

TORONTO  
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15th birthday.  
This was my  
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—TONY  
SCHERMAN

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Raised among the cultural elite of Paris and London, he devoured the museums and cathedrals and hobnobbed with the Beatles and Rolling Stones. The price for such privilege: a 40-year drug addiction and the loss of his mother to suicide. But through it all, he painted, garnering an enviable international reputation.

*The arrogant, irrepressible, immensely talented Tony Scherman*

BY ALEC SCOTT PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOY VON TIEDEMANN

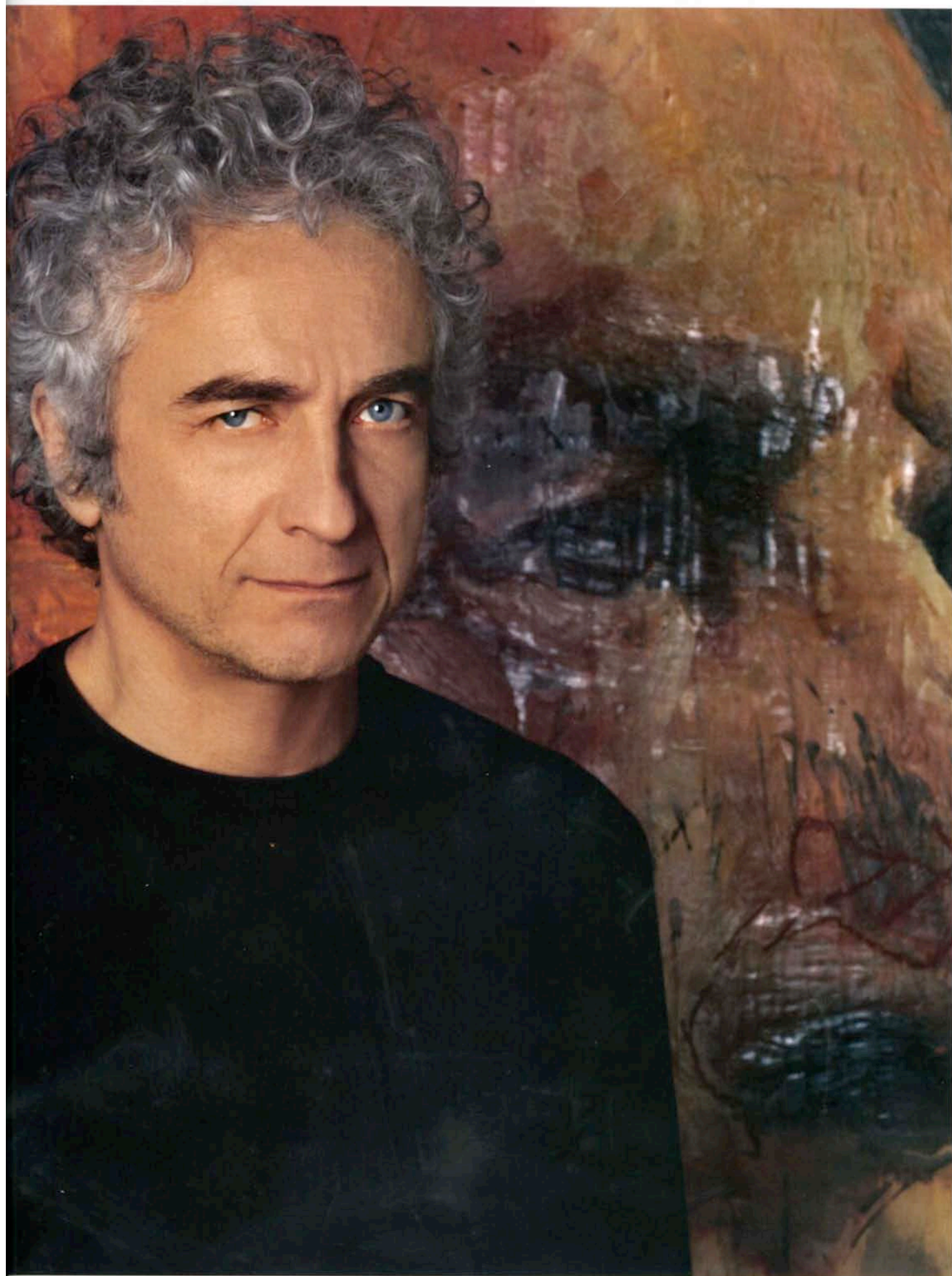


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# Outrageous Fortune









**T**ONY SCHERMAN'S studio, located in a converted warehouse near Dupont and Lansdowne, is, like the painter himself, grandiose. Bright, airy and as big as a tennis court, the atelier has all the usual trimmings—large, grimy windows, canvases propped on rolling easels, a beat-up tea kettle, a dilapidated hot plate and colour-splattered floors—and some unusual trimmings, as well: a huge collection of vinyl records and a turntable, a TV, a variety store bust of Elvis and one of the French wit and iconoclast Voltaire.

The paintings that sit on easels and lean against walls are mainly rendered in encaustic—hot wax mixed with pigment. The artist cooks up this mixture on the hot plate (hence its sorry state), then daubs it on canvas to produce his often immense pieces. A nine-by-eight-foot close-up of Lincoln's face glares at a similarly sized rendering of his rival, Confederate General Robert E. Lee. These are two of the pieces that will dominate the Civil War-themed show, *About 1865*, to be exhibited this month at his daughter Georgia's gallery and, from May, at his New York dealer's, the top-tier Winston Wächter. His last few themed shows (on Napoleon, Macbeth, Oedipus) have toured across North America and Europe and have sold out—no mean feat given that he asks as much as \$150,000 for his larger canvases. At auctions in New York and Los Angeles last year, his work fetched almost double the set reserve bids.

A professional artist from the mid-1970s on, Scherman has always done well financially—both at home and abroad. So well that he can afford to live in a hefty pile in Forest Hill. But he gets little respect

