

BLACK AND BLUE: A VENN DIAGRAM, or THREE RETROSPECTIVES

Needless to say, during the early months of 2021 I found myself with a lot of time on my hands. I began to take stock, casting a cold glance back over the past forty years of so of activity looking for patterns, false starts, forgotten gems . . . the result was three thick binders containing mocked-up layouts for three retrospective books, that in order of completion are “*Black and Blue – a Retrospective of Never or Rarely Seen Works (1976-2021)*” “*Me Me Me – a retrospective of forty-eight self-portraits (1952-2021)*” an “*Works With Words – 1976-2021*”) [with the occasional trip even further back].

While I’m neither tripolar as a whole reprising “The Three Faces of Eves,” because of a degree of overlap between the three distinct volumes the project performs a Venn diagram. This is the widely-used style that employs overlapping circles to illustrate the logical relation between sets – the diagrams are used to illustrate the simple relationships between probability, logic, statistics, and linguistics.

Marx once wrote that “men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.” Or perhaps more profoundly (to steal a few words from the Scottish actor and [ex]stand-up comic Billy Connolly,) the work presented here spring from “a merry-go-round of memories, observations, fantasies, and ad-libs that somehow fit together and mean something. That’s the way I like it because that way, they’re as imperfect as I am. They’re not story-shaped; they’re me-shaped.”

I strive for the bravery of Bacon and the wickedness of Warhol (at their best), and the collection of works shown here makes it clear that from the moment of art school graduation I came out swinging and these projects run the gamut from my most pugilistic to my most introspective. To steal another little bit from Billy, “if you’re likely to be offended . . . you may as well fuck off now.”

Accompanying the works in the (mocked up) books are newly created miniature versions of the photographs, installations, texts, and other media that span my so-called art career and are presented in chronological order. They are digital photographs mounted on 50.8 x 40.6 cm (20” x 16”) Bristol board [since cut down to 35.6 x 27.9 cm (14” x 11”) and are offered in small editions.

In the end “*Black and Blue: a Venn Diagram or Three Retrospectives*” is a work intended for quiet contemplation (even though the odds are strong that along the way you’ll be hollered at by this or that image or text.) the completed work consists of 120 works and 58 texts spread across 448 pages in three binders that are at once shocking and serene, introspective and bombastic, contrarian and ironic, furious and funny . . . bracketing my belief that one

might fashion artistic assertions from one's own lived experiences. This sentiment echoes one of my favourite quotes from the philosopher of existentialism (Baroness) May Warnock, former Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge. Warnock insisted that one "operates under perpetual tension – the only way to cope with life is to learn what to forget; the only way to feel one has an identity is to remember."

This project was displayed at the Robert Kananaj Gallery in Toronto from September 25, 2021-March 31, 2022.

"Black and Blue – A Retrospect of Never or Rarely Seen Works (1976-2021)"

164-page book mock-up with 34 works and 22 texts. 28 x 21.6 cm (11" x 8.5") pages in a 29.7 x 26.4 x 7.6 cm (11.625" x 10.125" x 3") three-ring binder.

In the earliest of the three books presented here I've proposed that the Black and Blue of this this (proposed) retrospective riffs on the meanings of those two words in visual form – blue is both sadness and sexual; black is the colour of mourning and menace; together they are the colours of bruising. The works in this volume have been arranged out of chronological order in such a way as to create a dialogue with the works that appeared before and follow after. The earliest works sprang from my direct involvement with the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) as assistant programming director – an experience that has had a life-long impact on both my practice and my worldview.

These works are all photo-based, but some are enlargements of archival documents in which I played a significant role and in other cases reconstructions of unique performances that were poorly documented at the time, or site-specific installations (since destroyed) and based on archival scraps. The content is both prescient and prurient, in some cases shocking (intentionally so) and in other sadistic (gleefully so) in their visual assault. But all of the works, ranging across CEAC-related performances, institutional critiques, "pornography" (after I've had my hands all over them, there's no longer any fear of arousal – unless there are paraphilia yet to be named), and the first waves of the AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics – both individually and as a whole, and whether appropriated from the real world or constructed inside my head – are drenched in irony and speak to many of the issues still clouding our dreams and enlivening our nightmares.

