

Sculptors in the Prairie Provinces

Illi-Maria Harff

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Au delà de la sculpture

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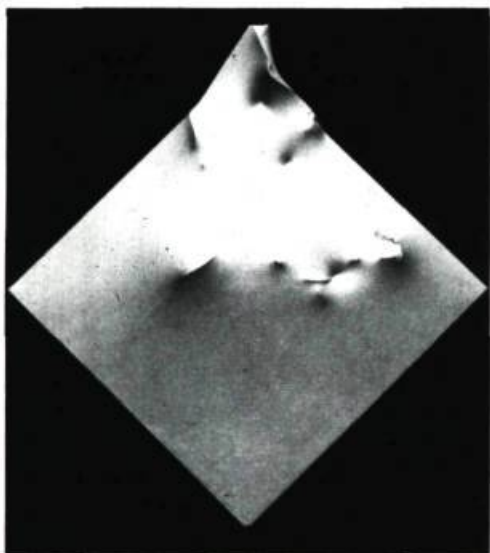
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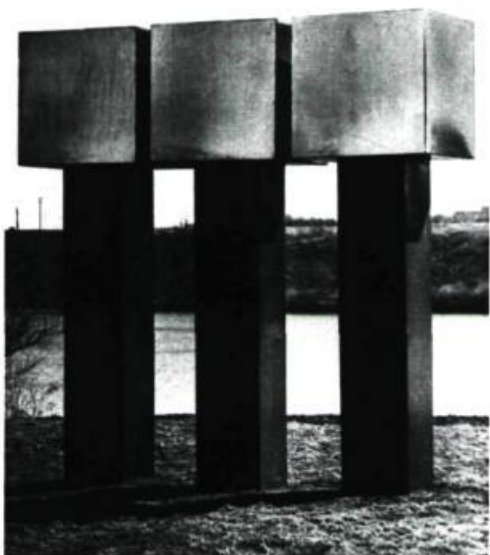
Ivan EYRE. Mana Idol, 1966. Plâtre. 25¼" (64,15 cm). Winnipeg Art Gallery. (photo Brigdens).