from the Toronto art establishment. Writing in the *Globe*, the dean of the city's critics, John Bentley Mays, once bitchily commented that no one in Toronto can paint a better teapot than Scherman. Since then, the oft-repeated smear—implying that he wastes his technical skill on trivial subjects—has stuck. Although the prolific painter has been exhibiting at prominent private galleries for decades, the Art Gallery of Ontario only acquired its first canvas—*Ciao Gaia*, a painting of an atom bomb detonating—in 2005. In this small pond, everyone swims about pretending there's no big fish named Tony Scherman.

As it turns out, Voltaire's presence in the studio isn't random. Scherman sometimes quotes him, and his face resembles the philosopher's to a striking degree: a sharp nose separating intelligent, impertinent eyes—pride, almost to the point of arrogance, is the predominant expression. Today, Scherman has dressed for the occasion of our interview in tight, once-white shorts and nothing else, no T-shirt to cover his minor paunch or his salt-and-pepper-haired chest. He snorts at my extended hand, the Bohemian proudly eschewing bourgeois convention. Immediately, he lobs





his first effort to shock, his first little outrage, in my apparently buttoned-down direction.

"Of course, you've heard about my 40-year problem with drugs." The best defence is a good offence and all that.

"Uh, no—er, yes, a bit." Damn, where is that recorder? Here it is. "Would you mind if I...?"

"Go ahead. There won't be anything off the record."

He points me to a beaten-up armchair, opting to lie on his back on a nearby couch, ready to tell all. There is a lot to tell in Scherman's case, and he's waited a long time to do so. He thought he'd speak to a writer for *Canadian Art* a few years ago, but the magazine couldn't guarantee him the cover, so he nixed the interview. "I told them, 'I've been painting in Toronto for 20 years and have never been reviewed in your magazine,'" he says. "'If my cycle is 20 years, then I want a cover.'"

Now that he's off the booze and drugs, his mind clear, he's ready to speak of many things. "I was never sure if my life was an A movie or a B movie," he begins. Long pause, during which he glares at me, anticipating an objection, and then, "There's some A movie material, and some B stuff. But it is a movie for sure."



