

Coach House – Pressing into the Future

Shiva's Really Scary Gifts

John Scott, as told to Ann MacDonald

Coach House

208 pages, \$21.95 paper

ISBN: 1552450910

Jim → by John Armstrong and Paul Collins,

Coach House and Art Gallery of Sudbury

120 pages, \$24.95 paper

ISBN: 15524510620

by Peter O'Brien

IF COACH HOUSE PRESS did not exist, it would be necessary for Canadians to invent it. And then the hard part would follow: nurturing it through the years and the many vagaries of publishing, funding, ceaseless technological change and what can best be described as the constant process of redefining beauty.

Since its founding by Stan Bevington in 1965, the press has been a small company that thinks like a big company. It keeps itself financially viable, it adapts quickly to changing technology, it updates its aesthetic mandate as required and it doggedly goes about doing what it is there to do: publish Canadian books.

As Canadian publishers go, it is also, paradoxically, a relatively big company that thinks like a micro-company. It produces what it wants (approximately 500 books since its founding) and lets the critics and the judgments fall where they may. It is nimble and adaptable (it sees electronic publishing "not as a marketing gimmick but as a reality and as a necessity") and it keeps its cutting edge truly sharp.

Because of their category-defying nature, these two books may very well not have found any other publisher in Canada, and yet both are not only worthy of being published, but worthy of an attentive and inquisitive audience willing to be challenged.

John Scott, winner in 2000 of the inaugural Governor General's Award for Painting, is perhaps best known for his *Trans-Am Apocalypse No. 2*, a car with the Book of Revelations scratched into its black surface. If you have never seen that menacing beast parked at the National Gallery in Ottawa, it's definitely worth a visit. In *Shiva's Really Scary Gifts* Scott is at his impetuous and idiosyncratic best. Known as a compulsive drawer, he can also now be known as a compulsive storyteller. The text in

the book was recited, presumably in ecstatic fits and starts, and then shaped by artist and writer Ann MacDonald. It is accompanied by about 100 drawings from cocktail napkins. It's quite a ride. We follow Scott through his adventures with an amorous rat; his endless conversations with the police as he tries to secure a permit so that he can buy a gun for use in his artwork; his bewildered harbouring of Lester, "the most wanted man on the planet"; his bout of meningitis; and his experiences of being hit by lightning, twice. Here is the second time:

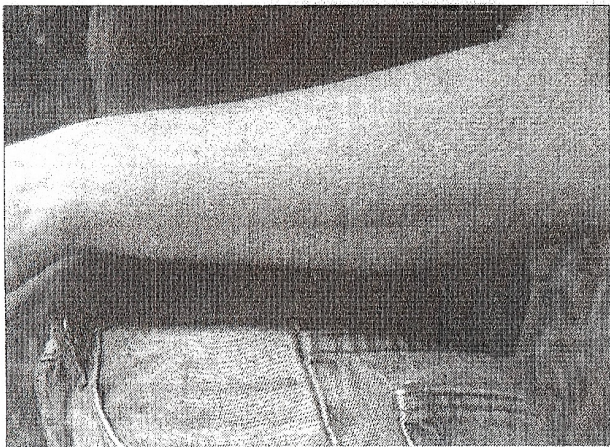
Then, when I was on the roof after Susan's memorial, I noticed the same smell, which is, as it turns out, ozone. And the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground. I realized I'd been struck again. In the head. Luckily, I was wet, which is a real life saver, because the electricity just passed over the length of my body. But it struck my left side and blew out a bunch of metal fillings. My fractured teeth were blown into my tongue, which subsequently got infected...

There are some artists' writings that seem to be the perfect representation of all artists—a sort of divine synecdoche of the part representing the whole. This book is not one of those. By turns hilarious, bizarre in the extreme, frightening (there is one scene that is the most disturbing thing I have ever read, anywhere), this book documents the frenetic and obsessive imagination of a very unique artist. I am left with a feeling for the inevitability of creativity, the essential hunger for stories, pictures, and illustrations. *Shiva's Really Scary Gifts* is the transcription of a soul in process, documenting itself as it moves through this strange world.

