

# Artichoke

FALL/WINTER 2000  
Volume 12 Number 3

WRITINGS ABOUT THE VISUAL ARTS

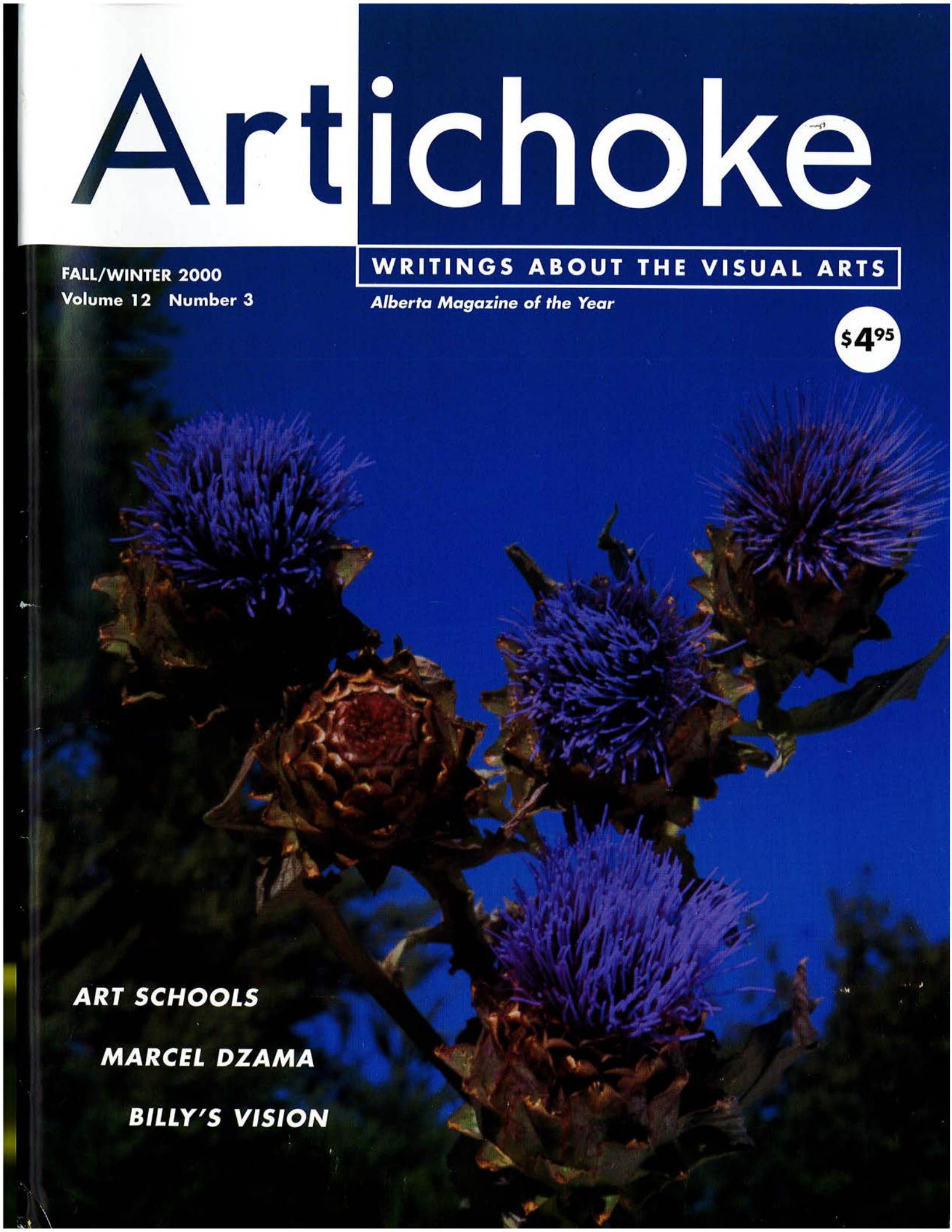
*Alberta Magazine of the Year*

\$4<sup>95</sup>

**ART SCHOOLS**

**MARCEL DZAMA**

**BILLY'S VISION**



Harry Fonseca  
Pow-Wow Club  
1981



# the POWWOW

An Art History

September 22, 2000 to  
January 28, 2001

Curated by Lee-Ann Martin  
and Bob Boyer



Canadian Heritage  
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## Exhibitions

