

PAT FLEISHER

Pat Fleisher, rédactrice de artmagazine se distingue de ses contemporains en créant des photos faites de multiples images superposées.

For Pat Fleisher art ideally should capture and transmit the essence of life, its inner spark. An art work is a moment of insight, 'when you stop the world and get off.' As an artist, she is an *animateur* who brings parts together and makes them happen. She has been painting and exhibiting her work professionally since 1959 (with a gap of ten years in the mid-sixties); since 1967 she has been editor of Canada's widely read *artmagazine*. As an editor, she is an innovator. Her job fulfils her sense of mission. With five issues a year, and a circulation of approximately ten thousand, *artmagazine* is a 'champagne magazine on a beer budget.' There have been changes in layout, design, and typesetting since *artmagazine* appeared as a quarterly in offset in 1967; its first real issue was in 1969. The magazine has served as a genuine stimulus to art and artists in this country. Since 1974, when *artmagazine* separated from its founding group, The Society of Canadian Artists, and Fleisher chose contributing editors from across the country, the publication has ranged widely over the spectrum of Canadian art. It has always preserved its 'how to' format; almost every article tells how art objects are made.

✦ For the last two years Fleisher has again been exhibiting professionally as an artist. She has come back to art with a 'different dimension,' she feels — primarily, she has learned to edit her work. As she says, in her field, colour photography developed from slides, and 'the way I'm approaching looking at my slides relates to editing.' Her magazine editorials have a personal, chatty, informal tone, like a diary. Her pictures are also a diary — particularly of her travels. In travelling she can let herself go, 'react to things around me and not worry.' When she's travelling, she is her most private self. Her photographs serve as her sketchbook as well — she takes things 'as they happen, as they move me, the way I would if I went out sketching.'

Because these are travel notes, the imagery Fleisher selects reflects the passing world like *ukiyo-e* prints in nineteenth century Japan. Her role is that of a voyeur rather than participant, 'looking out at things but not part of them.' 'I'm passing by — interpreting and reacting, but these are not things that are personally happening to me,' she says. Often her pictures, like her magazine, serve as a platform or stage for an art scene, and the image that emerges is a dramatic one. Fleisher focuses on windows, particularly in stores — in some ways like focusing on the cover of a magazine (a store window also attracts people). Studying the display is like 'looking in on other people's imagination.' The windows are symbolic; subconscious Freudian things happen in them. And then there are reflections. These have, for Fleisher, several different dimensions. The images she chooses reflect her surroundings. For *Pink Courtyard* (1979), looking down at the courtyard in her hotel in Venice, she photographed the reflections at different levels in her window to capture the pink and floating feeling of a building where you could 'hear water lapping at the door.' *Dog Festival* (1979), a study of stuffed dogs in a shop window, reflects Fleisher's reaction to Calder's circus and an Oldenberg show of toys as art objects in the Whitney Museum in New York (the window was close by). *Dada Beast* (1979), taken in Basel, contains a rocking horse which seems to come right out of the window. The word *dada*, after all, originated in Switzerland, and was supposed to stand for 'rocking horse.' (In the reflection there is a sign saying 'zoo.') *Legs and Glass* (1979) superimposes an image of the elegant pants, shoes, and boots worn at an opening over that of a boarded-up store window covered with graffiti. In all these works, the images are flat, rich in surface pattern set against an all-over field, two- and three-dimensional at once — as in a colour field painting. Usually there is a

strong central form, a 'painterly focus,' and Fleisher builds up her work with texture and colour in a painterly way. ✦ Fleisher's work differs from that of many contemporary photographers. As she points out, 'most photographers come from a background where they've gone to school and have learned photography through other photographers so they have a different compositional sense. They concentrate a tremendous amount on technique and printing.' When she selects slides, she chooses those with the feeling of a painting. In fact, she has taken up where she left off as a painter in the mid-sixties, when she was making multi-layered tissue paper collages and prints, and playing with pop construction. In some of her photographs she uses an ambiguous layered effect. (In her first photographs, she had to use 'sandwiching' to get what she wanted; now she uses one shot.) It is probably also of some importance that her uncle, Jack Litman, who came from Russia as a young boy, earned his living in Toronto as a sign painter (she remembers him lettering on a scaffold in mid-air). Litman annoyed his family with the murals he painted on the walls of the dining room and staircase, but at an early date he singled out Fleisher as special; she recalls that he painted a water colour of her when she was four. Some of Fleisher's interest in signs, graffiti, and lettering may have come from his example. Of course, there is Jasper Johns too — and all American contemporary artists, like Andy Warhol, whose repeated images are suggested in her *Friends/New York* (1979), a picture of a billboard. From Arthur Lismer, the well-known Group of Seven member and her teacher in the children's art classes at what was then the Art Gallery of Toronto, she learned to be spontaneous and natural in recording her reactions on paper. As part of this large group (as many as five hundred children) she made excursions to the top of the Bank of Commerce (the tallest building in

Toronto at this time), to Allan Gardens, the Riverdale Zoo, and the waterfront. Lismer wanted to get inside the feelings of children, to create people with an increased potential for life. Fleisher feels his influence was decisive.

