

OLIVER GIRLING



Julie Voyce's 1995 New Year's greeting card arrives with a sting in its tail, and doesn't smell anything like teen spirit. It's one of the

first things I pull out of my eye mailbag approaching this (Chinese) Year of the

## To hell in a Hallmark card

Pig, and it's numbered 90/94, so I can assume that 93 other people shared its sweet and sour.

I want to show it, because its howl demands a bigger audience. Its strength is in its power to surprise — the ridicu-

lous implacability of tragedy, whose face is seen for just a second as the year changes, before the surge of fresh, smiling, Hallmark card faces fills up bulletin boards, desktops and mantelpieces.

Who is it? An overgrown infant, having a resonance with one-toothed Sweet Pea from Popeye, but

also with The Simpsons in its lumpy, potato-headedness. But body-less: this child is no more than a bubble that swells at the top of a poisonous bottle. The dangerous vessel is our Aladdin's lamp, which when shook up and poured out, calls forth this reluctant

genie. Acetone, turpentine, methyl hydrate, lead-based solvent or a hundred other effective, life-shortening or life-giving mediums may be contained in it, for release of the ineffable painting, photograph, silk-screen, computer printout or human child.

Her tears are shot with sparkles, which well up and pool along the edges of her popping eye-cylinders; they fall in fat drops of red, pink and green that are

as oily as they are watery. She is the terrified first-born, the embodiment of the coming year on the front page of the paper. But a closer look suggests she's not as young as she seems; in fact, she's crying for time past, for the year that is irrevocably gone, 1994, contradicting the confident "1995" she wears over her head with her bow.

Voyce's rhetoric isn't empty. 1994 by any measure was a shocking year for the visual arts. General Idea came to the end of its illustrious 25-year career with the death of two of its three principals, Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz (AA Bronson has said he'll now pursue a solo career). G.I. were

instrumental in opening up the art scene in Canada as we know it now, an enterprise mixing government and private support for work that defies conventionally limited notions of gallery art. Though much of their time in recent years was spent in New York and Europe, their influence here remains enormous.

They showed that it was possible to exist as artists without becoming academics. They demonstrated a way that all

the communications media could be used by artists. They looked at this city as a talent pool full of beautiful creatures to populate their art, and in so doing influenced others to do the same. (One of these was David Buchan, who also died in 1994. An exhibition of his memorabilia is currently on view at Art Metropole.) In Europe, numerous "cells" of three or four artists each have emerged, based on the G.I. model (as well as on the model of rock bands, who also served as an early inspiration to General Idea).

In 1994, sympathetic connections got very frayed between the idealistic forms that artists construct and the more pragmatic forms of the mass communications media. Mike Wallace's debunking of the New York art scene on *60 Minutes* was symptomatic. In Toronto, a newspaper suggested that an artist's drawings and paintings were illegal. Another accused the alternative high school SEED of indulging students in orgies, after viewing a four-year-old videotape of an art performance, submitted by a disgruntled ex-teacher. Now these same newspapers are in court arguing for the public's right to see the Bernardo torture/snuff videos.

Did I miss something? Lenin predicted that "ethics are the aesthetics of the future." By their total abandonment of ethics in the frenzy for a wide demographic, these media outlets are proving him right, though in a way that I don't think Lenin could have foreseen.

In the meantime, I turn Voyce's greeting upside down. A laughing old woman is revealed, with a top-knot and prominent larynx. In '95 you could do worse than to share the joke. ☺

