

cruel. Yet students must learn to interrogate, if only to understand, perhaps to heal.

“Mr. Dunn,” the first student asks, “what is the date today?”

“February. February 15.”

“Look outside,” the third student says. “Is that February outside?”

The patient gazes out the window. “It could be February out there. Or April?”

“Who is the mayor of Toronto?” the second student asks.

“He’s an idiot.”

“What is his name?” the second student repeats.

“Badboy, that’s his name. He’s an idiot.” Mr. Dunn has worked himself into an angry mood. He tells a mean joke about the mayor as if memory has returned.

The students smirk.

“What will you do when you leave the hospital?” the first student says.

“You tell me,” the patient says. “I’m no good now. I’ve got to get better first.”

There are no books beside his bed,

no cards, no radio or TV, no photos, only a large calendar on his night table and a clock. On the calendar is pencilled in bold letters, with a time beside each one, breakfast, shower, morning walk, nap, lunch, social work visit, CT scan, supper, candy snack. Someone has charted a map to orient Mr. Dunn on his lost journey.

I point to my watch and say goodbye to Mr. Dunn. We move from the bedside. He folds back into himself.

The sitter tucks him in. Mr. Dunn turns away, exhausted.

We sit in a small classroom and review the case.

“Mr. Dunn was an alcoholic,” I explain.

“He can’t remember months,” the first student says.

“Or that he is in a hospital,” says the second student. “He has no time sense. He makes up false stories.”

They recite his mental status exam. Lost memory fascinates them. They have not seen it before. Memory is

what we take for granted. The students return to its absence, as if searching for a missing limb.

“What is his diagnosis?” I ask.

“Korsakoff’s syndrome,” the third medical student says. “But I saw the chart.”

“What is the treatment and outcome?” I ask.

“There isn’t much treatment, apart from controlling symptoms and vitamin replacement. The outcome is poor,” the second student says.

The following evening the students visit Mr. Dunn a last time. He doesn’t remember them. He will be discharged. The calendar and clock are missing. The sitter has gone. Darkness is the worst time. He stares outside but sees nothing.

He thinks it is April or February, or January, and he cries easily.

Ron Ruskin
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Lifeworks

Still motion

David Ferguson’s large-scale paintings first give an impression of stasis. But after a moment of experiencing their scale and their densely pigmented surfaces, one gets the impression of fine, quick, vibratory movement. Before long, the viewer is caught up in reverie, a multi-tiered meditation on the elemental nature of things. It is this mental and emotional space — the wordless source of improvised creation — that is the true subject of Ferguson’s paintings and installations. Hence the title of the show, *Courtyard for a Bird*, implies a safe, enclosed place where a habitué of the skies (the realm of abstraction?), accustomed to flight and constant activity (always in a flap?), may touch down for a while, rest and focus. To those of us who feel we are in ceaseless internal or external mo-



David Ferguson in dance performance. In background: *Wilderness*, 1999. Acrylic on cast cotton, 6' x 12'.



David Ferguson, 2001. *Shelter*. Acrylic on cast cotton, 6' x 6.'

tion, Ferguson's installations offer the opportunity to experience a vital quietude, a chance to locate ourselves, look around with a refreshed perspective and take new bearings. The effect on pulse and respiration of a gallery-goer immersed in a painted Ferguson sense-scape might well equate to the benefits of meditation.

David Ferguson — artist, writer and former swimmer — is also a principal dancer and choreographer with Suddenly Dance Theatre in Victoria. It's no wonder his visual works "speak" of motion. He uses complementary and contrasting colours to produce a pulsating optical effect. The vibrating surfaces of his paintings reveal other forms, defined by the pigments that flow through textural fissures and radiating lines. In *Shelter*, curved horn-like forms converge in a high, pointed arch, creating a gate or portal that invites the viewer to enter yet another dimension of movement. Energetic, wriggling lines rise from the bottom of the frame in *Wilderness*, like some kind of fantastical growth pattern caught in fast-frame photography; one imagines a vast, hyper-fertile field of wheat or succulent wild grasses. In other works, the cracked and wrinkled surfaces are more likely to evoke dried mud or

lake-bottoms, or the microscopic vegetal blossoming of lichen. The surfaces seem to writhe; there are poly-rhythms, accents and multiple variations on the basic theme: pure movement.

Paradoxically, one way in which this movement is emphasised is through the restful stillness that the viewer attains by contemplating each work. To be sure, Ferguson controls the way in which these works are viewed, in and as the environment, through lighting, placement and the relationships struck among the

installed works. But their effect is also to place the viewer into the same mental and emotional space from which they were created. Each of the works is a complex text, and decoding them is a synesthetic experience. Slight sensory distortions are a part of this. The paintings' animated fields of colour can give a vertiginous illusion of great height and distance — a telescopic view — but they can just as easily produce a sense of minute magnification. One might be gazing at the earth's surface from orbit, or plummeting into its complicated detail to have a look at its molecular structure. Serene, monochromatic fragment assemblages, on the other hand, have more modest aspects; their textures appear as the repeating patterns caused by wind on sand dunes, or by waves crashing and receding on a shore.

The "bird" in Ferguson's "courtyard" is the mobile, fleeting perception of the viewer, at lucid, meditative rest. The bird's-eye vantage point is that of the artist, creating from a still point a timeless moment of perception, or the trance-like state of creative meditation. When the viewer is placed in this relationship to the work, he or she shares in the creative state of heightened perception. In this sense, *Courtyard For a Bird* is also performative, for the audience

participates in both the creation and experience of vision.

In *Courtyard for a Bird* David Ferguson has choreographed a momentary respite from the world's dulling clamour, suggesting that visionary perception is itself a state of grace, a sanctuary. These works suggest that we "see" and "know" differently, according to factors of stillness and motion, distance and intimacy, activity and rest. They are an invitation to touch down and check in, even if momentarily, to allow this intimate connection with the experience of seeing. It beckons us to observe the play of light upon subtle, dancing surfaces, the sublime complicities of grandeur and simplicity, excess and refinement.

Courtyard For A Bird was presented at the Nanaimo Art Gallery, Nanaimo, BC, from Feb. 15 to April 16, 2002.

Yvonne Owens

Ms. Owens is a Victoria-based art critic currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of York, England.

"Dad's pencil"

Grandpa coughed a lot
and wasted into death
when I was young.

Trenches filled with poison gas
began the slow decline
which left just skin and bone,
a trembling hand
with weakened fingers
barely strong enough
to grip
a mechanical pencil.

Slow crosswords drew him
toward the last puzzle.

My mother saved the pencil
in its box.

Robert C. Dickson
Family Physician
Hamilton, Ont.