

JOHN WILL | *Cradle to Gravy*

Norberg Hall is pleased to present *Cradle to Gravy*, a not-quite retrospective of the not-quite-done-yet beloved senior artist, John Will. The work in this exhibition spans 25+ years and serves as a glimpse into the mind of this Canadian art legend and an excerpt from his expansive career.

The work in *Cradle to Gravy* is text-based, expressive and laden with poignant and playful truisms.

Language based visual art has roots in the Feminist movement as well as the rise of Conceptual Art in the 1960's. Functioning aesthetically, then comes an added layer of definition and analysis when *reading* text-based artwork; the inherently political nature and nuanced handling of language can appear very clear yet very opaque. The relatable nature of John's pieces allow them, in many cases, to transcend context and become symbolic of the human condition. At times John's work seems directive but there is always space left for interpretation and subjectivity, whether through obstructed lettering, misspelled words, pop culture or philosophical allusions, the viewer fills in the blanks and in turn completes the work by ascribing meaning.

John's work is humble, accessible and whip smart. He remains an intellectual with an aptitude for humour and cultural critique into his 80's. Juxtaposing "old" and "new" canvases and works on paper in a salon style installation highlights John's range in medium, scale and evolving attitude through the years. Whether drawerly, dripping, graphic or googly eyed, the artwork remains as snappy and relevant as ever. John is a master of playing with language. Layering text and imagery he disrupts hierarchies of information and how they are consumed in Western culture. The objecthood of the lettering itself becomes important here as the text will initially be read for *what* it says but *how* it is written informs the tone, stance and messaging; a visual onomatopoeia.

Some of John's pieces are self deprecating as he often pens ideas in the 1st person - but they speak to the proverbial "I" and "we", addressing the existential questions, self doubt and small failures we each stumble through daily - although he is comfortable being the butt of his own tongue in cheek musings.

Chatting with John about the canon of text based work has been endlessly fascinating, tangential, hilarious and went something like this:

Chloe: In some cases it seems like you employ a minimalist approach, for example using single words as your subject. Do you think that helps with the longevity and potential universality

in the work? In the sense of freeing it of too much context?

John: I cant help that! I may have made the work responding to something historically but who cares. I don't overthink it...sometimes I don't think at all, which in many cases is when I do my best work. I don't want to give away the full picture because I don't know what the full picture is. Please ask a different question.

Chloe: I will not. If the work changes along with the times then I think that helps maintain relevance, albeit a bit of ambiguity. If its not static and we can find evolving meaning in your balance of gesture + restraint, aesthetics + politics, critique + humour, then perhaps thats why people don't tire of your work.

John: That's debatable.

We're born, we make our mark, then we die... its all gravy.