**MOTHER LODE:** (clockwise from left) Theo, Donna, Tony and their dog Couda, Paris, circa 1956; *My Mummy's Feet and Jocasta* from *Seduction of Oedipus* series; Paul Scherman with Pablo Casals, Zurich, 1970



And like many films, Scherman's life has been filled with equal parts glamour and trauma. He's lived in the right cities at the right times, often in the company of the glitterati, but he's paid for his luck, enduring some extraordinary shocks in his childhood and youth. Now in mid-career and showing little sign of slowing down, the artist is delving ever deeper into himself and his past, unleashing, in his work, a unique and terrible beauty.

"MY MOTHER WAS A CREED," he says, lounging with his arms behind his head, his little pot-belly moving up and down like a small creature with its own independent biorhythms. "That may not mean much to you now, but back then it had cachet." For Canadian women of a certain age, from a certain class, the name Creeds equalled style. Scherman's grandfather was a character out of Richler, the outsized, flirtatious Jack Creed, furrier to establishment wives since the early 20th century; his uncle, Eddie Creed,

would lead their clientele from fur toward high fashion, obtaining the exclusive rights to some of the world's top designer clothes for their Bloor Street store and other outlets across the country.

Scherman's mother, Donna Creed, was Eddie's sister. She married another Jew, but one from across the tracks, a rakish musician called Isidor. Born in London, Isidor grew up in Toronto, where he parlayed a scholarship to the Royal Conservatory into a career as a violinist and conductor. By the time Tony was born in 1950, his father had changed his name to Paul and, after studying extensively in New York, London and Paris, had become the assistant conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Sir Ernest MacMillan. "He was passed over for the top job when MacMillan

retired," Scherman says, "and we—my older sister, Theo, me, my mom and dad—all moved to Paris. It must have been 1955."

For a time, the couple was happy, voluntarily exiled in the City of Light. Paul did well, scoring recording and conducting gigs with the legendary likes of cellist Pablo Casals and violinist Isaac Stern. Donna was a high-culture lover who, after years of living in the backwater that was Toronto, gobbled up all the museums, galleries, cathedrals and concerts that Europe had to offer. "My mother was chasing art, like a lot of people do, trying to find something. We went all over Spain and France, criss-crossing the fucking countries for years. I must have been to every cathedral in southwestern Europe. I never went to a synagogue growing up, but got sort of a second-hand Catholicism." (Indeed, the rich colours of that faith, its rubies, emeralds and amethysts, permeate his work.)

But the idyll didn't last. "My mother was a very troubled soul," says Scherman. "She had bisexual leanings, and from her diaries, there was a kind of restless romanticism to her, a me, me, me. Some entries are a bit manic, but basically, she was very depressed." It's not clear whether her lesbian proclivities or her depression alienated her husband (both parents are dead now), but Paul Scherman decamped for London in 1958, leaving a woman barely able to look after herself in charge of eight-year-old Theo and seven-year-old Tony.

A stream of lovers—some men, some women, most involved in the arts—flowed through the house in the Latin Quarter. "My sister and I used to be given money by my mother to go out to the movies, to one of the two American cinemas in Paris. While we were there, she'd go down and pick someone up at a local bar. When the American Film Institute produced their list of the top 100 movies of all time, I realized I'd seen most of them in my childhood."

The household was chaotic. Scherman recalls, at age seven, rebuffing a male visitor's attempt to cop a feel by fending him off with a kitchen knife. When he mentions such incidents, he's matter of fact, as if he were narrating someone else's story. "I always had my own gyroscope," he explains, "my own sense of balance."

If the youngster learned ugly adult truths early, at least the fam-



ily wasn't impoverished. "We didn't live lavishly, in any kind of opulence, but there was always money, from my mother's trust fund." Scherman attended a lycée and took painting and classical guitar lessons, exhibiting a precocious talent for the former. "This painter lover [of my mother's] was doing her portrait. He'd left it unfinished in the hall. While they were having sex, I tried to finish it, but I fucked it up. I was very determined; I needed to paint even then."

His mother evidently didn't find what she was looking for in her lovers or her culture-seeking peregrinations. In 1959, she dropped her children off with their father in London, returned to Paris and took an overdose of pills.

