



INVENTIONS OF THE WHEEL

By JENNIE PUNTER

LOOKING AT HAROLD FEIST'S paintings may be good for your health. Emanating rays of every color, the wheel-like images that have dominated his work since 1975 both soothe and stimulate the mind with their ballance, harmony and subtle complexities. In fact at the openibg of a major exhibition of his work last weekend, Feist was told by a psychiatrist — for the second time in his career — that the radial image reveals a well integrated psyche.

The powerful but simple image has changed and grown since it first sprang on to Feist's canvas 13 years ago, its structure fragmenting and diffusing in more recent works. Curator Karen Wilkin has chronicled its development in an intensely satisfying retrospective of Feist's art, Genesis Of An Image. This exhibition of 29 acrylic paintings remains at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre until Feb. 28 and then will tour the country for at least a year.

This group of works firmly underlines the relative unimportance of the subject matter, despite its glowing presence. The wheel image provides Feist with a set way to lay out a picture, freeing him from the search for a vehicle, creating a restraint that is actually liberating to work within. But Feist's harmonious image doesn't simply stand for "a wheel"; the shape is universal, found everywhere in nature — in flowers, shells, rays of light, stars. And in his painting, High Ring (1984), the image looks like a flattened diagram of an atom.

Early versions of the wheel are roughly symmetrical, with multi-colored bands — the artist calls them "spokes" — extending straight out from a central point toward the edges of the canvas like hands on a clock. The spokes usually end within the frame but sometimes stretch outside; the image is constantly making and breaking its own rules of existence. For instance, the smooth, unflinching strokes in Never Say (1980) are like unworldly streams of light originating from a prism. In another work, 4459 (1980), the spokes are so heavy with paint they look like part of a relief map. Orange Around (1978) explodes with each of its thick rays containing several colors.

To make a painting, Feist lays a large canvas on the ground, pours circles of paint on to the centre and then moves out the paint in straight lines. In the more boldly colored, aggressive works, he has pushed the paint rather than brushed it.

"I might have a color in the centre and use a roller to make a green spoke," Feist explained in an interview from his Toronto studio last week. "When the painting is still wet, I do the same with yellow, except some of the green might wind up in the mixture. The colors are involved with one other. They create a unity."

The shape of his image alters dramatically as it develops, and its environment starts to dominate the paintings. Sometimes the wheel appears to be floating under water or covered thinly by earth, sand or snow. In some paintings made last year, the image looks more like a nebula than a star, a huge body absorbing radiating light beams and re-emitting them as thick patches of strangely colored light and darkness.

"People often look at paintings as windows. They look through them trying to find meaning or something about the artist. To me, a painting is the actual thing, what you're looking at. It exists on its own. I always look at my paintings and ask myself if they have that quality. Even if it's powerfully ugly, does it exist on its own?"

Feist pictures an internal gravity ordering the elements, bunching the energy toward the centre or the bottom. What strikes him about his wheel image is the difficulty it presents the viewer who wants to find a deeper meaning. The artist wants people to forget about the spokes and look at other aspects. If the work has any resonance, people will keep looking.

"When I put one color on the canvas, I turn off my conscious mind and decide what other color to put along with it. Sometimes I might even put on the wrong color to create some energy. The painting actually involves a complicated process.