sculptors in the prairie provinces

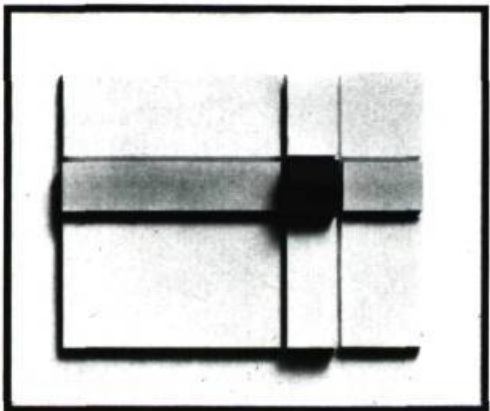
by ILLI-MARIA HARFF



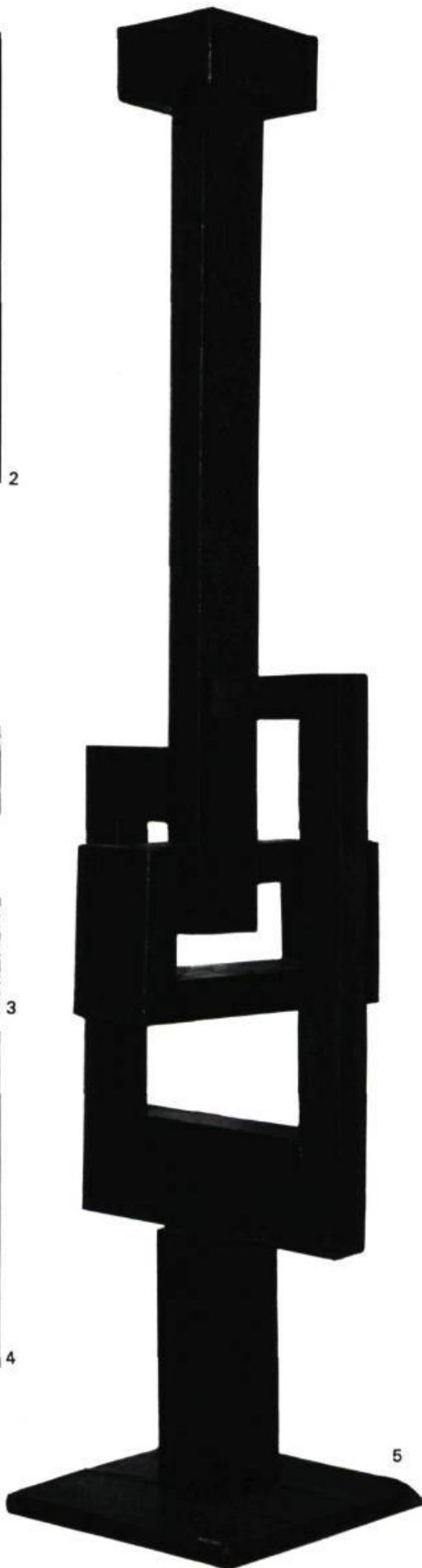
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2. Bruce Head. Peak. Toile sculpturale. (photo H. Kalen).
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7. Ann JAMES. What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing In A Place Like This?, 1968 (photo Bob Howard).

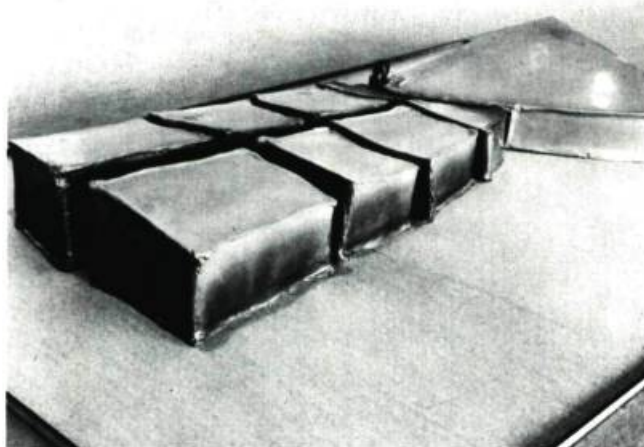
Although Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba are collectively called the Prairie Provinces, there is little that ties them artistically. Art activities centre around the larger cities and there is sparse communication among these. The vast distances between the major cities possibly account for this phenomenon. The artists working in these cities tend to look toward the international art scene for direction. Having recently made a survey of sculpture being done in Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary, I will report in that order mentioning my home base, Winnipeg, last.

The most advanced and accomplished sculptor in Regina is Ricardo Gomez, who came to Canada from San Francisco. His pieces are cast lead and steel or fibre glass which is then coated with lacquer. This gives the surface a smooth iridescent quality that transforms the object into apparent lightness. The surface seems softly molded and clay-like, the lacquer giving it a precious enameled look. Gomez' pedestal sculpture has recently become area consuming multiple-unit forms that hug the ground.

Joe Fafard who is also an instructor at the Art School in the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus, is presently experimenting with motorized foam-rubber pieces that are given the ability to writhe along the floor, like a motorized children's toy. At this point these pieces remain rather experimental and unfinished in their form.

Another young sculptor, Mark Anderson who came from the United States a few years ago, works in welded steel as well as in a variety of new materials. He too is still very much in search of his own style.