What to tell the children? After consulting with the world's pre-eminent child psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, Paul Scherman and Eddie Creed decided to tell Tony (who was nine at the time) and his sister the truth. "Everybody wept except for me," Scherman says. "I requested that some paintings I had done be buried with her. A couple of weeks later, at the school they'd put us in in London, I forgot my gym shoes, and that's when I cried."

COMPARED TO BOHEMIAN 1950s Paris, London in the '60s would be less high culture, more pop, but still filled with beautiful strangers. By the time the children were foisted upon him, Paul Scherman had begun doing session work. When The Beatles came under guru-producer George Martin's sway, Martin retained Paul and others to play the classical riffs that were woven into their later hits.

"My dad did the Stones' stuff, Rod Stewart, the James Bond movie scores," says Scherman. A teenaged Tony would come to know the famous rock stars, as well as a slew of big-name jazz artists. "Ella Fitzgerald, [drummer] Art Blakey and [guitarist] John McLoughlin would come by our house at Notting Hill Gate," he says. But growing up near the centre of a musical explosion had its perils. "My father and a friend turned me on to hashish for my 15th birthday. You have to understand—this was my world. But looking back, it seems a little out there." A desultory student, Scherman drifted through his teens in a haze. He hung out with the Small Faces, Eric Burdon and the Animals, Jeff Beck, Ron Wood. He recalls spending full spaced-out days in a string of dimly lit drug dens.

Even in his frequently stoned state, he kept up the painting and drawing. And so, when the time came to decide what to do with his life, he had only one plan—to go to art college. He applied to the Byam Shaw School of Art, but after reviewing his portfolio, a teacher advised him to hone his skills at night school and then reapply. "I screamed at him, 'Fuck you, you're going to read about me one day in the newspaper.' When I was saying it, I thought, Whoa, this isn't who I am. I was freaking out, though, because if this didn't work out, I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do."

Luckily, one of the admissions committee members saw something in him, and an acceptance letter arrived a few days later. "I got in on spirit alone," he claims. "I was surrounded by really talented people, and I had to work at it harder than anyone." In the end, he completed a four-year degree in three years, before going on to do graduate work at the prestigious Royal College of Art.



Scherman gluttonously devoured the technical instruction. As a result, he has an old-school facility with his hands; he can do things many younger or less driven artists simply cannot. Painter James Lahey remembers the first time he saw Scherman's work, in the early '80s. "I was blown away. All of us art students were. He's a monster, a beast, a motherfucker of an artist."

His main medium, encaustic, came to him when he was having trouble producing paintings for a graduation show. A tutor suggested he try something radically different, to help break his painter's block. The wax-based technique was popular in the ancient world, but it had fallen out of favour in modern times—with the post-war American painter Jasper Johns being one of its few proponents. Done well, it provides an instant patina of age and a highly light-sensitive surface, lending a sensuality to flesh, but it poses two main practical challenges to the artist: the hot wax sets quickly and permanently, and it can burn. (Scherman's hands and arms are riddled with incompletely healed blisters; he's twice visited emergency wards with severe burns, worrying once that he might even lose his hand.) The fit between medium and artist was immediate. It makes some sense that a perverse, against-the-grain cuss like Scherman would adopt this challenging, inflexible technique.

In addition to finding his medium in art school, Scherman met his mate, Margaret Priest, a tall, blond, plain-spoken girl who grew up on a housing estate in London's East End. "She was my painting tutor. Within a minute and a half of meeting, we got into a major fight. I said to myself, I'm





going to marry this woman.”

After art school, both seemed poised to stake out solid careers in London. “I came out of the Royal College and I was a star,” Scherman says, with customary immodesty. “David Hockney French-kissed me on New Year’s Eve. I was in there.” But in 1976, for financial reasons, they opted to move to Toronto instead. The U.K. had announced plans to levy taxes on foreign income paid to British residents. For years, Scherman had received money from

David Liss, James Lahey, the Toronto Sculpture Garden’s Rina Greer and photographer Arnaud Maggs. Scherman contrasts the Toronto evidenced at his daughter’s shindig with the one he and Priest moved back to, reluctantly, in the mid-’70s—the city of steak

houses and Stollery’s suits and plaid wool skirts, in which “ethnic” meant Irish or southern European. “I was used to first cities, and Toronto was definitely a second city.”

