

the insiders: imaging the institution

Lee Henderson

Institutions exist in various forms. They are simultaneously physical structures and cultural traditions. They are the bureaucratic constructs that govern daily life, and the social contracts and norms that imbue it with meaning. We speak of the institution of marriage. An individual may become a national or cultural institution. We may debate the institution of reforms within a given system. The health care system is an institution, as the art world is an institution. The Sherbrooke Community Centre is an institution, as the Mendel Art Gallery is an institution. And each institution has within it further institutions governing its aspects and its interactions with other institutions and individuals.

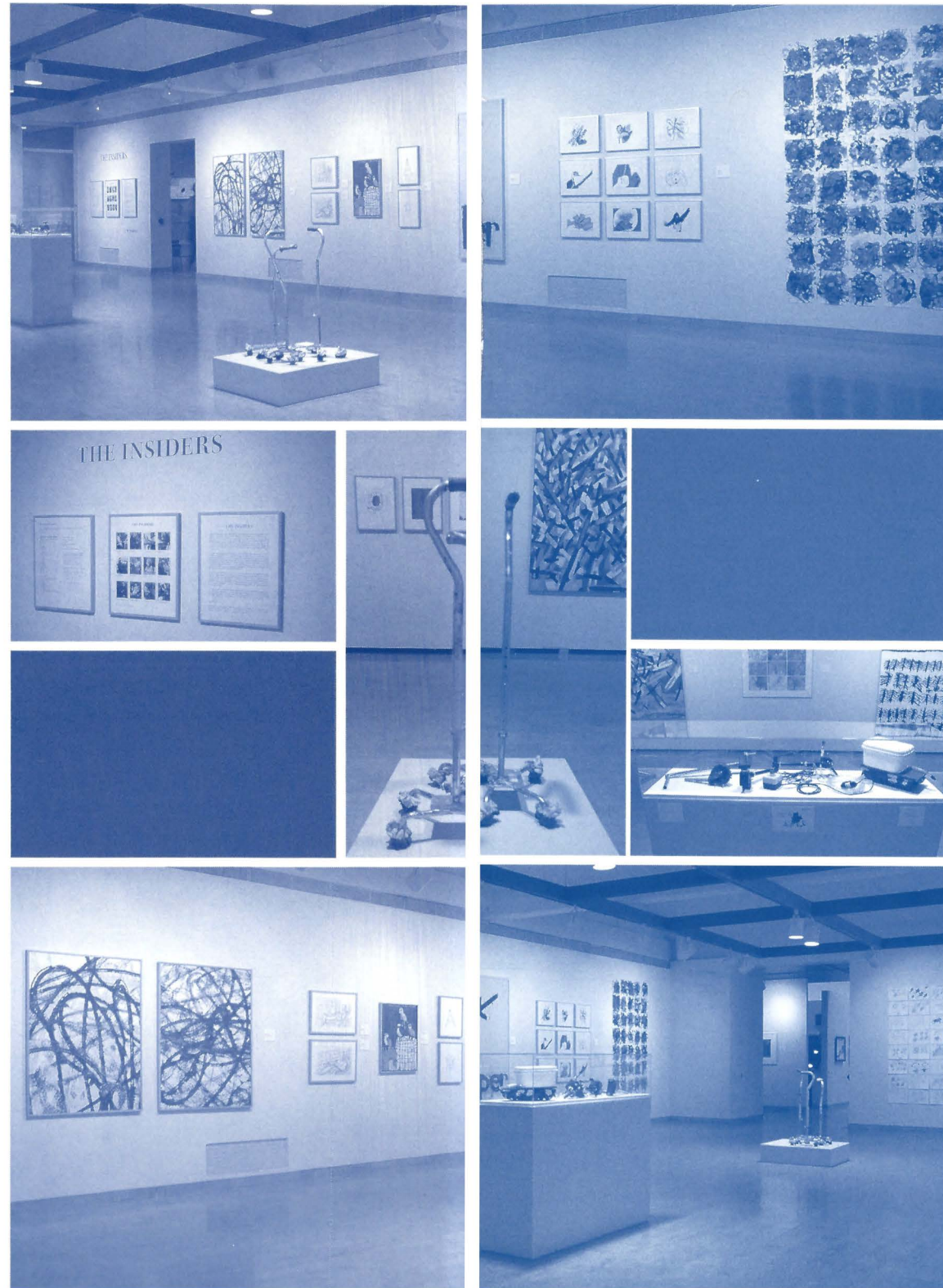
At its core, *The Insiders* is an exploration and a critique of the institution — which, in this case, is the Sherbrooke Community Centre, but also the Mendel Art Gallery, the funding structures that support the project, the art world at large, the mechanization of human mobility as an institution, and so on. The works in the exhibition reference this institutionality in various ways, be it through the processes by which the works are made, the materials used in their production, or by means of sophisticated visual metaphor.