Working in a startling new departure is the Regina potter Ann James. She has recently made constructions composed of paint, canvas, clay and a new material called natural urethane, which give forms the appearance of frozen foam. The



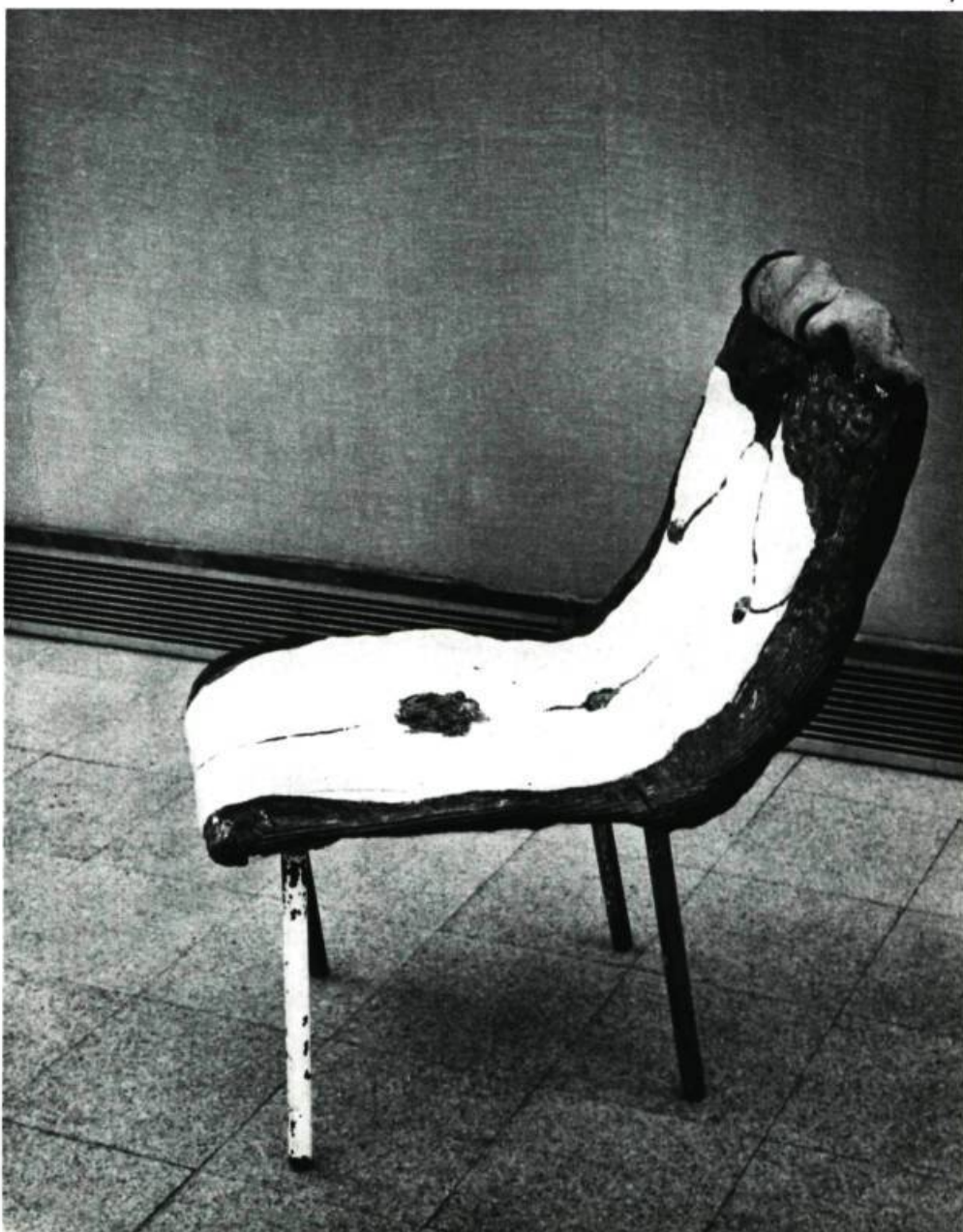
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assemblage sculpture of the American artist, Edward Kienholz, whose work had been exhibited at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1966 has possibly opened the door to this kind of expression. Ann James' comments are organically gripping shapes that writhe and moan, and are curiously coloured in extremely harsh dark tones or very sweet pastel tones. They slowly open themselves to the viewer and then strike with a lasting impact. Pieces like, "What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing In A Place Like This?" a seated nude fused completely with a chair are satirical statements in a lighter vein.