Still, both Priest and Scherman have done well here. Where Scherman’s artistic output is densely populated, messy and soulful, Priest specializes in precise pencil drawings and paintings of eerily empty modernist buildings. She exhibits often, and the Tate, AGO and Dallas Museum of Art hold pieces. She’s taught at Harvard and sits on the board of the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her main contribution to the cityscape is the staunchly elegant steel monument to

the construction trades in Cloud Garden (next to the ill-fated Bay-Adelaide Centre).

Their work reflects the contrast in their personalities: where he’s more-is-more, she’s less-is-more. Where he’s ethereal, more than a little New Agye, she’s resolutely grounded. Not surprisingly, the verbal jousting of their first meet-

ing continues to this day. “If Tony says something and Margaret thinks it’s not right, she’ll let him have it,” says his long-time friend, designer Bruce Mau. “It’s pretty hilarious at times—and sometimes not so hilarious.”

But they’re intensely loyal to each other. “If I had not met Margaret, given where I was going, I’d be dead by now,” Scherman says simply. Both had difficult childhoods. “She was surrounded by brutality,” he says. (She declined to be interviewed.) “When we met, we saw something in each other at a very profound spiritual level.”

Our artistic community tends to resent money, as if to compensate for the fact that the rest of the city positively worships it. Scherman is aware his inherited and earned prosperity irks some. “I remember someone saying years ago, ‘Tony Scherman can’t be an artist, he lives on Dunvegan Road.’” It’s true that the Priest-Scherman household is a successful one. “We have three good-looking, smart kids, two dogs and a swimming pool—it’s nauseating, I know.” (Their son, Leo, 31, is a filmmaker; the other daughter, Claudia, is 26 and articling at a law firm.)

But there’s more to Scherman’s bad rep than envy. He sometimes has what he calls “Larry David moments”—referring to the obnoxious lead in the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. A designer working in his building had a dog Scherman calls a “pathological barker.” One day, the barking stopped, and when he ran into the

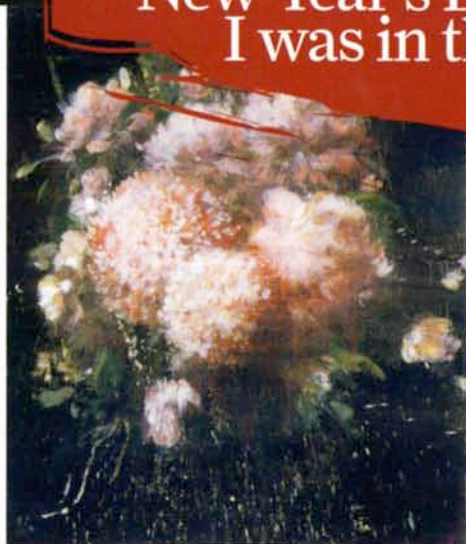
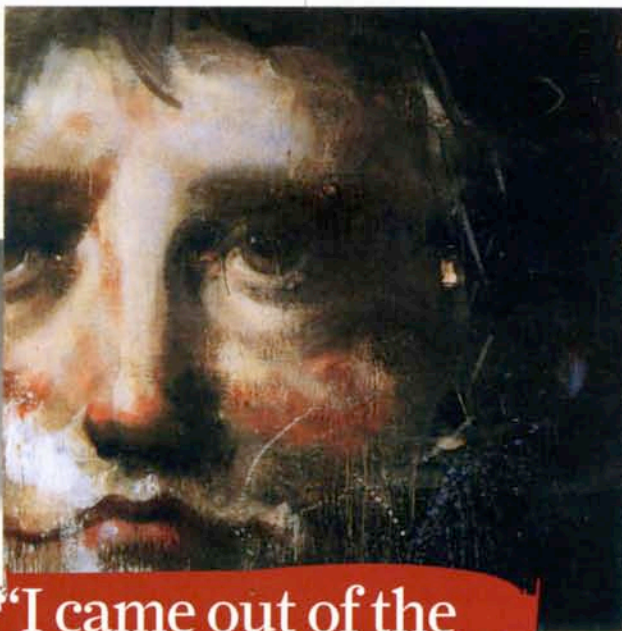
“I came out of the Royal College and I was a star. David Hockney French kissed me on New Year’s Eve. I was in there”

