

Here's to a rebirth of past glory

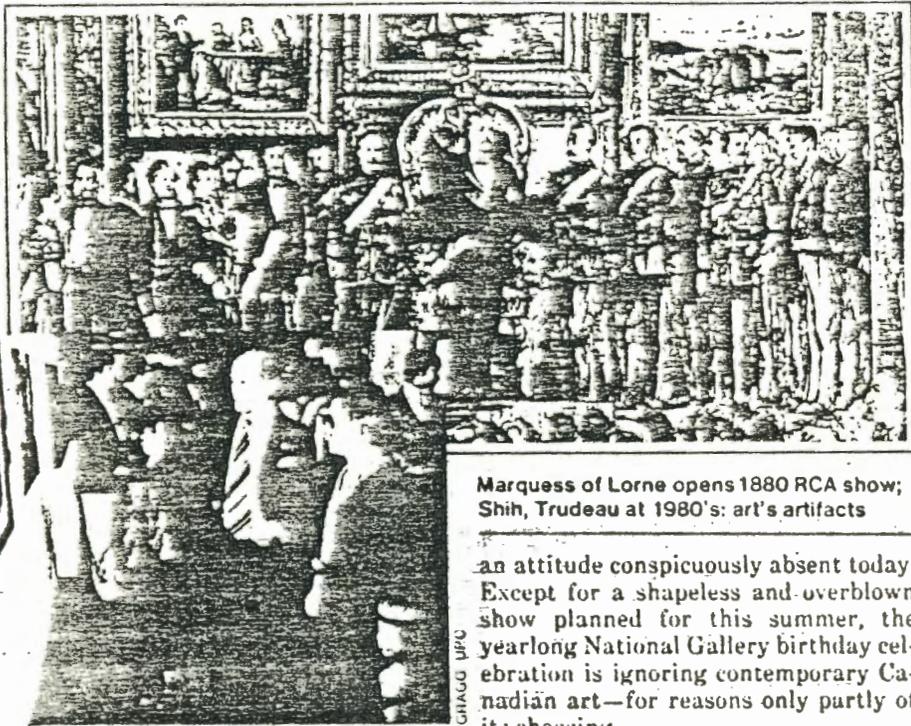
streamers, sleighs and period costumes more successfully masqueraded as the spirit of March 6, 1880, the opening of the first RCA exhibition and the birth of the National Gallery. Until 1913 the two shared a common history, ruptured then by the gallery's growing support of those non-academy art rebels, the Group of Seven, and the act of Parliament that officially separated them. By switching allegiances, the gallery proved it would support the best Canadian art no matter how controversial,

sides collecting artifacts of other cultures, she wishes to put more emphasis on the decorative arts—for instance, to display a Dutch vase with a Rembrandt. With each object purchased Shih moves the gallery closer to museum status—artifacts rather than arts—which reflects her view that “we don't really have a national heritage, we have a cultural connection with each other.”

Shih is also avidly seeking donations and a private endowment—again to keep the gallery growing. She has already secured the Heeramanek collection of South Asian art through Toronto industrialist Max Tanenbaum. The Henry Birks Collection of Canadian Silver was acquired as a gift a few months ago, immediately provoking a scandal among Quebec museums and scholars who felt that the predominantly Quebec-craft masterpieces should stay in that province. The bravura of these successive coups (something akin to a museum landing a big international touring show like King Tut) has earned Shih the label “art entrepreneur” from another of her curators. But in the prima donna world of art donations you do not get something for nothing. Donations—gift horses sometimes—must be documented, shifting expertise from traditional areas of the gallery. Gifts must be displayed or stored in an already overcrowded building. Presently the National Gallery can show only a small proportion of its holdings, causing deterioration of paintings through storage and handling. And the Canadian collection suffers most. Of the few hundred David Milnes, for example, only five or six hang. The whole Canadian department is in limbo as all three curators have left since Shih's arrival in 1977, and none of them has been replaced. Pierre Théberge, Jean Trudel and Dennis Reid had pushed the gallery to the leading edge in contemporary and historical Canadian studies, a lead now lost.

Soon Shih's bureaucratic sleight of hand will merge all the contemporary art departments. With her prejudicial belief, so opposed to Boggs and the gallery's founders, that “the art of our times appears to remove itself farther from the perceptions of ordinary life and people,” the merger may mean the demise of contemporary European and American art in the collection and hard times for Canadian. Ironically, a National Gallery retrospective of Michael Snow, a contemporary Canadian artist, recently toured Europe to much acclaim. One of the works in the exhibition was a photographic homage to the gallery's Group of Seven collection. At least, as in 1880, Canadian artists know that tradition and contemporary art are the same thing.

Philip Monk



Marquess of Lorne opens 1880 RCA show; Shih, Trudeau at 1980's art's artifacts

an attitude conspicuously absent today. Except for a shapeless and overblown show planned for this summer, the yearlong National Gallery birthday celebration is ignoring contemporary Canadian art—for reasons only partly of its choosing.

In an era of what Trudeau would call “reduced expectations” galleries are the first to get cut; the National Gallery is no exception. Still, throughout its history—in spite of measly funding and often hostile governments—it has managed to establish an excellent collection of European art and the largest collection of Canadian art anywhere. Under its last director, Jean Sutherland Boggs, the gallery achieved international esteem in both historical and contemporary art fields. Now it is back to Square 1, with people inside and out wondering what happened. Cutbacks, inflation and an unco-operative Treasury Board which is refusing to okay purchases for the “taxpayers' gallery” have undermined its acquisitions policies; and Shih has just threatened to resign if funds are not increased. “In the traditional fields the gallery has collected we are now unable to compete,” she says, adding, “I've got to keep the place alive and growing.”

Previous directors saw the National as a gallery of Western painting and sculpture. But Shih's “growth” vision is “more anthropological than art-historical,” as one of her curators puts it. Be-

As a birthday party it was rooted more in past events than present glories. Paintings from the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, the National Gallery of Canada's twin of 100 years, had been dusted off and hung on the walls of the drab Ottawa office building that has served as a “temporary” home for the gallery for two decades—heroic glorifications of French and Canadian peasant life, stoic politicians and romantic landscapes. Standing in front of Robert Harris' famous cartoon of the Fathers of Confederation, Pierre Trudeau opened the show by charming art-loving bureaucrats with an impromptu recital of poetry. But it was no sign of cultural enlightenment or coming prosperity for the National Gallery on its 100th anniversary. Trudeau may have graciously accepted the gentle barbs of Director Hsio-Yen Shih on the government's failure to provide an adequate building and funds to rescue a partly deteriorating and potentially stagnating collection. But his recently reborn government has fixed its gaze more on 1980 energy issues than on timeless works of art.

On the ground floor, festive