In Saskatoon, the driving force in sculpture is Bill Epp, who teaches art at the Technical Collegiate and sculpture at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus. He has been working on large welded steel sculptures for a number of years. In the earlier pieces, he used rectangular shapes that were added to each other to form slim tall sentinels. In 1967, he began a series based on the drum-shape. These compositions are built up on an arched base that lifts and supports them.

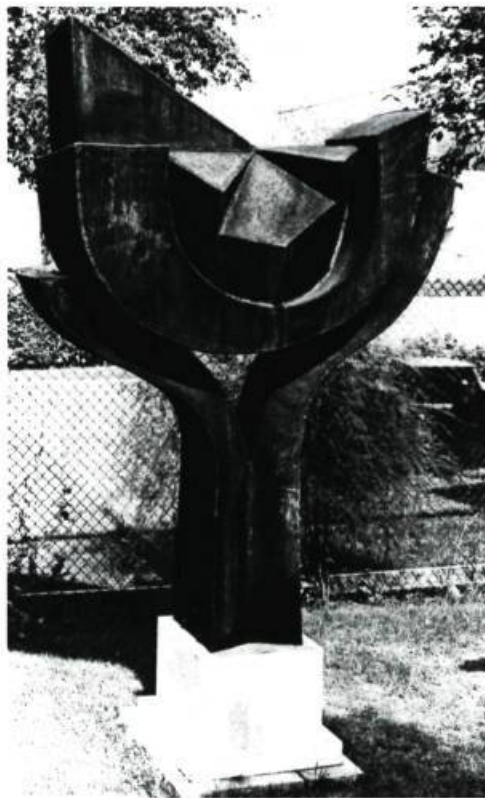
The surface treated with a blow-torch bears the artist's own handwriting. During the past year, Bill Epp has made sculptures out of sheets of plywood that are then painted. The arch base now expands widely giving the pieces a sprawling space-consuming effect rather than one of monumentality.

The constant work and interest in the sculpture field on the part of the teacher Bill Epp, has created a rather unique situation in Saskatoon. Several of his students have become sculptors in their own right. In the spring of 1968, these students were given the opportunity to work on large scale sculpture at a symposium organized by Bill Epp with the support of the Mendel Art Gallery. The results are astonishing. Two pieces were



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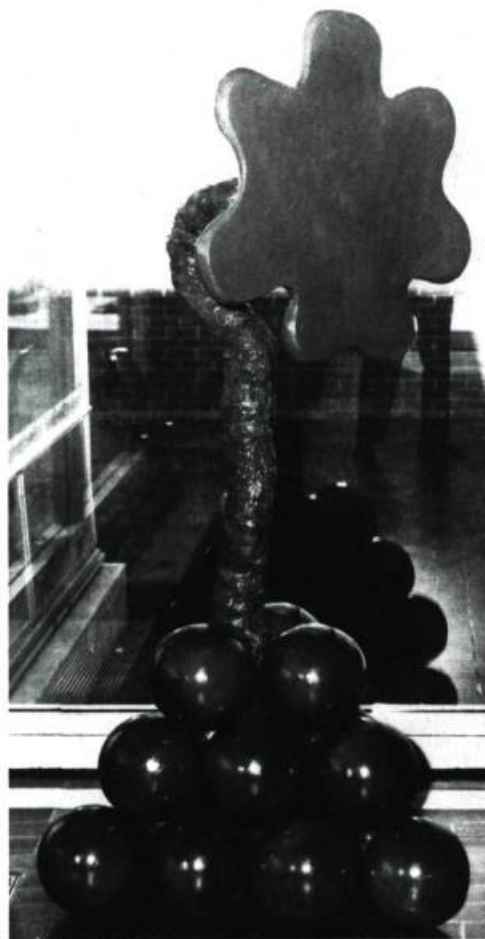
8. Katie von der OHE. Broken secret, 1964. Bronze. H.: 15" (38,15 cm). (photo A. Govers).
9. McLeary DROPE. Homage to Helios, 1967. Acier soudé.
10. Judith POOLE. Flower, 1968. Fibre de verre. H.: 84" (213,4 cm).
11. Luke LINDOE. Pétroglyphes, 1967. Relief en creux. Musée provincial et Archives, Milk River, Alberta.
12. Olle HOLMSTEN. Bronze. (photo Hu Hohn).