The Powwow: An Art History  
September 22, 2000 to January 28, 2001

The Art of Norval Morrisseau  
October 12, 2000 to January 7, 2001

Jeff Nachtigall:  
Excerpts from conversations with myself  
October 27, 2000 to January 28, 2001

Impressionist Masterworks from the  
National Gallery of Canada  
November 18, 2000 to January 21, 2001



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FALL/WINTER • VOL. 12 • NO. 3 • 2000

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# CONTENTS

<b>ARTSEEN</b>	4	FILM FATIGUE <i>Maureen Rivington</i>
<b>PAST &amp; PRESENT</b>	6	RON KOSTYNIUK <i>Kay Burns</i>
<b>FEATURES</b>	10	THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE ARTIST <i>Paula Gustafson</i>
	12	SCHOOLS ON SHOW IN '00 <i>Yvonne Owens</i>
	14	MAKING THE GRADE IN ART SCHOOL <i>Agnieszka Matejko</i>
	18	THE MINISTRY OF SILLY WALKS <i>REDIVIVUS Paula Gustafson</i>
<b>REVIEWS</b>	24	MARGARET GLAVINA: MUSEUM <i>Jet Blake</i>
	26	MARCEL DZAMA: MORE FAMOUS DRAWINGS <i>Marnie Butvin</i>
	28	DEADLY SILENCE <i>Kerry Moog</i>
	30	BILLY'S VISION <i>Greg Beatty</i>
	33	ARI TOMITA AND MONDO SECTER: BOKU JAZZ <i>Paula Gustafson</i>
	36	JIM PICCO: PEZZO GROSSO <i>Tomas Jonsson</i>
	38	JOSIE CHU: SELF-PORTRAIT (FILIAL TO GO) <i>Paula Gustafson</i>
	40	YELLOW, NO SLEEP AT NIGHT <i>Monique Westra</i>
	42	MILLIE CHEN: HUM <i>Shannon Anderson</i>
	44	FRESH MEAT <i>Allan Antliff</i>
	46	BRENT GELAUDE: SOUVENIR OF CANADA <i>Paula Gustafson</i>
	48	EGGOCENTRIC <i>P.S. Barry</i>
	50	LOUISE LEBLANC: INTRINSIC FORMS <i>Marie Leduc</i>
	52	SADKO HADZIHASANOVIC: PORTRAITIZM <i>Corinna Ghaznavi</i>
	54	DAVID BURNS: FOUR ELEMENTS <i>Paula Gustafson</i>
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	56	THE TRICKSTER SHIFT
<b>SITE SPECIFIC</b>	23	JAZZ TRIO AT ST. JOHN THE DIVINE <i>Avis Rasmussen</i>
<b>SHOWCARD</b>	9	PLUNGE <i>Ted Fullerton</i>
	17	CAMOUFLAGE 1 <i>Lois Andison</i>
<b>COVER PHOTO</b>		TOM BOWEN

## MILLIE CHEN: HUM

LA CENTRALE GALERIE POWERHOUSE,  
MONTREAL

APRIL 1 - MAY 4, 2000

by Shannon Anderson

Before I am able to see Millie Chen's *Hornful*, I hear it. A strange moaning, crying sound calls at the entrance of La Centrale, beckoning visitors around the corner into the main gallery space. Turning to the right, I discover that the source of the noise is located in a sculptural form hanging from the ceiling. Crafted from wood, the curvilinear object wears a pair of deer antlers at its crown and a set of rusty trumpet-like iron horns at its base. The shape is almost organic; an imperfect, lopsided design that, upon inspection, borders on the grotesque: coagulated blood coats the iron horns and stains the wood. For a moment, I forget the sounds emanating from this structure and focus on the rough, cracked surface of the blood-smearred horns. The sounds leaking out from inside this organic form now feel like death cries, and my wandering mind conjures images of late-night road accidents. But then I place my head beneath the form, between the horns from which the sounds are emanating. Caught between the two speakers, I am surprised by the soothing effect of the sounds that permeate my body. I am now aware of two distinct sounds; one horn emits the long-drawn-out cry that permeated into the gallery entrance, the other sounds a human breath. The original source for the cry is less identifiable. Looking at the antlers resting on top of the structure, I interpret the sound as a deer's call. But paired with the human breath it, too, sounds somewhat human. At the same time, there is something unnatural, vaguely mechanical about it. The sound of human breathing is a breath taken in through a mouth with lips parted and teeth together, the air pushing through saliva. This

