

The art of war

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Matt Bahen at Moore Gallery
\$1,200-\$6,500. Until March 24,
80 Spadina Ave.; 416-504-3914.

Painter Matt Bahen (pronounced Bane) has given his new exhibition, now at Toronto's Moore Gallery, the terse and initially inexplicable title, Marlow.

The eccentric title seems less odd, however, if you remember that Charles Marlow is the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The work, which is ostensibly about piloting a small steamboat up the Congo River and transporting ivory back down, is, in fact, an archetypal journey into the heart of evil, as anyone who has seen Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam War gloss on Conrad, *Apocalypse Now*, will know. ("The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed," wrote Conrad. "You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. . . .")

For Bahen, Conrad's short book became what he calls a template, a "new model for man's quest to find God."

"What was the old model," I ask him, during a recent telephone call to his Toronto studio.

"The search for the Grail," he says.

It is and is not a stretch to find Marlow, or at least the heart of darkness Marlow identifies as lying within modern man, in these impressive new Bahen paintings—which depict military objects and operations (and the suffering that is their by-product). The canvases, upon which Bahen has lavished oil pigment with almost indecent abandon, depict war machines, both at rest (a succulently painted Hercules cargo plane on the tarmac in *UN*, for example), or in dereliction (as in the graveyard of junked B-52s depicted in *Boneyard*).

Bahen sees the 16 paintings in his exhibition as a sort of narrative in which certain operations, preliminary to military conflict (as in troops boarding a Hercules in *Load In*), give way to battle (in paintings

such as *Submarines, Tanks and Aircraft Carrier*), which, in turn, leads to aftermath—especially, in Bahen's vision of war, to endless winding lines of refugees (*Transient and Train*). Taken together, the paintings come to provide a cumulative, composite portrait of conflict, given the fact that some of the images are derived from the history of warfare (*Horses, Paschendale, Tanks*) while others are as current as CNN. Bahen's exquisitely painted *Smoke*, reproduced here, comes to read like a final punctuation mark to all strife and suffering.

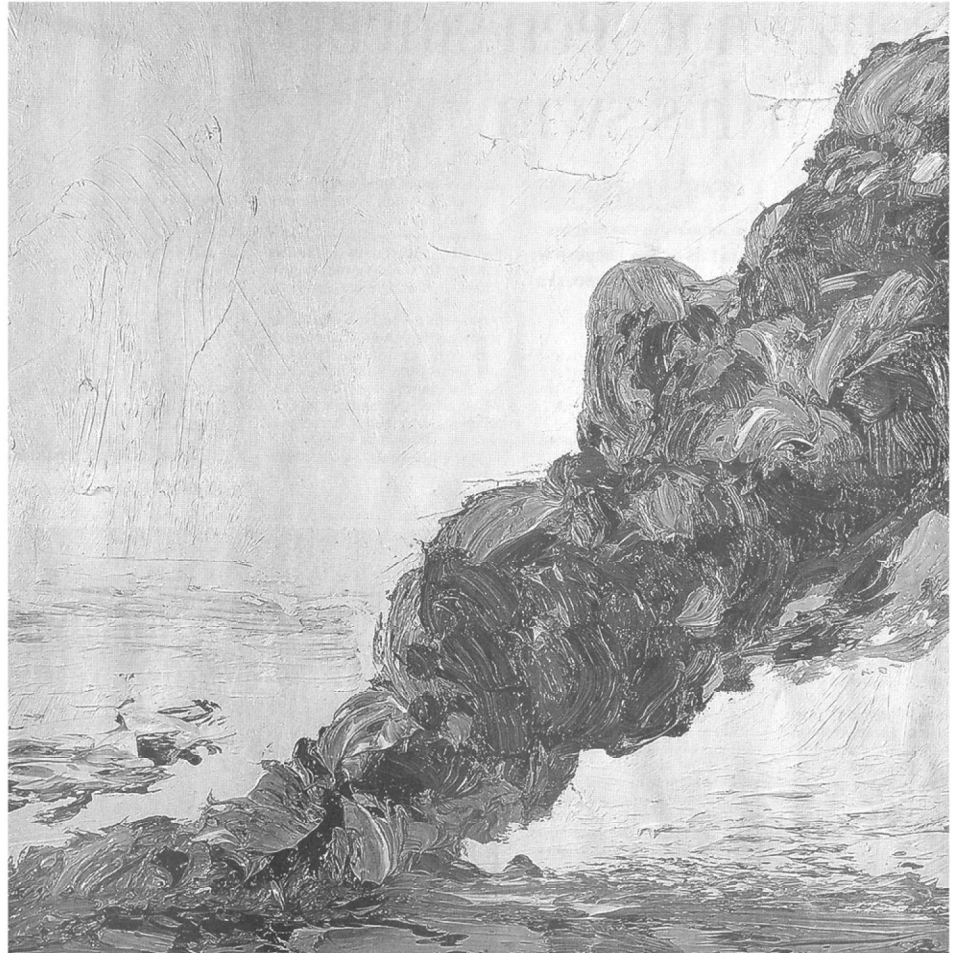
One more word about the way the paintings look: The entire exhibition is painted, for the most part, in thickly applied blacks, browns, whites and rich creams.