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acquired by the Mendel Art Gallery. One is by Brian Newman who works in welded steel forms that are assembled in geometric patterns reminiscent of the work of the American sculptor David Smith. The other piece made by Doug Bentham is already installed on the grounds of the Mendel Art Gallery. The piece consists of three repeated squares set on well proportioned rectangles, placed equal distance from each other. It is brave, elegant and minimal in concept. Judith Poole who also participated in the symposium, received her initial training at the St. Martin School of Art in London, England. She makes her forms by molding them out of fibreglass adding brilliant colours into the mixture. Her compositions are whitty and lighthearted and are closely akin to the work of the young British sculptors. This year she received a Canada Council scholarship to enable her to make sculpture furniture out of molded fibreglass.

Saskatoon is also the stronghold of the Structurists under the leadership of Eli Bornstein. The Structurist Art, although it bears definitely sculptural elements has evolved out of a painting tradition rather than a sculpture tradition, as Eli Bornstein points out in the first issue of "The Structurist" 1960-1961, a magazine he has been editing since then. If one were to categorize Structurist Art it would have to be termed relief since its elements do not protrude from the wall. A large Structurist relief made by Eli Bornstein hangs in the lobby of the Winnipeg Airport. Coloured cubes create the rhythmic pattern. The colour quality is extremely important to the Structurists. Bornstein's colours are continuously being purified. His latest pieces are very luminous with colours found in a butterfly's wing. A young disciple of Eli Bornstein's, R. P. Kostyniuk, who now teaches in Edmonton has taken the Structurist idea across to Alberta. His reliefs are presently less concerned with colour, slightly asymmetrical, yet very deliberate compositions.

In Alberta there is very little sculpture being made in the more contemporary vein. Sculpture is only recently being taught in Edmonton and the instructors have been imported from the United States. In Calgary, the situation is somewhat different, Walt Drohan and Luke Lindoe who are primarily potters have received some commissions to create reliefs and sculptures for particular architectural settings. Olle Homsten who teaches sculpture at the Alberta College of Art has received similar commissions but there are few individual works in evidence. The only one who has been working on sculpture primarily in that area

is Katie von der Ohe. She has produced numerous free-standing abstracted forms in a variety of materials. She has also created relief murals like the one in the Geological Survey Building on the University of Alberta Campus. This kind of conservative semi-abstract relief mural work seems to be particularly popular in Alberta.

In Winnipeg there are a small number of artists who have chosen the sculpture medium as their form of expression. The School of Art, now in the University of Manitoba has offered sculpture courses over a number of years. Until two years ago, the sculpture department was headed by Cecil Richards who worked in a modern figurative style casting his pieces in bronze. His position has recently been occupied by two young American instructors. Despite these teaching facilities, there has been little sculpture produced in Winnipeg.

The strongest personality here, who has been sculpting since the early 60's is McCleary Drope. He began by making ceramic sculptures and then turned to metal sculpture made from found objects which he welded together. Having become familiar with the welding technique, he constructed large welded steel forms that are lyrical and poetic and definitely monuments set on pedestals. He calls this series "Homage to Helios". The forms are derived from the geometry of nature,

reflecting its organic structure and revealing its inner core. Recently Drope is working in a new direction creating a kinetic piece made of three drum-shapes that carry patterns of neon tubing. He collaborated with an electrical engineer in the construction of this piece.