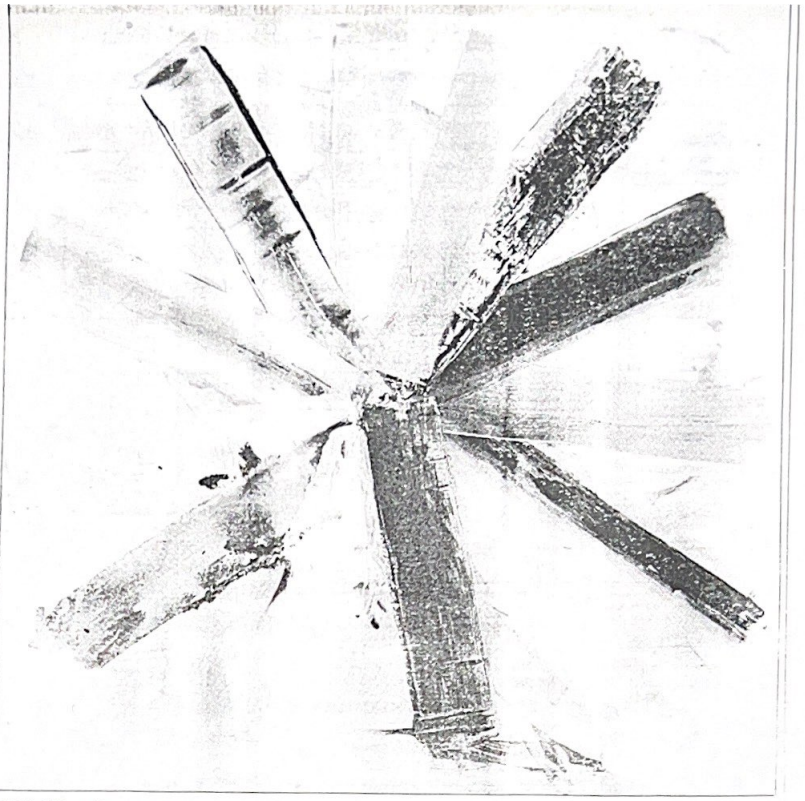
"I work within the realm of intuition rather than logic. It's a strain to do it, a problem of the intellect, but not in the way most people are taught in school. It's learned through the experience of doing it." Feist has even composed paintings after looking at other people's work. Once he studied a Rembrandt carefully, then took the same quantities of colors that were in it and used them in his own painting within the radial framework.

Surrounded by the array of Feist's art in the gallery chamber, you can sense the tension between paintings. The energy of one affects your response to the next and yet prepares you for it. The entire presentation is so strong that it overwhelms at first — even the artist himself.

"I'm still numb from the show. It's the first time I've had that many paintings together at once." This exhibition marks the first major retrospective of Feist's work, and he hasn't seen many of the paintings in years. "Sometimes I go through my slides if I'm feeling stuck. I'm more decisive about what I'm doing now after seeing those paintings again. I feel more confident. I know the five pictures in my studio are on the right track."

Just as it would be a mistake to say Feist's image is just a wheel, so his choice and combination of colors cannot be said to reflect his mood at the time of creation. Feist recalled a Matisse he saw many years ago, a beautifully calm picture of a table, dated at the same time the Germans were occpuying a part of France close to where the great artist lived. Feist's own experience is equally telling.

"Once at a very difficult personal time some-



ABOVE: 4459, acrylic on canvas, 1980
TOP LEFT: Hot Blood, acrylic on canvas, 1987
LEFT: High Ring, acrylic on canvas, 1984

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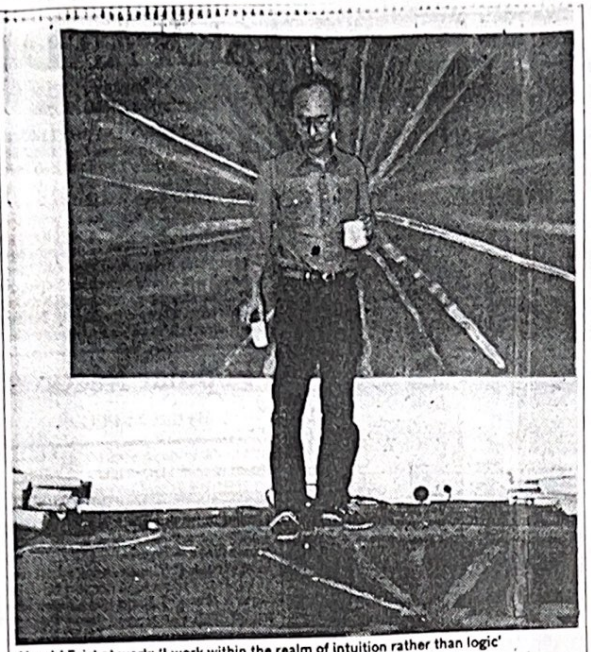
one who didn't know about it came into the studio, looked at what I was working on and said that I must be happy. So a painting can be how you wish things were. But I think they always tie into human psychology."

