

BOOK REVIEW

Eric L. Swanick

CIRCUS : Five Poems on the Circus.
[Shanty Bay, ON]: Shanty Bay Press,
[2002]. [48] p.

Simon Fraser University's Special Collections is very fortunate to have acquired *CIRCUS : Five Poems on the Circus*, the latest publication from Shanty Bay Press. This book is a *livre d'artiste* as the "...texts and the illustrations accompanying them ... have equal weight in the design of the book." To describe this book is to deal in superlatives. It is a beautiful production, so well crafted, so well designed. It is a pleasure to hold, it is a pleasure to view, and textually and typographically it is a pleasure to read.

The text of the publication consists of five poems, all of which deal with a different aspect of or present a different perspective on the circus. The poems included are "When I Went to the Circus" by D.H. Lawrence, "Circus" by Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Fifth Elegy, Duino Elegies" by Rainer Maria Rilke, "Puppets" by P.K. Page and "The Circus" by Kenneth Koch. Each poem is laid out as follows: title of the poem with a two-colour woodcut, all poems begin with a pochoir initial letter save for that of Rilke. Each of the five poems has one pochoir save for the lengthy Rilke poem which has two pochoirs. There is also a pochoir on the title page and a pochoir with the colophon.

Walter Bachinski, co-operator of the press, has written the preface. Bachinski taught art at the University of Guelph for many years. His art is known for his references to twentieth century masters, and his work is often characterized by superb colours, a feature so pronounced in this book. The afterword is written by



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Crispin Elsted of Barbarian Press in Mission, BC. This very articulate member of the printing fraternity has made another erudite contribution.

In his foreword, Bachinski writes of his long fascination with Picasso's painting, "Family of Saltimbanques", a painting of six circus personalities drawn together as "outcasts on society's fringe", all "isolated in their own thoughts." Interestingly, Bachinski's preface notes that Rilke did see Picasso's painting and it served as the inspiration for his poem, "Fifth Elegy, Duino Elegies", and Elsted in his afterword suggests that the Bachinski pochoir for this poem show the girl as being older and the boy as showing some similarities to Picasso.

The circus has always been a source of intrigue and fascination for all of us—the entertainment, the colour, the sounds, the opportunity to push to the limits, and always the mystery. I very much recall many years ago my uncle taking me to a circus performance in Toronto's Maple Leaf Stadium. Later in

New Brunswick, I befriended a person who had been a circus performer and wrote extensively about circuses. There was a reconstructed model circus in Fredericton which I would often look at and imagine the sounds, smells, action of circus life. And recently, I was very fortunate to attend a performance by Cirque du Soleil. As I began to turn the pages of this book, to read the poems and to look at the illustrations, I had returned to that magic world of the circus.

The first poem by D.H. Lawrence, "When I Went to the Circus" refers to "uneasy people frightened... [by] ... the smell of horses and other beasts," the shouts of the audience followed by silence, "a hunk of fear", the various performances and the acknowledgement both by adults and by children. This and the other poems acknowledge the various layers of meaning in a circus and the myth, the magic, the metaphor and symbols of a circus. As P.K. Page notes in the last line of her poem "...these small violent people shake the quiet room and bring all history tumbling about a great audience that almost weeps." On the page preceding the text to the Lawrence poem, the half-title, there is a two-colour woodcut in blue and black of a horse going to a circus. A basic tenet of good typography is to match text and illustration (read pochoir) and in this instance the pochoir shows a bareback horse, a trapeze artist and amongst other details a clown's painted face in the background, all the components so often identified with a circus. This is the pattern in the other four poems that is to say that the illustrations reflect, enhance and perhaps in some instances clarify the text of the poem.

As indicated above, the five poems are followed by Crispin Elsted's afterword in which he recalls viewing a recent circus and recalls circuses from his youth as well as discussing the pochoirs and the poems. The afterword enhances supplements and reinforces the circus atmosphere treated by the poems and the illustrations.

The volume measures 46 cm by 34 cm. Contained within a bright red cloth-covered slipcase, the book is quarter bound in bright blue cloth; the boards are covered with a Japanese bright red paper serving as a base for a pattern of bright blue diamonds. (These diamonds appear only on the front cover.) The colours used in the book production are reflective of traditional colours associated with the circus. It is a lovely book.

For those of you who may be interested, Walter Bachinski has written of the pochoir process and of this book in a recent issue of *Parenthesis* (no.7, November 2002) and will have an article in the next issue of *Matrix*. A *pochoir* is a modern form of stencilled illustration.

Previous Shanty Bay Press publications include Virgil's *Eclogues* (1999), Crispin Elsted's *Ode: Still Life with Vase of Flowers* (2002), a broadside. Publications in preparation include *Homeric Hymns to Aphrodite* (includes amongst other features "three full page complex pochoirs") for 2003 and Virgil's *The Georgics* planned for the fall of 2005 and to include eight full page pochoirs.

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