

A REVELATION OF DOUBTS: [Final Edition]

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Abstract/Details

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"There's nothing like having 24 hours a day to yourself. I'm making use of all my time. It's great having no interference." Mr. [Ralph Allen] and his family moved to Kingston from England in 1957. During the next 20 years, besides making paintings and raising a family, he served as director of the Agnes Etherington for 10 years (1963-73), taught fine art at Queen's University, then moved into full-time teaching when he was appointed full professor in 1972.

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THE EXHIBITION OF NEW paintings by Ralph Allen at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre gives cause for a double celebration. For art appreciators, it is the first chance we have had in over 15 years to see this outstanding artist's work in a solo showing. For the artist, the 19 oil paintings represent a portion of the work he has done in the very productive dawn of his retirement.

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"There's nothing like having 24 hours a day to yourself. I'm making use of all my time. It's great having no interference." Mr. Allen and his family moved to Kingston from England in 1957. During the next 20 years, besides making paintings and raising a family, he served as director of the Agnes Etherington for 10 years (1963-73), taught fine art at Queen's University, then moved into full-time teaching when he was appointed full professor in 1972.

His last solo exhibition was held at the Agnes in the spring of 1975. All the "leaks" or drain of creative energy did not impede the evolution of a philosophy that has been building for years. "My work has always been motivated by the same sort of philosophy -- how, in the face of constant change, you can stay on top of things and hold on to a belief system.

"In many people, the ability to adapt to change diminishes over time. Most people become very resistant to it." Mr. Allen thoroughly recommends teaching as a way of maintaining that connection to changing attitudes and ideas. His new paintings certainly have a youthful energy, while offering a completely mature vision that is striking in its simplicity and unity and intensity of expression.

"In these paintings, I reveal my doubts about the world; and I don't simply play with them. I am also interested in the complexity of human relationships and their complications."

Mr. Allen's great affection for landscape is immediately evident when you walk in the gallery space. He has limited his palette -- the canvases are mostly red with black and white shapes -- and the abstract minimalist landscapes, still lifes and human figures are stripped of unnecessary detail; he has eliminated that which is not essential.

"I feel we have no connection with the landscape -- we don't live in it anymore, we simply visit it. And this enables us to be careless with it." This feeling is communicated by the viewer's distance from the landscapes; many of them appear to be floating, with only a single human figure, a couple of trees or a door occupying the space.

Although the vermilion red lends a quality of warmth to the canvases, it also suggests the apocalypse, human isolation, nature being burned away, and the blood of life and of death. Many of Mr. Allen's paintings contain images of religion; the empty table in *Supper* (1988) could refer to the Last Supper; the one in *News Of The Supper* (1988) could show religion replaced by a TV set as the central unifying force in the family.

"I'm not particularly religious, but I believe in many of the ideas of the Judeo-Christian philosophy. There is a need for religion in our society. I think it can spontaneously unite the world in its different forms.

"In my paintings I am trying to work out what I believe in. I'm looking for truth." Besides examining and re-interpreting ideas and images of religion and mythology, the artist also gets caught up in creating a mood in his landscapes. "The music I use when I paint is not the kind of great structural music like Beethoven. I listen to electronic music, like Ennio Morricone -- film music that is intended to create a mood."

The artist prefers to paint quickly, usually working on three to five canvases at a time. "I don't set myself up a plan. I've learned not to let my brain get in the way." One of the simplest yet most powerful works in the show is *Landscape With Ruins IV*, with the silhouettes of ruined buildings perched on one corner of a chunk of land. "It is about the past. I believe nothing really dies, it just moves away in time and space -- life floats off into space. So these classical ruins are still alive, somewhere.

"It's a nice concept to think of. There has been a return to the 18th-century experience of rediscovering the classical concepts. There are many classical references in the work of contemporary artists."

Mr. Allen still gets out to see art. One of his favorite galleries within driving distance is the Albright-Knox collection in Buffalo, N.Y. "I no longer want to look forever. The artists I 'talk' to are (American) Philip Guston, some of the Hispanic American artists and Francis Bacon. And I'm very excited about some of the young new German artists. It seems the artists in Europe are re-examining themselves -- they are talking to each other."

As for his own work, Mr. Allen felt only slightly unnerved sitting in the middle of a large gallery, surrounded by the stirring images that he has created. "When you put something up for other people to interpret, the work takes on a creative life of its own; there are endless interpretations."&

Illustration

different pieces of art by Ralph Allen ;

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