

Sister artists from sister city offer 12 perspectives

By ANGELA JEFFS

The 12 Canadian women now exhibiting on the lower two floors of the Yokohama Civic Art Gallery have much in common. All are in their 40s and have lived in Vancouver for at least 10 years. All are professors as well as practicing artists. All admit to greatly respecting one another's work. Most have children. Many are fanatic gardeners. A few even share working space.

I learned all this and a lot more from Greg Bellerby, the curator of the exhibition, who did not seem all unnerved by being the only man on the group trip. As the curator and director of the Charles H. Scott Gallery, which is part of the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, where he and many of the featured artists teach, he has known them all for years.

Their current exhibition, "Vancouver Perspective," which opened Oct. 31, is in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the sister-city affiliation between Yokohama and the capital of British Columbia.

"Last year 12 women artists currently active in Yokohama brought their work to show in Vancouver," Bellerby explained Oct. 30. "All were Japanese — excepting painter Liga Pang, who was born and lives here."

With "Vancouver Perspective," the exchange is complete.

The day before the exhibition was due to open, Elspeth Pratt was perched high on a ladder, knocking pegs into the wall in preparation for hang-



TEN OF THE VANCOUVER ARTISTS now showing their work at the Yokohama Civic Art Gallery share a joke with the exhibition's curator, Greg Bellerby. ANGELA JEFFS PHOTO

ing "Lucky Me" (made of wood, galvanized metal and felt) and "Scar" (plywood, corrugated cardboard and strapping).

"Elspeth's work explores the relationship between women and Western art history," Bellerby offered to explain. "She sets out to foil the myth of sculpture as a male tradition by using macho materials in a way that men never would."

Lucy Hogg, with one large

painting hung to her satisfaction, uses 19th century European painting as her field of reference.

"The piece you see here is one of a series painted over the last five years," she said. "I began by collecting images in Paris that I might work from, starting out with the idea of reconstituting the female body as a construct. I'm interested in the relationship of a nude to the ground, and psychoanalytic readings of

the phallic woman in relation to male anxiety."

Back in Vancouver she shares gallery space with Renee Van Halm. Though their techniques overlap, with a similar buildup of surfaces, Van Halm has a completely different agenda, often involving architectural constructions that frame small discreet icons. In "Speculation," for example, the centerpiece is what appears to be a monogram. In fact, the calligraphy reads as "anger," the surrounding installation managing to divest it of any emotive expression.

"I'm interested in the way words become cliches, how they are used in domestic architecture, and to elicit certain responses in women," she said.

Another theme that runs through many of the women's work is an exploration of cultural roots.

Anne Ramsden shows a group of chairs whose loose covers open up a world of foreign exotica. Everything comes from somewhere else; nothing is as clear as it seems at first glance.

Sharyn Yuen, who co-owns a shop, Paper-Ya, in Vancouver, was supervising the hanging of two enormous pieces of "washi" paper made by spraying pulp onto screens. From a series of five, one was photoprinted with a group of young Chinese orphans; the other, a comb that her mother had brought with her from China.

"Around the end of last century, thousands of young Chinese girls were imported into

Canada for purposes of cheap labor and prostitution, no different to the way Southeast Asian girls are brought into Japan nowadays," she revealed. "I became very curious about this lost piece of women's history, my own cultural roots, and what is happening today in China, where orphanages are full of unwanted, expendable female babies."

Upstairs, Jin-me Yoon was trying to hang 137 photographs of Korean immigrants in two groups. In one, people stand before a painting by Lauren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven (founders of a Canadian style of landscape painting earlier this century); in the second they face a work by Emily Carr, one of the group's associate members.

But, Yoon reckons, they were very much observers. Emily Carr, for example, spent years paddling up and down the West Coast painting Indian totem poles and villages, but never involving herself any further.

"I can't stand back in this way. As a second-generation Korean-Canadian, I strive to find a place in a multicultural society," she said. "I'm constantly asking, 'How can I create a national identity for myself?'"

The title of the piece now on view, "A Group of Sixty Seven," refers to the 1967 immigration act that allowed a far greater range of foreign nationals into Canada than had been allowed. One of the countries affected was South Korea.

Vicky Alexander, who has

shown in the U.S., Belgium and Switzerland, shows paradoxical photographs of trees and landscape framed in wood.

Alysson Clay has exhibited in London and lived in California. Her feelings about Los Angeles, where women feel unsafe and everyone travels by car, is reflected in "A Day Just Like the Day That Always Follows the Day Before," in which two light boxes are connected by a line of emotive writing.

The other artists are just as passionate, just as intense. But while Landan Mackenzie appears to dream in paint, Monique Fouquet celebrates her grandfather's career as an early engineer in Quebec.

With a hooded bed and a lacquered Japanese "tansu" filled with starched linen, Kati Campbell not only quite accidentally brings coals to Newcastle, but more importantly reminds women of the harsher realities of marriage.

Lorna Brown's installation questions how unborn children are being served by ultrasound techniques originally invented by the military.

Bellerby, who was due to start teaching within hours of touching down back in Vancouver when the group returned home last Monday, was originally a filmmaker.

Putting together an exhibition like this — which he and the "Group of Twelve" will be taking to Taipei next spring — is now his own personal form of creative expression.

"Vancouver Perspective," Oct. 31 to Nov. 24, Yokohama Civic Art Gallery, 1-1 Bandai-cho, Naka-ku, just across the road from the back side of Kannai Station. (Phone (045) 224-7920).