

## Virgil Hammock, la nostalgie du romantisme Nostalgia for Romanticism

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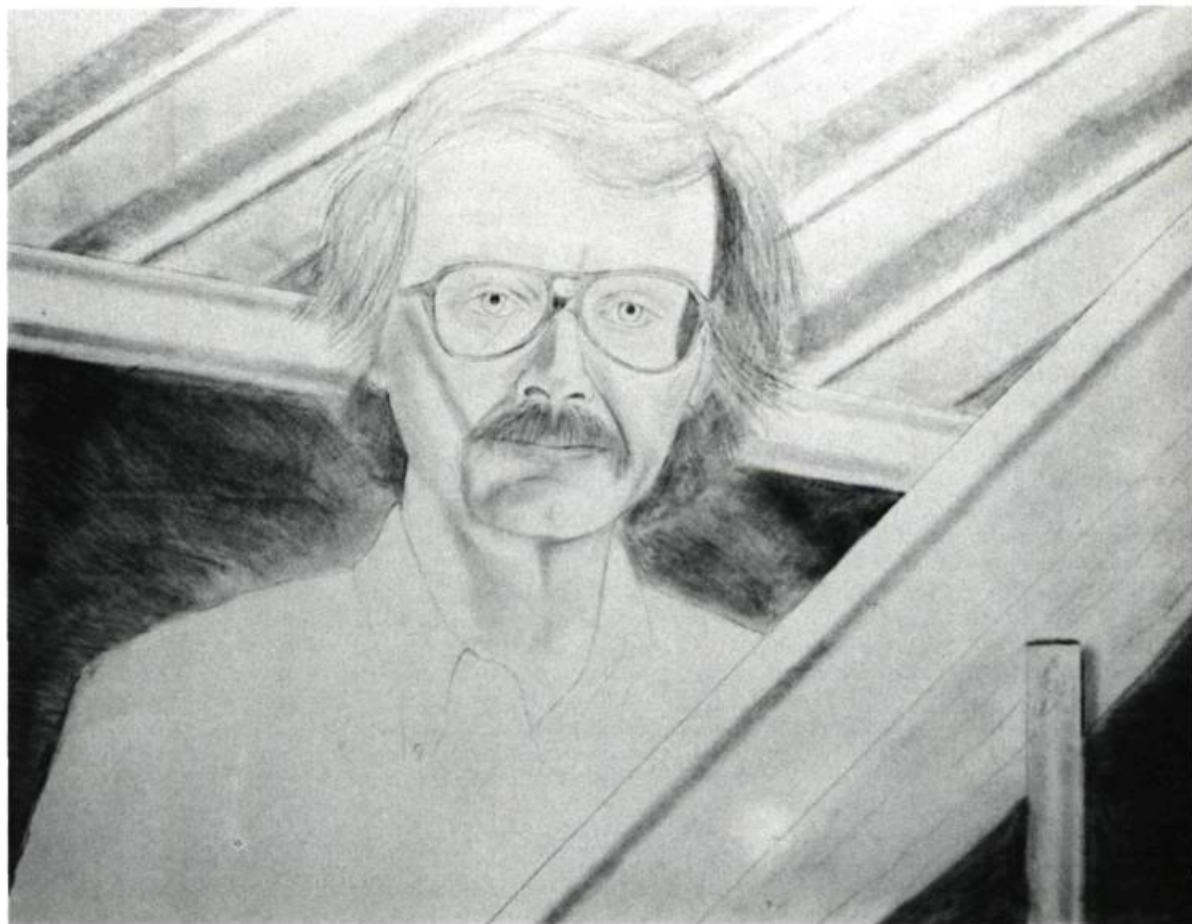
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# VIRGIL HAMMOCK, LA NOSTALGIE DU ROMANTISME

Eric Cameron



1. Virgil HAMMOCK  
*Myself at Thirty-seven*, 1975.  
Dessin; 48 cm 2 x 66.

Parmi les seize dessins que Virgil Hammock expose au Musée de Dalhousie<sup>1</sup>, sept s'inspirent de photographies du compositeur Gustav Mahler. La plupart des autres sont des autoportraits ou encore des portraits de la famille de l'artiste. La relation entre ces deux groupes d'œuvres donne le ton à toute l'exposition et révèle en somme ce que la pratique du dessin signifie pour l'artiste.