Entering the exhibition space at the Mendel Art Gallery, I was immediately struck by the arrangement of the works. Along all walls, the two-dimensional works are hung at proper gallery height, while two plinths in the middle of the space support drawing and painting instruments. One set of these is under a vitrine.

The works on the walls are displayed according to rigid, Euclidean patterns; notable examples of this include the large grid of drawings by Margaret Vogelgesang, the rows and columns of Jack Coggins' paintings, and the framed, matted precision with which Cynthia Faust's drawings have been presented. What is remarkable about this is that the content and craft of these drawings and paintings, along with other works in the exhibition, seem to suggest a reading of the artist's body as the site of artistic production, while their organization suggests the influence of the Institution. If we are willing to read these two tendencies as factors governing the creation of the works presented, then we also realize that they are simultaneously in friction and collaboration with each other.

Some featured works incorporate depictions of the institution directly into their subject matter, such as Dennis Anderson's *The Dream* and Esther Heimbecker's highly saturated drawings of schools. The use of space in Stuart Sherin's overwhelming and large-scale abstract painting and the intimacy of Ian Huck's anarchic marker drawings — also arranged in a grid — demonstrate a range of scales in the scope of the works presented. Indeed, the various artists in this exhibition have chosen to address aspects of both individuality and institutionality from a range of conceptual focal lengths.

In reading only the presentation of the works in the gallery, we may begin to formulate an understanding of the exhibition as concerned primarily with answering the question, "What happens when the individual collides with the institution?"



Given the nature of Jeff Nachtigall's curatorial/pedagogical project and the situation of the presented artists within the Sherbrooke Community Centre, one might assume that this collision is oriented along one side of a potential binary, that is, one might at first assume that the question asked above can be answered either "the individual benefits" or "the individual suffers." However, the answer delivered in the exhibition hovers between these two poles, and even the works of individual artists are ambivalent in this regard.

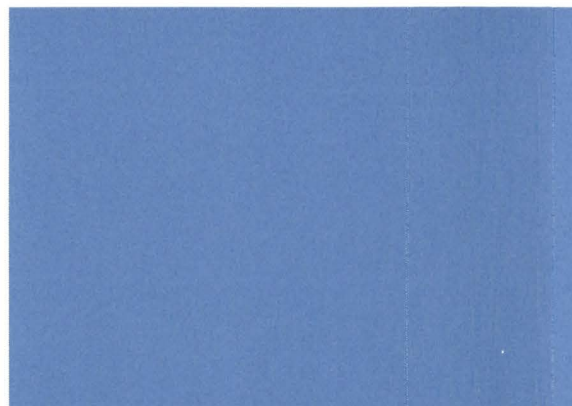
The works that are perhaps the most clearly critical of the institution are Dennis Anderson's paintings, in which he employs satire, metaphor, and a confrontational attitude to address his own institutional context within the Sherbrooke Community Centre. In Anderson's work, we see evidence of an individual who feels himself beneath an institutional wheel. In reading this work, however, we should be careful to note that Anderson's attack is less against the specific edifice or governance of Sherbrooke than it is about societal behaviours that enable or are enabled by such a structure. For example, in his *Misplaced Sensitivity* Anderson questions the gentility of euphemistic language, causing viewers to in turn question the use of "polite" discourse. The large, mauve diaper attached to the surface of this painting and labeled "Diaper" with purple paint might be read as a surrogate for any concept that is unpleasant and which, therefore, the institution has deemed in need of whitewashing. As Anderson insists that a diaper be called (or labeled or declared) "Diaper," he by extension insists not only that things be referred to accurately, but also that such accuracy breeds dignity rather than shame. He has, after all, capitalized the word Diaper, suggesting a proper noun.

