

Vancouver artists

Raymond Chow

By Stephen Allen

The house looks like an empty skull.

The windows of the house stare out at the little girl approaching it on a tricycle like the eyes of the skull, and the whole painting is done in an eerie shade of green.

But wait. There's something behind one of the windows! It's a face! And it fills the entire window. So there's some humanity and warmth in the house after all.

But was this the artist's purpose: to indicate the warmth and humanity in even the coldest and most ominous-looking house.

Well, why not ask the artist?

"Not necessarily," Raymond Chow said with an infectious smile. "You see, I don't work at all from photographs. I work directly from the subject — which means that I may be in front of a house for quite a long time. Usually I work from inside the car so I will be less conspicuous, but often the people in the house notice I am there and begin peering out the windows and from behind the curtains, trying to figure out what I am up to. They probably think I am from the RCMP, or the city or provincial government.

"The houses I like to paint are the oldest ones, with a lot of character, and often they are also the most rundown houses, so the owners are very suspicious. One time a man came out and in a very nasty way asked me why I didn't paint Chinatown . . . He didn't realize that I had already painted Chinatown.

"At first it used to disturb me — being peered at all the time while I was peering at them. But then I decided to incorporate it, to make it a part of my work.

"I think I found that if a home is a man's castle, it is often a woman's prison, and a little of this comes out in some of my work."

— And thus you see the danger of leaping to conclusions about interpretation that may be more "profound" than the real truth — if there is such a thing.

Henk Vander Horst, director of the Exposition Galleries, in Gastown, in which many of Chow's paintings are displayed, feels the same way.

"I don't like to analyze Chow's works any more than I do of any other artist," he said.



"A painting doesn't 'mean'; it just is, that's all. If it could be explained adequately with words, there would be no need for the painting.

"When you begin to analyze something, the beauty of it begins to fade for you, and the artist becomes an unfurnished room. It's like a poem: what is in the lines is not so important as what is in between them. You cannot explain beauty.

"But one of the things I like best about Chow's work is its

complete uniqueness. There is no evidence that he ever copied anyone. He does his own thing. His work seems to be a mixture of nostalgia, humour and whimsy, and Chow himself has said that his idea of beauty is a combination of imagination and humour."

This is evident in many of the paintings: A car wash tunnel carries a sign above it: "Not a tunnel of love". Of course it's not; any fool can see that because of the shape of the sign it's a unicorn — and Chow has so painted and so titled it.

"Chow is also unintentionally becoming an 'artistic architect'," Vander Horst said. "He has drawn an enormous number of Vancouver houses, and of course many of the houses are no longer there. So for most of them, their only claim to immortality is through one of Chow's drawings."

Chow explained his fascination with houses: "At first, I wanted to become an architect, because my uncle was an architect," he said. "But I found I could draw a crooked line better than a straight one . . . so I thought I'd better become an artist."

His works have appeared in local newspapers and magazines, Toronto and Montreal newspapers and magazines, on the CBC, in Vancouver Museum, the University of British Columbia, of which he is a graduate, the Vancouver Art Gallery and galleries in Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco, Hamilton and Ottawa — and are on exhibit in Vancouver at the Exposition Galleries and the Harrison Galleries on Howe Street.

In addition to all of this, Chow also plays the piano and composes! ✓

An artist with a sense of humor