Plusieurs des dessins représentant Mahler sont des portraits assez directs tirés prosaïquement d'illustrations prises dans des livres — un buste assis ou alors tout simplement un profil de la tête. L'un d'eux montre Mahler dans un bateau en route vers New-York, seul cas où apparaît une indication sommaire du décor. Un autre, *Mahler at Toblach 1907*, réunit le compositeur et sa fille avec, en arrière-plan, un personnage féminin plutôt vague. Ici, on pourrait remarquer le parallèle avec le sujet Hammock, sa fille et son ancienne femme à Edmonton, mais, en général, la relation n'est pas forcée. On nous laisse tirer nos propres conclusions sur la nature de

la juxtaposition, jouer avec le nom du compositeur et sa suggestion d'un artiste visuel et nous demander s'il existe réellement des ressemblances entre les traits de Mahler et ceux d'Hammock lui-même.

Dans les courtes remarques du catalogue, l'artiste nous dit que son dessin est une activité privée. Il faut cependant chercher entre les lignes sa signification personnelle. Les dessins sont très réticents et privés des grandes effusions passionnées qu'on trouve, par exemple, dans les symphonies de Mahler. Peut-être est-ce là l'élément fondamental. Hammock nous montre le véritable Mahler qui était en réalité un homme sans grande envergure. Si Mahler a eu sa part de malheurs, la perte d'une fille, cela n'est pas en soi plus grave que ce que bien des personnes endurent sans attirer l'attention de l'histoire. La différence, dans le cas de Mahler, ce fut que la musique de la fin du romantisme lui permit d'extérioriser ses sentiments personnels selon une échelle héroïque, de sublimer sa peine en lui donnant les dimensions d'une grande tragédie.

1. Du 1er au 23 décembre 1977.









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2. *On the boat to New York*, 1977.  
Dessin; 50 cm x 43,1.

3. *Mahler in Vienna 1907*, 1977.  
Média variés; 66 cm x 50,8.

4. *Mahler in Vienna 1906*, 1977.  
Dessin; 55 cm x 40,6.

5. *Boo and Bob Herschkowitz at Birdsbill Park*, 1972, 1976.  
Dessin; 50 cm x 40,6.

Depuis Mahler, ce genre de sublimation est devenu très difficile. Le vingtième siècle et son art ont perdu leurs illusions sur les attitudes héroïques. En revoyant son activité artistique depuis les années cinquante, il peut maintenant sembler à Hammock qu'il a «regardé la forme des arts visuels se désintégrer au point où écrire sur l'art est plus intéressant que l'art lui-même». Cependant, le processus qu'il décrit est en partie intérieur et concerne son propre passage de l'art à l'écriture sur l'art. Lorsqu'il repense à la génération de Mahler, il se souvient encore que son désenchantement pour l'image du héros a marqué le point de départ de sa vie artistique.

Cela se passait en 1960, lorsqu'il entra dans une école d'art, à l'âge de vingt-deux ans. Il avait, pendant les trois années précédentes, travaillé comme photographe en Corée avec l'armée américaine. La guerre avait pris fin mais les gens continuaient à se faire tuer — dans les accidents de la route, les écrasements d'avions et les suicides. Son travail l'obligeait à prendre des photographies. Entre temps, il enregistrait parades et remises de médailles. Tout cela laissait un sentiment constant de futilité et d'absurdité.

À l'Institut d'Art de San Francisco, il commença par étudier la photographie mais se tourna bientôt vers la peinture. Il choisissait pour sujets les cowboys, les pilotes de ligne, les politiciens et des écrivains comme Scott Fitzgerald et Herman Hesse. Héros de la société certes mais, sur les photographies, ils n'étaient que des héros de papier. Il choisissait parfois des sujets très piquants, par exemple un garçon à qui on remettait une rosette bleue en récompense d'un exploit juvénile ou le mutilé de guerre recevant une médaille à l'hôpital. Ses images cadraient assez bien avec le contexte des peintres figuratifs californiens comme Richard Diebenkorn. Il s'y trouvait cependant un aspect négatif, un reniement de l'humain dans sa propre démarche vers l'abstraction.