His early paintings also seem close to archetypal imagery. The most striking examples are Distant Contact I and Distant Contact II (1978): two radiant suns with blue, green, purple, pink and orange light beams shooting out, painstakingly and perfectly ordered. Made while Feist was living in New York on a Canada Council grant, both also illustrate a different technique.

"I started by covering the canvas with grey everywhere. Then I poured a circle of paint in the centre, and the blobs of paint would just sit there. I used a piece of wood to drag the paint to the edge. Each time I did this around the painting it became more difficult. The painting becomes more demanding as it draws towards its conclusion."

Last Bouquet (1979) tears away flowers and replaces them with stark, asymmetrical marks. If titles mean anything, then this looks like lost innocence, the light pink background, slashed with a blood-red blotch, a thin black line and thicker, fleshy pink patches. A title presents one way into the painting, even making the odd humorous connection; in Good Suit (1980) a flannel grey background lends its texture to the interweaving lines, and its darkness tries to push through the color.

The image in Sotto Voce (1983) seems obscured by its environment. In this very wide, thin work, the centre is lost in a sea-like flush. Patterns of water, coral and cracks in the earth glimmer through shades of blue, white and orange, adding to the underwater effect. This painting and others made at this time were inspired by a setting Feist had been living in.



Harold Feist at work: 'I work within the realm of intuition rather than logic'

"They were painted after I returned from teaching a course in Bermuda. I was looking down at the sea, the sky was a deep vermillion, pure color, and the ocean was different colors of blue. There were luminescent colors under the water, glowing in the dark. People told me they were some sort of living creature."

Feist, 43, was born in Texas; his family was constantly moving because his father was with the army. He studied fine arts at the University of Illinois, then pursued graduate studies at the Hoffberger School of Painting in the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. He taught at the Alberta College of Art in Edmonton until 1974. The genesis of his image occurred while he was teaching at Mount Allison in New Brunswick. He moved to Toronto "with 800 pounds of rolled up canvas" in 1979 after working for a year in New York. Besides this exhibition, two other, smaller 10-year retrospectives of his work have been mounted. Gallery One, Feist's dealer, opens its show tonight, and Buschlen-Mowatt Fine Art in Vancouver is also holding one.

The wheel image reaches its most stunning proportions in the newer work. Chant (1986) is like a giant bluish green nucleus, with dripping lines, large black blotches and the thickly crusted remants of a line that forms something like a chain of islands. Incross (1987) is covered with splashes of color, orange glowing through red and shades of bright yellow. The spokes now have become enormous blotches, and the emphasis has shifted from range of colors to shape.

Hot Blood (1987) is an appropriate title for a work that could be an enlargement of a drop of blood squished under a glass for a microscope. Paint emerges dripping from behind thick patches. The choice of colors is more selective, an orange slash in the lower left, a single faint blue line that starts at the bottom centre and moves to the top.

"In Hot Blood, and others like that, I'm taking the spokes and putting them elsewhere. The image changes because, subconsciously, I've proved to myself that it works. After painting Hot Blood I jumped off into other areas."

Feist now wants the color in his work to open up, which he thinks he can now accomplish after looking again at the paintings in the Agnes show. "If you go back to the show and cover the bottom part of a painting, that's what they look like. The newest ones are cut off at the bottom, radiating from the bottom centre, like a fan or hand of cards." □

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