Few of the other works focus on institutionality in this way, but employ other tactics instead. In Jack Coggins' paintings, we

notice variation in technique, yet a consistency of the arrangement of people relative to structures. In his *Untitled* watercolour paintings — one an image of the Eiffel Tower, the other a portrait — he has used thin paint and made evident the presence of the human body that produced the final brushstrokes. There is a similarity to be found here with the Japanese tradition of *sumi-e* painting — because Coggins' medium is indelible and unmaskable, he seems determined from the outset that every trace of his physical interaction with the work be preserved.

In the works *Flush*, *Vortex*, and *Implosion*, we see another use of watercolour paint by Coggins, this time as a more controlled and highly saturated medium. What seems to tie together these two different modes of working is the division of the people in the works from the mechanical, kinetic, or architectural structures that are present. This is perhaps most explicit in *Vortex*, a work in which a small figure floats amid stars and a blue-black void. A wheelchair is present in the work, but it floats apart from the figure and near the edge of the frame, suggesting its inconsequentiality. Coggins seems to be suggesting that even when rendered together, the individual and the structures that either enable or govern the individual are nevertheless distinct, separate entities that diverge when set adrift.

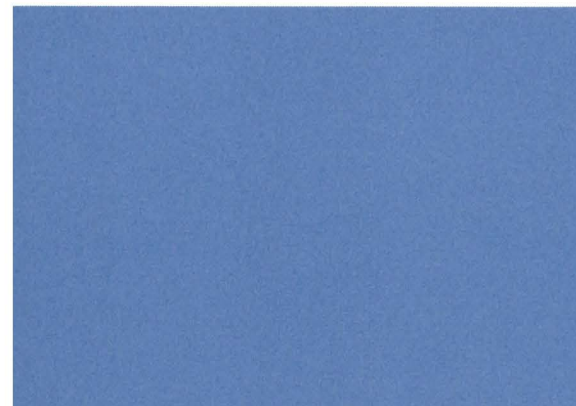
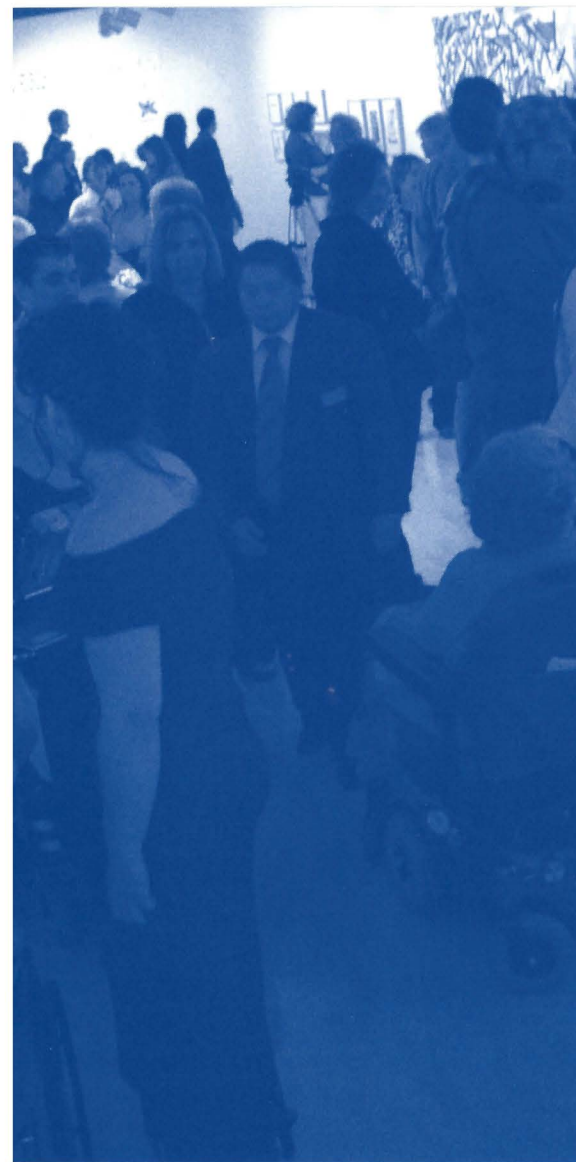
Marjorie David's painting of birds invites a similar reading. In this work, a number of distinct, brightly coloured birds have been painted on a sheet of cardboard, along with a birdcage. The birds exist outside of the cage, or on top of it, implying the living individual's escape from or even mastery of the structures that would otherwise bind it. As a counterpoint to this — as well as to Coggins' work — is Kathleen Robertson's pair of drawings *Mr. Vincent* and *Professor Jack*. These drawings, rendered in graphite on paper and thus in grey and white, each show a person reclining