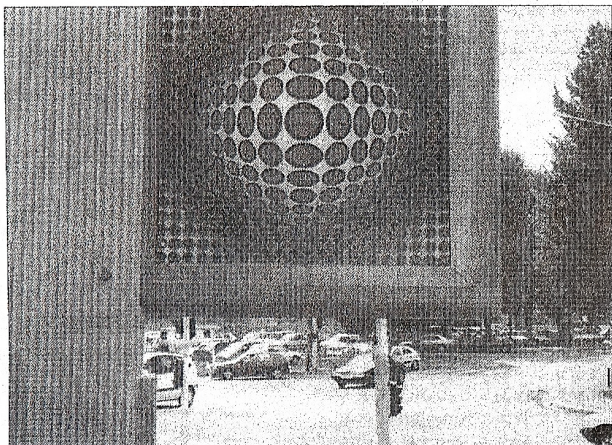
"Jim, that way. Par la" is the collective work of long-time friends and collaborators John Armstrong, a Toronto artist, teacher, curator and writer; and Paul Collins, a Canadian artist and teacher now living in Paris. While lunching one day in Paris, the two came up with a list of 49 words for which they subsequently provided

photos and text. The first word chosen was "Jim†" which refers to the graffiti tags scratched into the gravestones at Paris's Père-Lachaise cemetery that lead the way to Jim Morrison's tomb. Other words chosen include "mustard pot / pot de moutarde" "tree / arbre" "Jean-Paul Riopelle", "phrase", and "sujet libre". The images are paired at the beginning of the book and the text paired at the end. The audience does not know who took which photograph, nor who wrote what text.

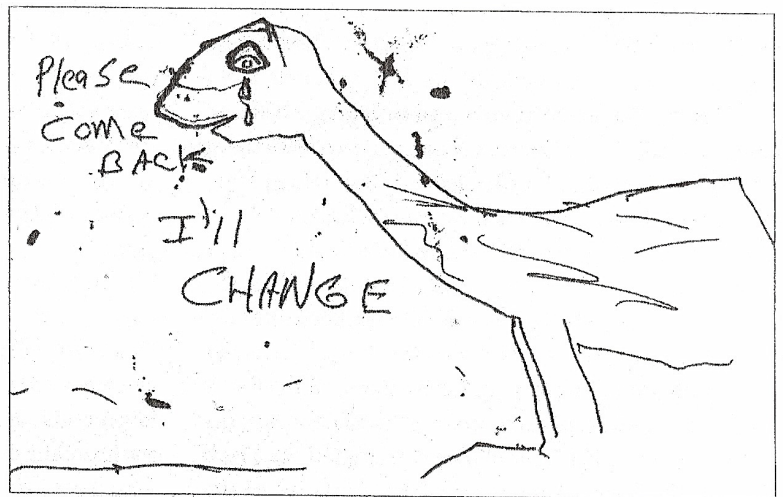
All the images are resolutely quotidian, and yet they take on, at times, a profound resonance. "Tree / arbre", for example, pairs a photograph of a city tree on the boundary between a garden and a series of intersecting walkways, and a photograph of a framed etching of a tree on ornate filigreed wallpaper. "Sujet libre" pairs a photograph of goose bumps on an arm



from Jim



from Jim



from Shiva's Scary Gifts

and a photograph of a Victor Vasarely poster hovering over the traffic of a downtown street.

The writings likewise have a delightfully random, anonymous nature, by turns banal, provocative or prescient:

One youthful summer, I worked for two florists with the real and unlikely names of Groom and Philpot. One day, en route to 'deliver a wedding,' Groom told me that he and Philpot had just bought some lovely striped sheets for their bed. For lack of anything better to say, I enquired, 'Only stripes? Where are the stars?' 'The stars?' he responded. 'Between the sheets, darling! Between the sheets.'

The book also serves as a catalogue to a show of this work which has traveled from the Robert Birch Gallery in Toronto to the Art Gallery of Sudbury and then to galleries in France and Germany. It is a beguiling juxtaposition of cultures and texts and photographs and sensibilities. The interwoven gestures articulate the banal that is hidden within the imaginative, and the arcane that lurks within the everyday. •

Peter O'Brien has reviewed visual art and writing for various publications, including Canadian Literature and Canadian Art.