Though the reduced use of colour makes sense, given the sombre subject matter, the downright lathery luxuriousness of the pigment (especially the buttery creams) may seem strange at first—more a celebration of the act of painting than a memorializing of the horrors of war. In the end, though, the paintings—which Bahen describes as "big but quiet"—appear to be made of the very stuff of battle: heat, dust and smoke.

Wayne Wightman and Dimitri Papatheodorou at Gallery 1313
Wightman's works, \$150 each;
Papatheodorou's, \$900-\$4,500.

I've never heard of Wayne Wightman before, but the guy can paint really well, and his tiny exhibition of minuscule paintings in the smallest gallery of the Gallery 1313 complex is filled with his skillfully wrought acrylics on paper of banal objects: cordless phones, highway safety rails, a series of red weights, and so on. There is even a nifty little painting of a power-bar (it looks like a city from the distance) with all its cables plugged in.

You could argue that Wightman's pretty little paintings are a tad too pretty. And given that banal, everyday objects are everywhere being made legitimate and even desirable subjects in art, the value of Wightman's works must now rest not with the wit of his choice of subject matter, but with his ability to wield his paint convincingly. And this he can do.



MATT BAHEN

Matt Bahen's Smoke: Exquisitely painted, this work acts as a final punctuation mark for the artist's narrative of war in this exhibition.

There is a great deal of charm residing in one of his consummately well-painted cordless phones—though it's not always easy to decide why. I suppose it has to do with the tender, generous spectacle of this much attention being paid to such ignoble objects.

Dimitri Papatheodorou is a Toronto-based architect and painter (and composer), whose exhibition at 1313, Encounters, has apparently inspired by the architecturally scaled works (the *Torqued Ellipses*, in particular) of American sculptor Richard Serra. It's not easy, especially at first, to see the links between Papatheodorou's delicate, ethereally painted pictures (you'd swear they were photographs) and the huge, sweaty Serra sculptures

—big Faustian bendings of heavy Cor-Ten steel. But, as Papatheodorou points out in his gallery statement, Serra's work is "all about the close encounter between artifact and viewer" and notes that Serra "does with sculpture what I want to do with painting."

This is quite impossible, of course, and Papatheodorou's extremely deft and delicate works could not be more removed from the spirit of Serra's strenuous, Paul Bunyan-esque, space-bending energies. What they do well, however, is to depict a lovely, veiled light falling softly into the picture space. For me, they make a better tribute to Le Corbusier's famous Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, France, than they do to any *Tilted*

Arc or *Torqued Ellipse* you can imagine.

Reality Bites at the Angell Gallery
\$5,000-\$7,500. Until March 24,
890 Queen St. W.; 416-530-0444.

Group shows usually mean there's too much to see by too many people. Reality Bites, however, is eminently worthwhile in that it presents new-appearing work by three artists hitherto not exhibited in Toronto: Britain's Ted O'Sullivan, and two young American artists—Ian Hartshorne and Britton Tolliver.

Tolliver's work is so dynamic it nearly blows your head off. The

"newness" in painting is here crystallized in the strange melding of painterly precision (ruled lines, sharp angles, platforms of colour added to the paintings like wall-board) with a wild colour sense and a dizzyingly varied command of techniques for getting his pictures made. Here, discontinuity is continuous.

Hartshorne makes surreal interiors in which there is nothing you can depend on. Visionary, too—on a sublime scale—are the vast, literary, hyper-romanticized paintings of Ted O'Sullivan, whose works feature the same internal strife as Tolliver's: a restless, disorienting, fearless synthesis of painterly approaches and attacks that are as dizzying as they are enthralling.