slightly in a chair. The chairs support her subjects' bodies and suggest an almost cyborg-like symbiosis of individual and structure, rather than their opposition to each other. Robertson's body of work also includes a series of painted portraits in which her subjects appear surrounded by straight, gold stripes. While this could on the one hand be a Klimtian influence, I could not help but notice that the gold stripes, in such a pattern, give the impression of a gilded cage.

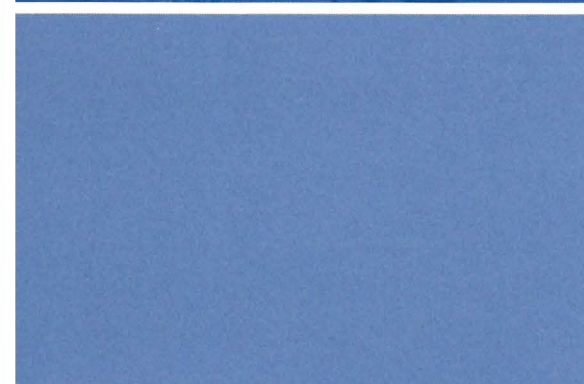
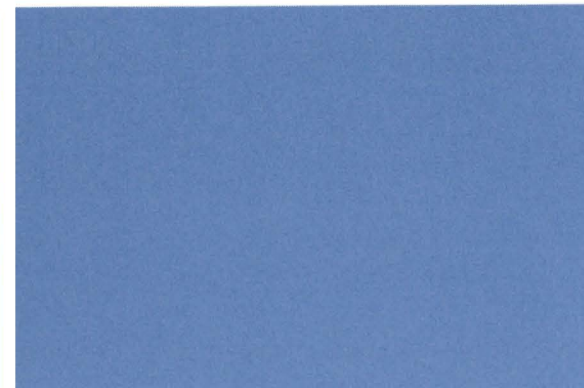
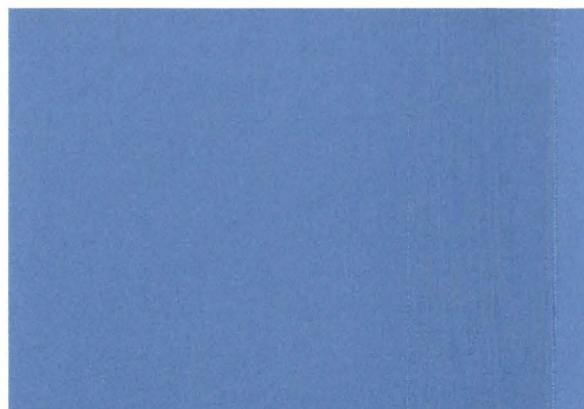
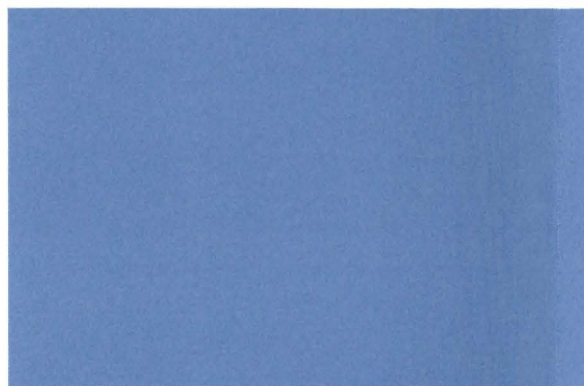
With a view to exploring processes of creation, we may examine the works of Matthew Proctor and Larry Fitzpatrick, made with the use of a mechanical apparatus. Proctor's *Wheelchair Paintings* act as archives of movement over a surface; each is a series of wheelchair tracks on canvas. The tracks are records of the artist's presence and interaction with the medium, as are all paintings, but the works directly reference the location of a body, a medium and a surface relative to each other. The body in question is further mediated by the mechanism that supports it, and through which it is able to interact with both medium and surface. Adding to this exploration of mechanism-as-implement is Fitzpatrick's *Forest*, a large-scale drawing of black trees and roads on neon yellow panels. The forest — a disorderly, organic, and non-uniform entity — is depicted as a series of varied trees and roads, that are nevertheless organized into rows and grids. Encountering again the geometric division of space, we are reminded that organic human beings can define the organic phenomena of a forest through organized and controlled (read: mechanical or institutional) means.