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Lorsque sa peinture devient tout à fait abstraite, vers 1966, ses couleurs prennent une grande dureté. Je dois admettre que je les trouve difficile à accepter. Cependant, avant la fin de la décennie, les compositions compassées commencèrent à se transformer en paysages-chaînes de montagnes impénétrables au-delà de grandes étendues d'eau, sans aucun dégagement. Avec le temps, les montagnes s'effondrent, un sentier s'insinue dans le lointain, le soleil monte à l'horizon, mais tout demeure très plat. À partir de 1972, apparaissent les premiers dessins exécutés en général d'après des photographies. Il copie une ancienne photographie de lui-même en uniforme de l'armée. Il semble important de savoir qu'il travaille à partir de la surface plate. Lorsqu'il se détourne de ses photographies, il trouve dans la fenêtre de son atelier un sujet tout aussi plat: le mur, la double couche de verre et, au-delà, la clôture. Lorsqu'il dessine sa propre image dans le miroir, elle ressort tout aussi plate, écrasée entre la planche à dessin et une forme indistincte à l'arrière-plan. Lignes variées, plusieurs différents traits de crayon et diverses manières d'ombrer, mais une ligne indécise, plutôt dure, semble presque toujours dominer comme s'il tentait de pénétrer la barrière du papier lui-même.

Parfois, comme dans le dessin de sa fille *Paive on the P. E. I. Ferry*, on retrouve une touche du réalisme magique des artistes des provinces de l'Atlantique, comme Alex Colville, un rappel que, depuis San Francisco, les années l'ont conduit jusqu'au Nouveau-Brunswick en passant par l'Indiana, l'Alberta et le Manitoba. Ces nuances occasionnelles ne sont jamais que légères. Finalement, elles ne font qu'indiquer que l'illusion n'a pas place dans son monde.

(Traduction de Marie-Sylvie Fortier-Rolland)



It is neither criticized or praised, its existence is only recorded as part of our urban habitation upon this planet. What is revealed is this, it is not the painter who is anti-human, it is not his creation nor that of any individual. The world of man's created environment conforms to the elements of nature's teaching. Go Shigi's painting *Housing-D, 74-2*, for example, shows the cells within a complex interdependent human habitation as modular, if not as architecturally perfect, as the honeycombs of a thousand worker bees. The artists see no need of colour in most of these works, they are generally colourless to our eyes. We see our cities as grey and colourless. I remember stepping from a New York subway coming up out of the earth and seeing the grey stone of Wall Street for the first time. Tokyo is not only a larger city than any in North America or Europe, but it is also far more condensed in its living space. The artist is an urban person and records what is there and yet remains unseen and grey in our minds. People in cities seek beauty and meaning in the arts. They seek it in glass cases in a museum or at the theatre. In a crowd of millions moving like ants for the Tokyo underground at rush hour, each wrapped in his or her own individuality, one person stops to look up and is knocked over. In New York, London, Montreal or Tokyo only the tourist looks up. Only the stranger looks up and sees the surroundings. The artist in the same way provides this function. A small and compact kitchen is the subject of Go Shigi's painting *A Kitchen* painted in 1975. It represents a centre of human activity within the apartment multiplied a hundred times, perhaps more, within a single exterior structure. Yet everyone knows his own door.

The artist is part of this world while standing apart from it. He paints images that resemble in some ways photographs and then these paintings are enlarged as large as the painted canvas. Side by side both can be compared with the original. The copy, its surface and colour perhaps somewhat different from the painting on canvas, exists as a kind of paradox. The photo is derived from the painting and not from the actual subject.

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## NOSTALGIA FOR ROMANTICISM

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by Eric CAMERON

Virgil Hammock's exhibition of sixteen drawings at Dalhousie Art Gallery includes seven based on photographs of the composer Mahler. Most of the rest are self-portraits or portraits of his family. It is the relationship between these two groups of works that sets the theme of it all and finally gives the key to the meaning of the drawing process for him.

Several of the Mahler drawings are quite straightforward portraits, a seated half-length or just a simple profile of a head, that are prosaically rendered from plates in books. In one Mahler is on a boat going to New York; in that case alone there is a scanty indication of setting. Another, *Mahler at Toblach 1907*, shows the composer and his daughter together with a rather shadowy figure of a woman in the background. At that point we might notice the parallel with the subject of Hammock, his daughter and former wife together in Edmonton, but generally the connection is not forced. We are left to form our own conclusions as to the nature of the juxtaposition, to play with the composer's name and its suggestion of a visual artist, and to wonder if there really are similarities between the cast of Mahler's features and those of Hammock himself.