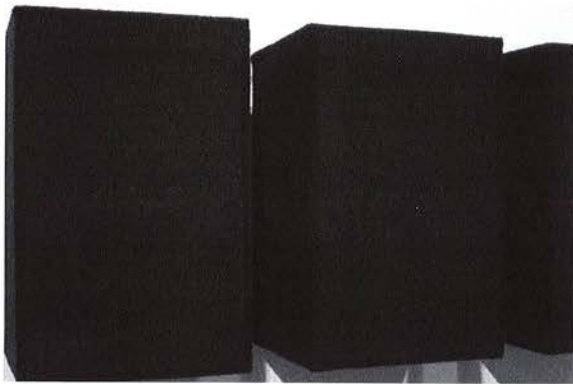


*Hornful*, Millie Chen, 2000

cyclical structure, then, breathes in and out, as though each breath travels through the curves of its organic form and emits a strange call as it exhales.

Influenced by the pace of the breathing form, I notice that the pace of my breathing has slowed involuntarily, and the effect becomes not only soothing, but also hypnotic. A desire emerges to express this effect in words, but I am at a loss for the vocabulary. I fall back on the visual, thinking of these sounds in terms of complementary colours that resonate when placed side-by-side. I realize that these are not simply sounds, but a sound poem, a musical composition. The form is not unlike an instrument, with the exception that it is created strictly for listening, and for an audience of one.

The memory of these sounds stay with me long after I leave the gallery space, and in a few days I return to Chen's installation with a hand-held tape recorder in an effort to capture this sonic experience. Not surprisingly, when the recorded sounds are played, their disembodied presence loses all the complexity of the original. The inability of a mechanical device to capture the allure of these sounds somehow makes my task of translating an encounter with this installation into words all the more challenging.



*Buzz Humm*, Millie Chen, 2000



*Hornful (Detail)*, Millie Chen, 2000

In *Buzz Humm*, the second installation in Chen's *Hum* exhibition, the intersection of sound and the written word is addressed. At the far end of the gallery, a line of small black boxes hang across the wall, grouped in small series of two, three, or four. Unlike *Hornful*, these shoe-box sized, speaker-like forms are silent. Instead, 'transmissions' have been embroidered on the surface of each felt-covered box as onomatopoeia. Each series spells out a different sound composition. *swooosh / swish* or *vroom / whzz* are some of the sound groupings that fit together to become short sound poems. Here, however, it becomes the visitor's responsibility to read these poems aloud if they are to be brought into the realm of sound.

This is not the first time that Ridgeway, Ontario, artist Millie Chen has explored the use of sound in an installation. Earlier this year at The Museum for Textiles, I viewed her collaboration work with Evelyn Von Michalofski entitled *Damping Chamber*. Part of the October 13, 1999 - January 30, 2000, group exhibition *Felt* (guest curated by Kathryn Walter), Von Michalofski's and Chen's *Damping Chamber* employed a thick version of the same material used for *Buzz Humm* to line the space of a small room. Drawing back a large panel of this harness felt, the visitor enters a dark, rather claustrophobic space. Inside, the body is surrounded by a beautiful yet disquieting arrangement of sounds composed of singing voices, breath, and splashing water. Here, Chen and Von Michalofski used sound to create a vivid encounter in an otherwise sensorially-deprived space.

The tactility of Chin's installations in *Hum* are as seductive as their use of sound. Each appeals to a sense of touch that reflects the quality of sound that the piece generates. In *Buzz Humm*, each letter is meticulously embroidered on top of soft black felt. The text reflects a more controlled form of sound; one that is abstract yet confined to the written word. *Hornful* is organic and disconcerting, almost daring the viewer's hand to caress its surface. The sounds that emit from the bloodied horns are unconfined, travelling beyond its body. (It seems appropriate to call this form a body, constructed as it is with organic materials from both plant and animal.) In both works, the characteristic experience of 'viewing' a sculpture is reworked, with the result that sound becomes the pre-dominate sense that influences the visual form.

In both installations, the distinction between sound and noise is clear. Although they are abstract and unidentifiable, these sounds are thoughtfully selected and arranged to generate intriguing resonances echoed by the forms that house them. In her role as composer, Millie Chen creates sound pieces that entice the viewer into becoming a listener. ♦

Shannon Anderson is a freelance art writer and curator currently based in Mississauga.