STILL LIFE: (clockwise from left) *Working the Back Seat of the Impala*, 2001; Scherman and his wife, Margaret Priest, Toronto, 1979; *The Talleyrand Question*, 1998–99; *Mirabeau’s First Funeral*, 1998; Paul Scherman, Paris, 1956

his mother’s estate; if he’d stayed, he would have owed the British Exchequer 17 years of back taxes. “Our accountants recommended we get out, so we did.”

A FEW MONTHS AFTER I first met Scherman, his daughter Georgia threw a party to celebrate the opening of her eponymous gallery, Georgia Scherman Projects, located in the same converted factory as her father’s studio. It was as glamorous a gathering as Toronto can muster, filled with beautiful people decked out in Paul Smith, Westwood, Balenciaga, a distinctly cosmopolitan cool about them. A porn star’s recollections (applied to one wall) titillated, as did Fraser Stables’s photographs of a tattooed heavy metal fan (hung on the others). The wine and hors d’oeuvre were plentiful.

The Scherman and Creed families were out in force—and joining them were the likes of AGO director Matthew Teitelbaum, MOCCA’s





designer, he asked after the canine. Scherman recalls the interaction: "He said, 'It died,' and I said, 'Lucky you,' and he said, 'Thanks for your condolences,' and I said, 'Any time,' and he said, 'You've obviously never had a pet,' and I said, 'I adore pets...see ya.'" But this abrasiveness, this impertinence, is only his opening gambit, a way of testing strangers.

If Scherman developed a gruff exterior, in part as a coping mechanism, his sister, who suffered from poor mental health early on, wasn't able to adopt such camouflage. "Her diagnosis went from schizophrenic to manic to what we'd call bipolar now," Scherman says. A Toronto resident, she longed to write songs, but despite showing some promise, couldn't make a living at it. The cause of her sudden death in 1990, at age 41, remains unclear.

MOST ARTISTS ARE MORE than willing to talk about their work but draw a veil over their personal lives. Scherman is the opposite: he'll tell you all about his life, but he mystifies his work. When pressed about the genesis of his pieces, he'll flit through tangentially relevant references to philosophy and art history. In our interviews, he led me through a maze of Derrida this and Foucault that, of Velasquez this and Singer Sargent that, the dissertation, as often as not, obfuscating the project of the paintings. He'll seldom tell you, in plain language, what a given work means to him, how it was inspired. Instead he'll shrug: "What does it mean to you?"

For a long time, the word on Scherman the artist was right: he did squander his universally acknowledged technical prowess on unimportant subjects. A 1988 Toronto show focused on the pleasures of the table, with luscious depictions of ginger jars, elaborate place settings, even bronzed broches; a later exhibition was filled with still lifes of ripe-to-the-point-of-bursting fruits. These paintings set his local reputation, but in the past decade and a half, he's moved far beyond this starting point. In the '90s, the late bloomer found ways of processing his bizarre childhood artistically, of exorcising his demons through painting.

It doesn't take a Freudian analyst to interpret his 2003 *Seduction of Oedipus* series, with its sexualized depictions of Jocasta, the mother of myth who marries her son. She is, as Scherman's women tend to be, a siren, a dangerously unhinged woman, with lipstick smeared all around her hungry mouth. Though he won't make the connection, the artist appears to have been working through his early exposure to his mother's untrammelled sexual appetite.