In the brief catalogue notes he does tell us his drawing is a private activity, but one has to look between the lines for its personal significance. As drawings they are very reticent. There is no great passionate outpouring of emotion of the kind we find, for instance, in Mahler's symphonies. Perhaps that in itself is their main point. What Hammock shows us is the actual Mahler, who was in fact a rather small man. If Mahler had his share of misfortunes (the loss of a daughter), that in itself is no more than many people endure without attracting the attention of history. What was different with Mahler was that the music of late romanticism allowed him to externalise his personal feelings on a heroic scale, to sublimate his grief in expanding it to the dimensions of a great tragedy.

Since Mahler, that sort of sublimation has become more difficult. The twentieth century and its art have become disillusioned with heroic stances. Looking back over his own active art life since the fifties it may seem to Hammock now that he has "watched the form of the visual arts disintegrate to the point where writing on art is more interesting than art itself," but the process he describes is partly an

internal one, his own shift of emphasis from art making to art writing, and as he looks back to the generation of Mahler he still remembers that disenchantment with the hero image was his own starting point in art.

That was in 1960 when he went to art school at the age of twenty-two. For three years before that he had been a photographer with the U.S. army in Korea. The war was over, but people continued to get killed — in automobile accidents, plane crashes and suicides. It was his job to take the photographs. Between times he recorded the parades and medal presentations. It left an abiding sense of futility and absurdity.

At the San Francisco Art Institute he first studied photography, but soon turned to painting. His subjects were cowboys, airline pilots, politicians, and writers like Scott Fitzgerald and Herman Hesse. They were the heroes of society, but in the photographs from where he worked they were only paper heroes. Sometimes the subjects were very pointed, the boy presented with a blue rosette for some juvenile achievement, the maimed war veteran receiving his medal in the hospital. In the context of California figurative painters like Richard Diebenkorn his flattened images fitted well enough, but there was something negative, a denial of humanity in his own move towards abstraction.

When his painting becomes completely abstract around 1966 there is something very harsh about the colours. I have to admit to finding them very difficult to deal with. However, before the end of the decade the formal patterns began to resolve themselves as landscapes — impenetrable mountain ranges beyond great expanses of water that provide no place to stand. As time goes on the mountains break, a path winds its way into the distance, the sun appears above the horizon, but it is all still very flat. From '72 come the first of the drawings, generally from photographs. He copies an old photograph of himself in army uniform. It seems important to know he is working from the flat surface. When he turns away from his photographs he finds in his studio window a subject that is just as flat; the wall, the double layers of glass and the fence beyond that. When he draws his own image in the mirror, it comes out just as flat again, squashed between the drawing board and some unidentifiable form in the background. The lines are varied, a lot of different grades of pencil and different modes of shading, but almost always a rather hard indecisive line somewhere seems to dominate as if he were trying to penetrate the barrier of the paper itself.

Occasionally as in the drawing of his daughter *Paive on the P.E.I. Ferry* there may be a hint of the "magic" realism of Maritime artists like Alex Colville, a reminder that the years since San Francisco have brought him via Indiana, Alberta, and Manitoba to New Brunswick. Such occasional overtones are never more than slight. In the end they only point up that his is a world deprived of illusion.

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## THE SCULPTURED PLANES OF GERHARDT KNODEL

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By Virginia WEST

Historically, the use of the fabric plane within interior architectural space is not new, dating back to medieval times when banners and tapestries were hung in high vaulted areas of churches and castles. Such textiles called attention to the new dimensions of space that were made possible after the pointed arch raised ceilings to new heights and allowed light to penetrate interior recesses.

Gerhardt Knodel has bridged the tradition of Renaissance tapestry with his handwoven sculpture, super-scale works using the fabric plane as three-dimensional dynamism within vast architectural interiors. One recent commission came from John Portman, architect for Detroit's \$337 million Renaissance Center; a second from the University of Houston for their new library; and the most recent a grant from the General Services Administration for the entrance to the Federal building in Oklahoma City. All are stunning, — astonishing in their ability to blend the most radical engineering feats with weaving, the oldest of man's arts. It is perhaps to be expected that the architects of our twentieth century buildings would resort to the warmth of fiber to humanize their antiseptic steel, glass, and terrazzo surfaces; since the fourteenth century tapestries have visually blotted dank castle walls from memory. However, Knodel's work extends the spatial relationship of architecture and sculpture, communicating an emotional experience that places the whole mass of the building into an identifiable perspective.