beautifully rendered landscapes, but they are never sentimental, bucolic pictures. Coolly dispassionate, they often include a parking lot or road that cuts through fields and forests and a white vehicle she calls "every car." To Vincent, the road and car symbolize man's journey through life but also our intrusion into and negative effect on nature. Over the past few years, Vincent has reintroduced abstract elements into her landscapes, blocks of colour that frame the view. In a recent work, *Travelling into Winter*, a black and white winter scene, complete with highway leading to it, forms the heart of the picture. Encircling it are bands of colours radiating outwards, replicating like a prism the colours found in snow and sky. "I don't think there's too many people that sit around examining the colour of snow," she says. "It's a way saying, look, look at what's right in front of you."

After the death of her husband in 1993, Vincent explored loss in paintings textured with plant matter and meticulous drawings such as *Reach for It* (see cover). One of the most remarkable of the textural works is *Fourteen Women*, a 28-foot-long painting portraying ghostly silhouettes of the engineering students massacred in Montreal in 1989. While commentaries do seep into some of her works, Vincent's primary goal is to make people examine the world around them more closely and appreciate its beauty, complexity, and ultimate fragility. "Art is an experience that enriches our lives," she says. "I really enjoy it when people say, 'We were driving the other day and we saw a Bernice Vincent sky.'"

Bernice Vincent's work is available at Thielsen Gallery, 1038 Adelaide St. N.

Susan Scott is a writer and visual artist.

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