The attempt to define an individual through structural relationships is made personal by Margaret Vogelgesang in her large body of drawings. Arranged as a grid, some of these drawings seem themselves to be efforts to break the artist's understanding of the world, and the work, into easily defined



categories. In some works, she has drawn an array of circular lines, each filled with a colour and a word. Sometimes the word corresponds to the colour and sometimes not. But the very fact that what Vogelgesang has labeled “white” I would define as “orange” is compelling. That is, the categorization of a colour with a word acts as a stand-in for an understanding, but is fundamentally inadequate to the problem of understanding the nature of that colour, let alone one’s experience of it. As such, we might extend our reading to indicate that the breaking of human experience into packets of comprehension — extended to the institutional grid in which these drawings are displayed — is a subjective process. This work therefore throws into chaos the ideal of universality in human sight, comprehension, or understanding.

Adding to this discourse on human understanding of the world of phenomena is yet another large grid of works, in a series of paintings by Linda Friesen. *Braille Paintings* suggest a multi-layered critique of institutionality and language by incorporating abstract painting with pages of text rendered in Braille. Friesen, a blind artist, has chosen to use a support with which she is familiar for the creation of her paintings. But the nature of the Braille material as text is disrupted by the presence of the thick paint, which fills indentations and deadens textures in the paper’s surface. Thus the text is rendered partially illegible by the artist’s intervention (although the artist “sees” her finished work through the tactile means with which she reads the text in the first place). Furthermore, the placement of this work within an institution such as the Mendel Art Gallery eliminates any possibility for the text to be read, for even though parts of the text are left untouched by paint, they are nevertheless made untouchable (and therefore illegible) by their displacement of status into a museum. That is, because we are not allowed to touch the works of art, we are denied access to the textual content of this work even if we are able to



transcode Braille text. Friesen, therefore, as individual artist, has generated a work that is made accessible through the existence of the institution it inhabits, and yet is also forced into a state of isolation by the prohibition of our physical contact with the work.

Given the exhibition title, it’s little wonder that *The Insiders* deals with the institution as directly, representationally, obliquely and intimately as it does. Without an institution to be inside, or to be inside and against, we could not consider an “insider.” For instance, if someone is within a house, we may refer to that person as inside, but not as an “insider.” As such, we may assume that the relationship of mutual benefit and harm between an insider and the institutions he or she inhabits is the deliberate subject of this exhibition in its various forms. Further questions surround the various natures of those institutions — questions raised too subversively and subtly by the works to further address in this text — but, it suffices to say that *The Insiders* insists on our attention as it performs cultural inquiry on a number of levels. By comparing the routinization of human action with the mechanization of the human body, and allowing structural processing of organic physical action to represent (or re-present) societal norms, the exhibition assaults our preconceptions of one’s existence outside of a structure as opposed to inside of it... whatever such a structure might be. And while the artists may offer hints, we would be wise to reflect also upon our own use of ourselves and of each other in the formation of barriers and systems, that we too might become insiders.