"Me Me Me – A Retrospective of Forty-Eight Self-Portraits (1952-2021)"

144-page book mock-up including 17 texts. 28 x 21.6 cm (11" x 8.5") pages in a 29.7 x 26.4 x 7.6 cm (11.625" x 10.125" x 3") three-ring binder.

The introduction text accompanying this work begins with the lyric

"Well, it seems to me that you have seen too much in too few years"

*And though you've tried, you just can't hide your eyes are edged with tears
You better stop, look around
Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes, here it comes
Here comes your nineteenth nervous breakdown . . ."*

and continues on with an explanation that the above text was written and recorded in 1965 when the future artist presented here was thirteen years old and believed (along with millions of others) that rock lyrics were deeply profound. When read today, sixty-one years later, the words are not all that profound but their deep emotionalism (couple with an externalized disembodied spectre of mental distress roaming the streets ready to attack without warning) renders the lyric, in this artist's mid at least, as Gothic. As explained by Frederick S. Frank, the Gothic works that emerged in the late 18th century forwarded the "impulse to reclaim the strange, the exotic, the savage, the improbable, [and] the mysterious . . . as legitimate zones of artistic pleasure" that "these corridors to the forbidden opened the door to an alternative universe . . ."

While being at once the subject and the object of surveillance in the forty-eight works assembled here . . . gleefully hopping, skipping, and jumping across the pages of late-Modernism, the artist is seen here plucking (seemingly at random) titles, or tendencies, or signature gestures that act simultaneously as homage, parody, and institutional critique. While the artist's approach is conceptual, the investigations presented here part from the classic framing devices of first-generation conceptual art by introducing the gothic and the confessional – they are a visual record of what was going on inside his head at the given moment.

With the exception of two post-art school works, the self-portraits – arranged in chronological order – spring from the 1990s onward, a time when the political climate seemingly encouraged the idea that Victor Frankenstein's handiwork be taken as a role model. The monster's narrative was a philosophical meditation on what it feels like to be completely alienated from one's environment, what it's like to be "the other." We have *always* been that . . . but . . . the (calculated) movement at that time was to instill the feeling that one was to view oneself as a "thing," (or even better, to become an "it.)

While the artist here obviously has the ability to reconcile the binary opposition between objective and subjective states of personal experience into a semi-fictional construct that may be seen from multiple perspectives, there is always the danger, as Julia Kristeva wonders, how "one can prevent [it] from leading either to . . . narcissism or to the indifferent scattering of objects that are experienced as false?" The projects presented in this volume show a level of authenticity that makes clear these works were never destined for Instagram (and it's not without a sense of irony that in many cases the artist does not appear in any recognizable form).

The artist has been told often enough that he's led a very interesting life – that's certainly plausible – but it's hardly been a fun-filled one. It's his mastery of the self-inflicted putdown that has always been his own externalized disembodied spectre . . . roaming the streets ready to attack without warning. What follows are a series of “self-portraits” [with sarcastic air-quotes] culled from forty-three years of effort from which the artist presented here found himself finally able to claw his way to a position at the bottom of that lowest level of celebrity – the award-winning visual artist from Canada.

“Words With Words (1976-2021)”

140-page book mock-up with 42 works and 19 texts. 28 x 21.6 cm (11” x 8.5”) pages in a 29.7 x 26.4 x 7.6 cm (11.625” x 10.125” x 3”) three-ring binder.

The third and final book is a collection of works arranged out of chronological order, and as implied by the title, the objects presented here involve textual incursions into the domain of the visual. Beginning with works enhanced by the intervention of a single word, they are followed by the slow and steady increase of a textual presence until by the very end all that remains to be seen are large and dense works of text only. Over the course of this transformation the images become less and less of a factor and eventually diminish to the point of oblivion. The works themselves are a combination of the approaches taken in the previous two books – from the interiority and confessional aspects of the second (Me Me Me), to the confrontational, pugilistic stance of the first (Black and Blue); all the while touching on institutional critiques, “pornography”, archival documents, and the first wave of the AIDS epidemic.

Bruce Eves (revised July 3, 2026)