

# Accidental unity

By CONNIE HITZEROTH

Upon first viewing the Isaacs Gallery's new group show featuring the work of four young Toronto artists, it appears the project must have been developed as a unified package. But looks can be deceiving.

The show features four works (sculpture/installation) by Andrew 0-1 (Owen), four floor sculptures by Marc Gagne, three wall-hung paintings by Jim Reid and five framed wall-mounted drawings by Michele Karch. Their collective details include: colours of earth reds and wood browns and concrete greys, shapes roughly constructed, lines ambiguous and mysterious, angles mean and tough. The notion that the artists walked through the front door in a foursome and proposed a show to Av Isaacs is believable, so strongly does their work reflect shared influences. But it didn't happen that way and it is of particular interest to the artists themselves that the exhibit was curated, installed and opened before any of the four had met.

Two of the artists, Gagne and Karch, studied at the Ontario College of Art, department of experimental arts, although Gagne was graduating as Karch was enrolling. And while Gagne's sculpture is on exhibit at Isaacs, paintings were featured in his single previous exhibit. Karch has exhibited in a couple of photographic exhibits but her drawings are on exhibit here.

## Embracing activities

Andrew 0-1 does not claim any formal art education but has been the most prolific in the past few years, embracing activities which range from "hundreds of graffiti spraintings around Toronto" to a window installation called Brick and Marble Suite, Rock Candy Room, at the Salon 1087, Toronto. And, he says, "outdoor installations in parkettes are my favourite."

Reid's career history balances the scale. His formal education began with four years in biology and another seven in fine arts at four institutions. His work has been in several exhibitions and was last seen at the Peter Whyte Gallery, Banff, Alberta.

0-1 has a bone to pick with those who make building after building

in cities using brick and concrete, especially the latter, which he finds to be bleak and destructive, calling it the Tyranny of Expressed Structure and the Urban Rectangle in his mural. This piece suggests an aerial view of several intersecting roads in perspective made of asphalt on wire mesh and in between is cement embedded with represented "building" made of pieces of decorative brick, reinforcing bar, glass, false brick siding and other shards of building materials. 0-1 also likes to title this piece *Architorture* because "it is shorter than the Tyranny title and I don't want to burden people with lengthy explanations about what this work is all about."

Asked if he considered becoming an architect so he could put right the cities' visage, he replies, somewhat surprised, "No." 0-1 sees the world "getting more and more crowded with iconography and architecture and precious art." He won't add to it by making art that will only have to be restored by some museum technician in the future, having come to enjoy making things that are less than permanent in the traditional sense.

## Too high

0-1's brick reds and concrete greys appear in Gagne's four sculptures. They are all vertical, floor-standing wood constructions, their surfaces covered with transparent or opaque wax and soft wax (the beeswax sweet-smelling) embedded with these pigments. *Staircase I* and *Staircase II* are body-width and taller than Gagne himself (he originally used his own body scale as a measure for the height) with risers and steps too high to accommodate the average leg comfortably and too shallow to bear anything but the ball of a foot. So they obviously aren't meant to be climbed but the desire is created. I imagine a very fast, energetic, even heavenly ascent. "I like the verticality," says Gagne, "and the form of the steps which echoes the zig-zag terracing which I admire."

The most compelling aspect of Gagne's sculpture is the painterly-ness, the layering treatment he gives to the colour within the waxy layers. *Nomad* is the most successful (and Gagne's most recently produced work) of the four here. He uses Winsor and Newton cadmium reds, chrome greens and French



Artists (clockwise from upper left) Marc Gagne, Andrew 0-1 (Owen), Jim Reid and Michelle Karch had never met before their paintings, drawings and sculptures were installed in the Isaacs Gallery.

blues within layers of wax that have been smoothed and rubbed and worked to remove any surface drips that have been otherwise retained on the other pieces. The form of Gagne's works are secondary to this sensuous surface treatment and perhaps this might give him more impetus toward his renewed interest in painting.

The painterly Gagne is uncannily reminiscent of Reid's treatment of his plywood/paint/moss surfaces. Reid's paintings, on the other hand, have become so sculptural that there occurs that marvelous Monet-like push and pull between closeup inspection and distant big picture impression.

"Viewed at a distance, the works appear to be idealistic landscapes. Closer examination can cause a startling shift as the character of the surface is realized," says Reid.

Standing in front of *Nine Mile Swamp*, I am positive if I hold my breath and take one step forward saying the magic word that I will be

in the middle of slightly musky, spongy turf, hearing the running stream vibrant blue amidst dead tree trunks and roots. And with his own style of irony, Reid has used manufactured materials such as styrofoam, metal and acrylic paints in conjunction with his found natural materials to construct his sizable paintings. He has done this to emphasize the distance, liberally and figuratively, from the wilderness.

"From the urban dweller's point of view, the inaccessible wilderness can only exist as idealized images," says Reid.

Karch, the other member of the quartet, plans to travel to the south Pacific to build sculptures of her drawings. Her pieces, *Enclosure #1* through to *Enclosure #5*, graphite and varsol on white paper, are on view at Isaacs.

"These drawings have been based on anthropological studies of a certain spiritual nature of shelters built and used by women,"

says Karch. "I have pleasant memories of building forts when we were children. Since then I have learned that women are not expected to be able to build things, but I would like to test this and build my Enclosures."

Number one is a long block pod shape vibrating as though its contents are wriggling to be set free. Number two is another longish black shape drawn like an overturned cedar strip canoe, again restricting something which desperately wants out. The other three works depict fence-like situations, which could be enclosures, but there is nothing implied inside them creating that marvelous tension emanating from the first two. The powerful feelings expressed by Karch in her drawings are at once of fear, unknown power and curiosity about the beings inside. Because they seem to be alive, Karch's drawings work better in the mind than they ever could in constructed form.