In his most internationally acclaimed show to date, the 1998 show *Chasing Napoleon* (exhibited locally at the Sable-Castelli gallery), he depicted the self-made French emperor at various ages, before momentous events (the Battle of Austerlitz, the Russian campaign, his coronation), always shaving in front of a mirror. Showing the great man at his toilet is Scherman's way of deflating the Napoleon myth, of de-deifying him. In the same show, he hung paintings of Robespierre's mother, Hitler's bright-eyed German shepherd, and the Führer having sex with Eva Braun. The message: these are not monsters, but humans. In tabloid talk, the stars (here malignant stars) are like us—they have moms, they shave, they copulate and walk the dog. He manages at once to catch the awful glamour of European totalitarianism (the spotless uniforms, the unshakeable confidence) and to puncture the dictators' pretensions to being superhuman.

The other uncanny aspect of his portraits of megalomaniacs is the sense that he's conjured them from the beyond, that they're in the room. "I first understood the nature of portraiture," he says, "after I smoked a joint and walked around a show at the Tate. They were watching me. What's required is that the person in the

painting interrogate me, that he be looking at me, not the reverse. If there's not a thought-bearing being in the painting, then you've failed." The AGO's curator of contemporary art, David Moos, is particularly fond of Scherman's portraits. "He's deeply steeped in the European tradition, taking inspiration from 17th-century artists like Rembrandt and Franz Hals and, in more recent times, from the likes of Van Gogh, Thomas Eakins and Lucian Freud. But Tony also has this very contemporary disposition—and his project is about the new image culture in which we live."

Scherman's shows have a collective impact, greater than the sum of their parts. His next series will be portraits of celebrated junkies. In his studio, a large depiction of Marilyn Monroe, so lit that her skull comes through her translucent skin, hangs near Lincoln. But the paintings never show (and therefore primly judge) addiction from the outside; they're snapshots of a nightmarish inside. You can see Marilyn's lust for the next fix. "For an addict, you're actually in withdrawal all the time," he says. "The moment you start to come down, you start to pine for the next."

In front of the spooky portrait of the doomed screen goddess, he outlines the progress of his own addictions, how he supplemented his perennially heavy alcohol intake with hash and codeine. "He's an obsessive," Mau explains. "He doesn't do anything halfway, which is how you have to be to produce things that affect the world. You can't have it in certain parts of you and not in others, can't turn it on and off like a tap."

Scherman has his own theory: "Addicts are people who aren't normal, who are driven to find their own solutions. They don't want to plow the fields like everyone else." He speaks of his periodic visits to rehab, of how, regardless of his condition, he usually managed to produce at least one major show a year. Of how it feels to be clean for over three years, and why he volunteers each Saturday morning at a rehab clinic. "I was the last guy to ever think that my life would be better clean and sober than when I was high and drunk. But it is." And yet, he's not gone totally Betty Ford: "Drugs can help artists. The best work that Eric Clapton did, that Miles Davis did—they were on smack."

Ironically, our final interview at his home on Dunvegan was interrupted periodically by his Scottish terriers' barking. An old, vaguely Arts and Crafts-style mansion, the house's interior is spare, modern, resembling one of Priest's paintings. In fact, many of her drawings are on display, alongside works by Hockney, Eric Fischl, Hans Hofmann, Jonathan Lasker. Only one Tony Scherman hangs on the walls here, his first large-scale encaustic.

At last less combative, he was dressed in loose-fitting khakis, a white shirt, well-worn deck shoes—he tends to save vibrant colours for his paintings. He chatted amiably about his work habits—how he likes to watch TV (cooking and business shows) and listen to rhythm and blues, classical music and academic lectures while he paints. "Painting can be very boring," he asserts. "It's nice to be distracted." He discussed his hero Voltaire's deathbed bon mot: when asked by the bishop to renounce the devil, he said, "This is not a good time to make powerful enemies."

Toward the end of the visit, the painter diverted his intense gaze from me, staring glassily at a wall packed with art and reference books. "I knew a lot of artists who were incredibly talented at the Royal College. But after we graduated, many of them froze." Fortunately for Scherman, he's never experienced that kind of arrested development. "They operated by the idea that art was about manifesting the self through a momentary gesture. It wasn't something you perfected. For me, I've always been trying to get better, through practise. My dad and his musician friends practised every day. Every painting I do is practise. That's all it is." **END**