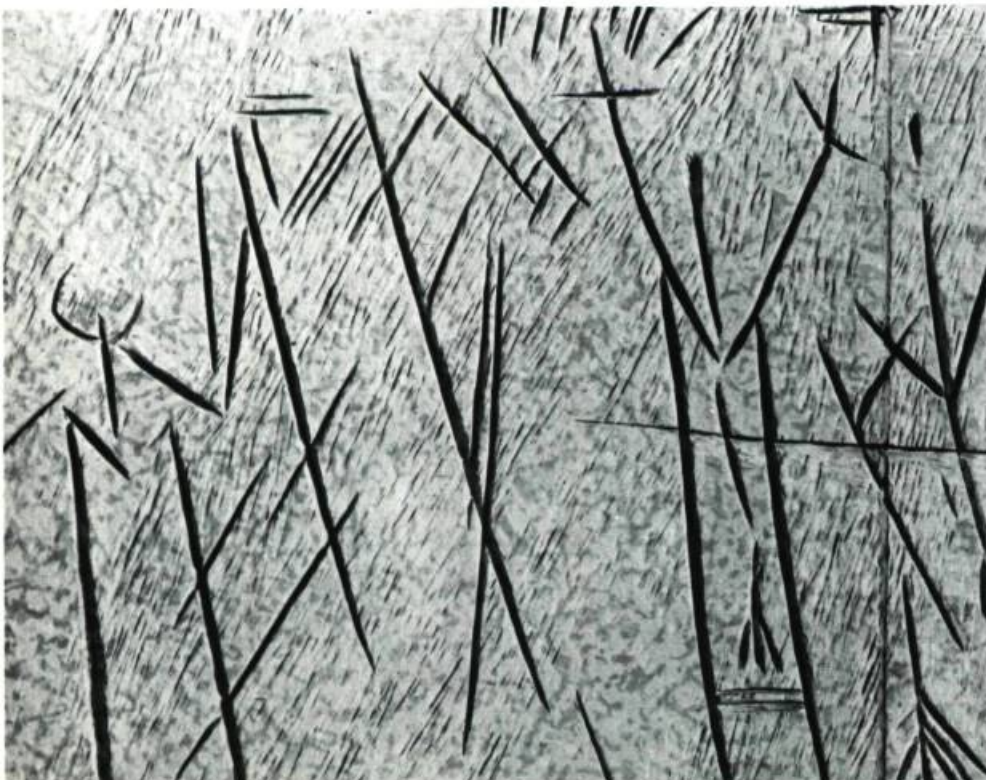
Another Winnipeg artist Ivan Eyre, who is primarily a painter should however be mentioned for the very unusual realistic sculptured figures he has made. The figures are out of plaster with some painted areas and some areas covered with cloth. They are characters that have appeared in his paintings and have now been personified in three dimensional form. Recently Ivan Eyre has been creating male and female forms in clay.

Extending the painted canvas into a relief form or sculptural form is done by the Winnipeg artist Bruce Head and the young American Robert C. Sakowski who in 1967 joined the staff of the Art School at the University of Manitoba. Bruce Head takes film reels and twists them into various shapes as the bases for his construction. Over this skeleton he stretches a canvas and then paints the surface. The piece called "Peak" is painted in metallic silver giving a softly formed surface that has however all the qualities of a sculptured relief. Robert Sakowski entered a piece into the Eleventh Winnipeg Show at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in November 1968, that he called "Untitled Construc-

tion" made of canvas painted with acrylics and a strip of plexiglass.

The piece was displayed on the floor. The canvas having been stretched over a wooden frame was formed into an elegantly white geometric shape. The plexiglass strip, also white, served as a continuum and a defined plane resting along the top of the construction. A graduate of the School of Art, James M. Barr was also represented in this exhibition. His sculpture "Flower Power" is a large painted steel piece with plastic parts that revolve. A pink cloud crowns the piece and large pastel coloured flowers rotate. Again it is a playful whimsical piece of sculpture.

In summing up, there are several points which come to mind. Although the sculptors in the Prairie Provinces are physically rather removed from the large art centres in the world, they have managed to keep in contact with some of the current developments. They are experimenting with new materials. They are creating pieces that tend towards the environmental. They are also trying to work in forms that tend to border between painting and sculpture. Current problems of expression have become their own problems of expression. In closing I would like to thank the artists and my colleagues who have helped to gather the material for this essay.



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