✚ Later, Fleisher studied fine art, anthropology, and English for her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Toronto. At night and in the summers she studied painting and drawing at the Ontario College of Art, and continued her studies at Queen's University, Kingston, Ste. Adele, Quebec, and — like Dennis Burton — Skowhegan, Maine. At the Pearson School of Design in New York, she took a correspondence course, advanced for its time, which began with abstraction and ended with figure drawing. At U of T she found painter/teacher John Hall 'inspiring,' and as art critic for the *Varsity* she enjoyed a literary friendship with critic Paul Duval, then writing for *The Telegram*. (She also had a one-person show of her paintings, which he selected.) In 1951, when she graduated, she married and 'submerged,' raising three children, painting 'on the side,' and taking evening classes. Around 1959 in a course at the Artist's Workshop in Toronto, Robert Hedrick, her teacher at the time, looked at what she was doing and told her to get a studio and start painting seriously.

Fleisher's present work in photography has developed since 1974, when she bought a camera for an article she was writing on Banff. At first she used the camera only to document her surroundings. In 1977, having studied 'The Art of the Colour Slide' at *A Moment in Time Gallery*, Toronto, she decided to experiment. She also recalls as influential a mysterious work by Peter Turner in a book on Polaroid art in which dozens of babies appeared in concentric circles so that they resembled little masks or toys. The image stuck with her. Masks were to become an important theme for her, not only because they 'cover your true feelings and portray you as something else,' but because they convey the quality of life in other cultures. Her *Masks/Mexico* (1978), of masks lying on the ground during an open-air fair in Mexico City every Saturday, has an undercurrent of the coarseness and gaiety of peasant life in Mexico. To the

elusive moment or mood Fleisher wants to capture, masks, toys, or puppets contribute a sense of mystery, 'something beyond the artist.' In *Rocker* (1978), a poster of a rock star lying on the ground, the nose is torn off like that of a rag doll. *Blue Woods* (1979), a huge rock sculpted as though by Druids, is seen through the underbrush of Northern Ontario at four o'clock in the afternoon; the effect is mysterious. Fleisher is attracted by the grotesque and the bizarre, the slightly repellent — at least enough to pause before it for a second look. Malevolence, a suggestion of evil spirits, come through in her *Homage toENSOR/Venice* (1979), again a series of masks.

✚ What about Fleisher's mixed metaphors made by 'sandwiching,' by superimposing two colour slides together in one print? She mixes only those slides with a real affinity for each other — often those which are soft, overexposed, or not as intense, to create an effect of overlay, a surreal impression sometimes recalling René Magritte. Often she chooses to relate several views, as in *Graffiti/New York* (1979). She may look up and down at the same place as in *Budweiser* (1979), which is about building buildings, tearing them down, and ground debris. She may use views of the same place through alternate lenses, as in *Through the Gate* (1979), which shows an elegant apartment house on Fifth Avenue seen in soft and hard focus. She may use a second shot of the same subject to intensify the colour, add more intense feeling, and slightly off-register depth, as in *Checkerboard Man* (1979). She may superimpose for thematic purposes as in *Tenement Dream* (1979), placing professional skaters practising at Rockefeller Centre on a tenement fire escape in SoHo. 'Anybody can become great if you really try,' she says of the subject.

Once Fleisher used to write poetry about passing by things that she 'really wanted to do but for which she never had time to stop.' Now she says she has time to take a picture. 'You can shoot out of a window and you've got it.' One has visions of trains and planes. She adds that her best pictures are done when she's cornered. She's in a position where she can't move from a place for a few hours and simply has to concentrate. It is at this juncture that

the camera aids her like a friend which keeps her company — or another pair of hands.

Fleisher is superstitious about her work, feeling it's 'outside' of her. She is the medium for the vast ouija board of nature; things were meant to be taken, she believes. And she knows the minute she takes it which photograph really works, as in *Nova Scotia Shoreline* (1977) with its textures, weeds, and 'feeling of sea.'

Fleisher is light sensitive, and so is her camera. The atmosphere of her scenery changes — Venice has its own light. Sometimes she seems to prefer a mild blue-lilac but it's hard to know whether this may not be part of her process.

She develops her photographs from 35mm colour slides taken with a Canon AE1 camera, a small unit with a very sharp lens. Using a light box, a magnifying glass, and several kinds of enlargers, she analyzes her slides, sorting them into categories by mood and 'rethinking them.' She may then decide to mix (or not to mix) her images to make her 19 x 23 prints using cibacolor, a technique she likes for its directness since there are fewer stages between the final print and original image (there is no internegative to be reversed into a negative and then a positive). The result has a shiny, translucent, Art Deco quality which captures, she feels, the vibrancy intrinsic to the colour slide. Cibacolor is less likely to fade. She also occasionally uses colour Xerox and collage as in the *Anniversary Party* (1978).

Very occasionally she devises a way of using a negative image as in her *Tulips* (1977) which she cut out of a colour negative strip, mounted, and printed as a slide.

✚ Fleisher has recently shown her work in the United States (Palm Springs, Desert Museum, California, and the Laura A. Sprague Art Gallery, Joliet College, Illinois) and in Canada (Gallery One and the Koffler Centre of the Arts, Toronto). For her the hardest part of making art is to keep her approach fresh. But then again she changes; she's not static. It seems appropriate to her life that she loves Edward Weston and most of the great early photographers but knows she doesn't think as they do. Her model is the independent nineteenth century female novelist George Sand. ©