

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

THE RECORD, Kitchener, Ont.

● Bonnie Malleck F3 ● Martin DeGroot F4

Electrifying exhibit

Montreal artist takes spirituality to unnerving lengths

By Robert Reid

RECORD STAFF
How does one express spiritual values in a secular age?

That, in a nutshell, is the central question posed by Song Khapa, an exhibition of painting, sculpture and installation by Sylvain Bouthillette currently on view at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

Bouthillette is a practising Buddhist. Although familiarity with this ancient Eastern religion opens a level of meaning that remains closed to the uninitiated, it is not required in order to appreciate what the Montreal artist/misician is up to.

What is even more helpful is knowledge of art history. For Bouthillette's decidedly post-modern approach to artmaking is post-expressionist and post-surrealist — post-punk, if you will.

Drawing on a variety of sources, encompassing Quebec folk art, Joseph Beuys and Patterson Ewen, Bouthillette's art is as eclectic as it is iconoclastic, as formal as it is frenzied. At a time when liturgical music and

ART EXHIBIT

Song Khapa, by Sylvain Bouthillette, is on view at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (at Centre in the Square, Queen and Ellen Streets) through Feb. 6. Viewers interested in the Buddhist underpinnings of Bouthillette's work will want to attend a free lecture by the works of the Chandrakirti Mahayana Buddhist Centre at 2 p.m. on Jan. 23.

spiritual iconography have been usurped by advertising jingles and corporate logos, Bouthillette uses irony, parody and satire to give expression to religious experience.

Looking at one of Bouthillette's paintings is like biting into tin foil. They are electrifying with their vocabulary of idiosyncratic imagery (disco balls, party hats, horns and skeletal clowns, simultaneously menacing and ridiculous). Animal imagery — from decapitated moose and compromised

hares, to gigantic bees and decapitated birds — which once carried religious associations, exist simply as cartoonist images that invite viewers into the paintings. In one work an apocalyptic horse resembles Roy Roger's beloved Trigger.

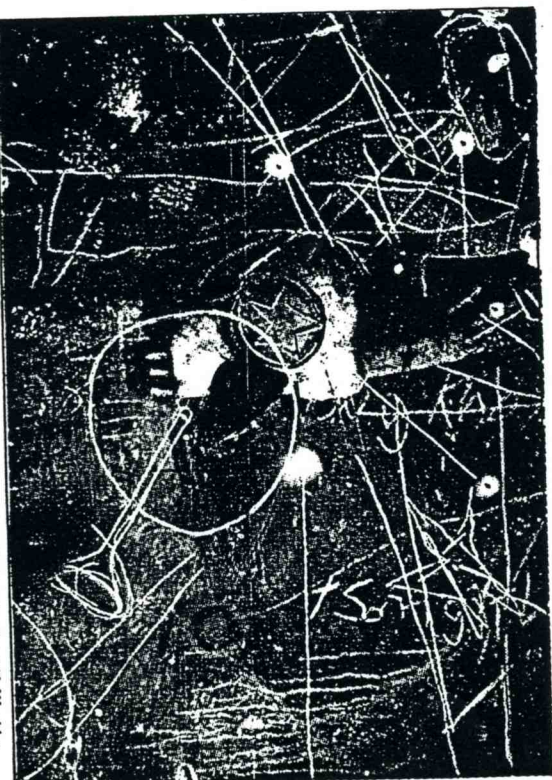
Bouthillette erratically dispatches primary colours on grey-black backgrounds reminiscent of blackboards. Nervous squiggles and wiggles of intense colour jostle with blotches and diluted stains.

He scars and gouges the picture surface with apparent randomness.

At a time when intergalactic space has been demystified by Hollywood and TV, Bouthillette uses awkwardly painted stars and planets, along with tacky miniature stick-on stars, to recall the once awe-inspiring cosmos.

Similarly, Bouthillette uses empty declarations to remind of the inadequacy of language to authentically express wonder, joy and happiness. Glib clichés such as "super" and "great" are scratched on the panels with the frenetic energy of graffiti.

Bouthillette's work is in-your-face



Mahakala Bombarding Mental Conditioning, by Sylvain Bouthillette.

and unnerving. Raw and elemental, it makes no apologies for being irritating, annoying and garishly grotesque.

Although the pictures seem random and spontaneous, he works up his compositions after careful deliberation and planning, as is evident from the small drawings included in the exhibition.

Bouthillette is a serious artist, even if his style is playful, precocious and mocking.

His aim is to penetrate the crass com-

mercialism and vulgar consumerism of contemporary life and to reclaim a cosmic consciousness.

The world and human consciousness are in a constant state of flux.

While seemingly governed by random acts and cosmic accidents, Bouthillette's work asserts that both realities (internal and external) are informed by order.

One of the keys to understanding Bouthillette's work is finding the inherent order that underlies his cosmic cartoon.