



Lifeworks

Reading the times

The Art Gallery of Hamilton continues its *Countdown to the New Millennium* series with Cees van Gernerden's photographic and textual exploration, *Surviving the (dirty) nineties*, on view until Dec. 5. Over the course of two and a half years, the artist photographed friends and acquaintances — mainly artists, environmentalists, and community activists — and asked them to comment on their “hopes, fears, aspirations and expectations” in the 1990s. More pointedly, he asked them how one could survive the “assault on health, education and social programs” that has characterized this decade. Most of the photographs were taken in the participants' homes; van Gernerden used a small rangefinder camera that, as he explains, “looks like a kid's camera” and makes less noise than the more popular SLRs. The result is a series of 52 portraits in which the “subjects” are engaged with the camera in a frank, relaxed and dignified mode. The second textual component of the work, dispersed through the exhibit on four clipboards, is assembled from material culled from mainstream print media over the period of the project. Despite the mainly right-wing orientation of the sources, these excerpts reveal a concern with social issues. As van Gernerden remarks, “All of us are uneasily aware that our social fabric is coming apart by the seams.”

When van Gernerden immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands in the mid-1960s, he was looking for a more pristine and less populated place to live. He remembers the Trudeau years as “fantastic times ... the country was alive then.” But we have missed opportunities to set an example in our social programs and environmental stewardship. As in the Dirty Thirties, we are seeing a resurgence of homelessness, poverty and the degradation of natural resources.

Van Gernerden began the project in 1997, spurred on by government policies that amounted, in his view, to “the criminalization of poverty.” Rather than facing up to the problems created by cut-



From Cees van Gernerden, *Surviving the (dirty) nineties*, 1997–1999. Silver print. Collection of the artist. Stephen and Douglass Dozdow-St. Christian: “We’re Queer, and we’re a couple, so feeling marginalized, being marginalized, is a way of life, but we have a special sting here in Ontario during the last three years, because something mean and corrosive has turned the marginalized from people too long neglected into targets of wilful political attack. Something venal and divisive ... has polluted the social atmosphere. And then there’s Bill. He is a squeegee-kid who lives in an abandoned warehouse, and works under crumbling concrete of the Gardiner Expressway, washing the windshields of the increasing numbers of BMWs making their way to Queen’s Park We’re out there, somewhere on the margins, just like Bill. And just like Bill, we get by ... although more and more, we are getting by in a nasty and brutish province that has abandoned the poor, or worse used them as scapegoats in order to win votes; that has turned its back on the victimized.”



From Cees van Gernerden, *Surviving the (dirty) nineties, 1997–1999*. Silver print (detail). Collection of the artist. Judy Burgess, Paul and Zachary Ropel-Morski: "The 'Dirty' Nineties, for our family, has been a decade of 'ifs.' We'll manage if ... — our jobs and non-profit art galleries continue — if these galleries ... continue to receive government support — if we can afford the large increase to our house taxes — if no serious medical or dental problems arise ... "

backs to social programs, governments are "going after easy targets — squeegee-kids and beer-drinking mothers — as a political expedient." In *Surviving the (dirty) nineties* he wants to give a voice to the people "from a grassroots level rather than from positions of power." None of the participants have joined the ranks of the homeless, and many enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, but the apprehension expressed about what van Gernerden describes as "the hard-right turn in government" is a thought-provoking testimony of the times.

Anne Marie Todkill
Editor, The Left Atrium

Freud's request

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Simon looked gaunt and exasperated lying on his bed. I drew up the equivalent of the next increment of his oral morphine and injected it.

"Will it be enough?" he asked.

I took his hand and said, "I'll be here for you."

Simon closed his eyes, shook his head, and said, "I'm not going to say goodbye." Then he waved me out of the room.

Downstairs, his wife and children waited. They very much wanted to care for Simon at home and were keen on learning about skin care, lifts and transfers, and pain control. We made arrangements for nursing support, and I wrote out prescriptions for pain relief.

On my next visit Simon let me know he had been annoyed with me.

"Why?" I asked.

"You know why. I didn't say goodbye to you but after the morphine injection I half hoped not to wake up. Furthermore, you made arrangements with my family that were not discussed with me." He looked at me severely and then grabbed my hand. "I forgive you," he said. "Now I suppose you want to confirm that my heart's still pumping."

Over the next month Simon was remarkably free of pain. A daily routine emerged, one that clearly reflected Kate's

aesthetic sense. Every morning after breakfast she would help him downstairs to a comfortable chair that looked toward an eastern exposure. Here he had his coffee and read the morning paper. Simon showed me the view plane. Leading to the window was a vase of freshly cut flowers, and through the window was a small forsythia bush that would soon break into bloom. Next to the forsythia was a young serviceberry tree that in turn brought forth delicate white-brown blossoms. Beneath and around the splashes of colour were lush evergreens — junipers, pines and yews — and beyond the aromatic bark mulch and winter grass grew a slanting row of linden trees.

Late in the morning Simon moved to an alcove facing south near the kitchen and listened to music: Buxtehude, Bach and Chopin. The bay window was alive with colour: hanging plants merging with ferns and palmettos, through the window a thick spruce hedge, and above, in the distance, the sweep of a cedar-shake roof.

During the afternoon, in the family room, Simon organized his papers and worked on his correspondence. In front of him was a picture window overlooking the garden. Birds swooped into the feeders close to the window and then darted away to the shrubbery. This garden, full of wonderful highlights that merged and produced a whole, was in

the centre of the city, but it could have been in Bouchard, Belingrath or Kew.

After supper, Simon's daughter read him Chekhov, but as the days lengthened, his strength began to fade. One week he was actively discussing the points in the story; by the next he was falling asleep in mid-sentence. His daughter would finish the story, and then his son carried him upstairs to bed.

By the last week of June, Simon slept most of the time. The stories and music continued, and when I visited there was always a gentle smile on his face.

The evening of the first of July my wife and I walked down to the harbour to watch the fireworks. It was warm, with just a puff of wind languorously propelling the sailboats across the yellow and magenta water. The crowd stirred as the curtain of night fell and the first rocket sizzled high in the sky, exploding in reds and whites and blues. Beautiful variations of colour continued to build in the night sky into a profusion of sound and colour. Then came a pause ... and a single rocket arched high over the harbour, exploding in a magnificent, luminous blossom of bronze and silver and gold. In the awed hush that followed my pager summoned me.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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