

JOHN EATON

By Nature Possessed

By Dorota Kozinska

Parcours, Art et Art de vivre, winter 1995

Most great and humble artists give homage to Nature, the one master no pupil will ever surpass. It is no different with Ottawa painter, John Eaton, whose works are a continued dialogue with the environment, both physical and metaphysical. The search is both pictorial and personal, and this struggle is masterfully translated into canvas after canvas.

Classically-trained, well-travelled, Eaton has collected a myriad impressions and, ensconced in the quiet of the Ontario countryside, is steadfastly weaving them into a unique visual tapestry. Thus enveloped, one may say, embraced by the earth and the sky, he absorbs and releases, producing works of art in symbiosis with the nature around him, and the resulting works continue to fascinate, the viewer and the painter.

The artist's respect for his subject matter is visible in the fluidity of the lines, as if air itself was guiding the brush, pushing it and prodding gently, swooping here and there, at time allowing a gust to raise the paint into a textured landscape.

In his recent works, on display at Galerie Lydia Monaro, Eaton continues to employ animal and floral motifs to structure his composition, but all remain in the hold of an almost surreal energy that controls the image, in *Percheron with Peonies*, the magnificent horse is outlined with but a few delicate brushstrokes, its oblique, stylized form hovering in the lower corner of the canvas, gently staining against a shower of giant pink flowers.

They float all around like great puffs of smoke, not yet fully in bloom, blossoming; it seems, before our very eyes. They dwarf the pale horse, turning laws of Nature upside down with a joyful abandon of artistic licence.

The otherworldly ballet is taking place against a dark background, like dense smoke that begins to dissipate in the upper part of the painting, just as the final peony floats up and disappears in the breaking light.

Upon closer inspection, the canvas reveals a universe of details, petals and buds appear in the textured folds of paint and the whole takes on the semblance of tapestry. *Rooster with Theatre* presents a different play, as it were, featuring at its very heart a gleaming, shimmering coat of a strutting bird. Its plumes have the texture of silk and velvet, shining like precious gems.

The bird's movement is perfectly incorporated into the gesture of the brushstrokes, and thus its form becomes just another brilliance of colour against an enigmatic, abstract darkness. Once in a while, Eaton invokes spectral images of human faces, almost featureless they seem to be composed of air and coloured smoke, there but for an instant, only be blown away by a gust of wind.



In *Young Performer*, the youth has the smile of a Leonardo da Vinci portrait, his face enveloped in a halo of red hair or perhaps a fancy wrap, framed on both sides by two hearts. The painting is like a lover's message to his beloved, ardent yet innocent, and like love, illusive.

Eaton's poetic spirit surges in *Pool with Rocks*, a Zen-like paean to nature, in which he seems to be guided by a powerful energy to create a mesmerising, ethereal and completely captivating tableau.

It features a moving, swirling eddy at the centre of the canvas, cold and pale like the Dead Sea, pushing through giant walls of granite, the force of its persistence almost tangible. This is a breath catching ethereal scene verging on religious, and symbolic of the spiritual dimension in Eaton's work.

It is also a sign of the great mastery of painterly techniques accomplished by Eaton. That ever-present energy in his works is composed of a sophisticated play of light and shadow. This critic's reference to da Vinci is by no means frivolous. Echoing the convictions of the great master, Eaton places his objects in deep darkness, thus opening up a universe of invisible light which he releases into the works like a living spirit.

One of Leonardo's many famous inventions was a technique called "sfumato", from the Italian word "sfumare", meaning "to evaporate like smoke", characterised by a blurred outline and mellowed colours that allow one form to merge with another, and always leave something to the imagination.

The same can be said of the art of John Eaton, whose talent lies as much in what he presents to the viewer as what he allows us to discover for ourselves.

Red Fox Spring, mixed media, 56x30"