



CLIFF EYLAND
LIBRARY OF BABEL A Retrospective



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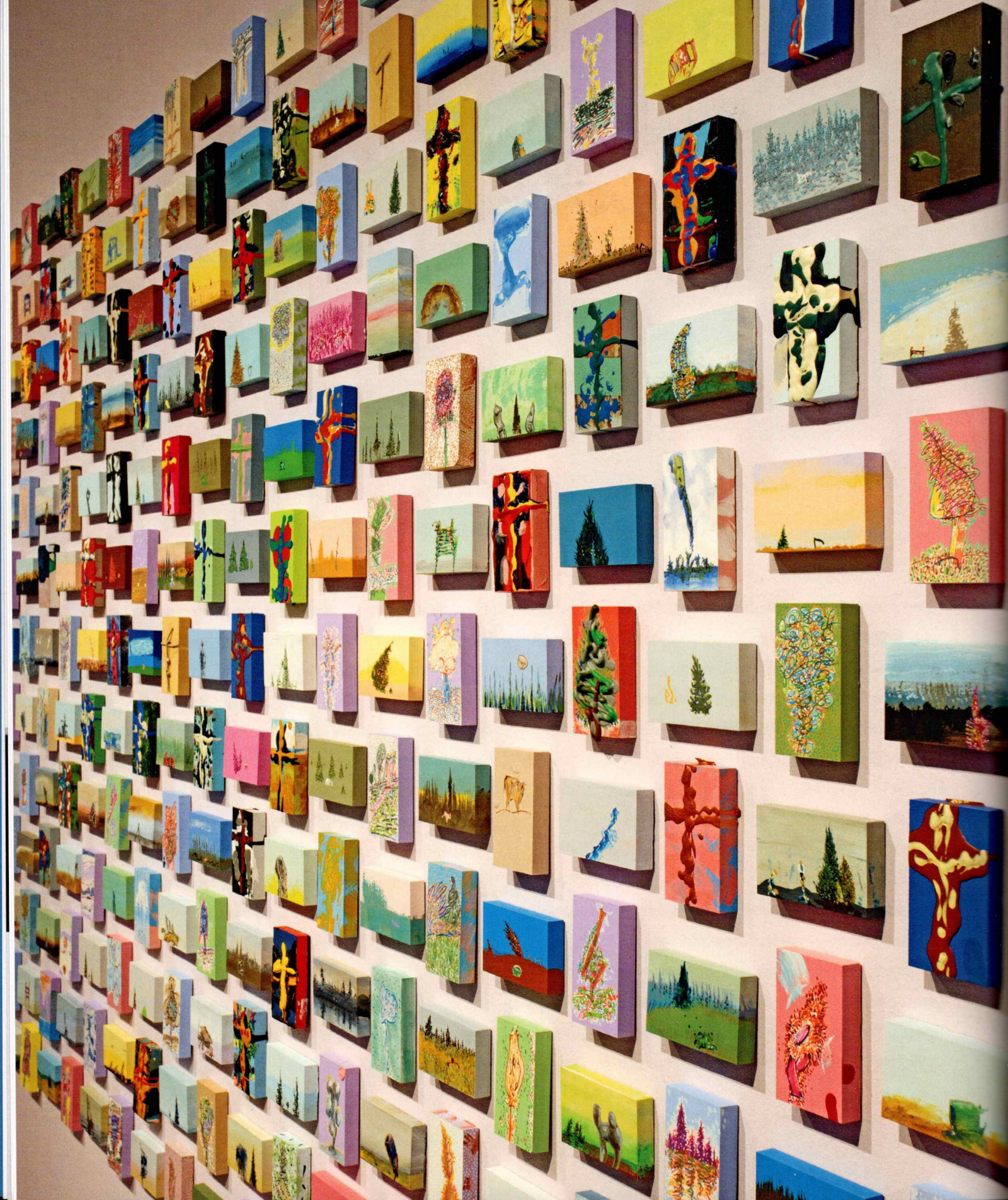
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THE BOOK OF CLIFF

ROBERT B. EPP

Introduction

Cliff Eyland: Library of Babel—A Retrospective grew out of a long friendship and from a mutual admiration. In October 2017, I suggested to Cliff that he was long overdue for a retrospective exhibition of his work. I let him know that I had always wanted to organize a show of his art and he agreed the timing was right. Together, we chose the majority of the works in the exhibition from his collection. They represent a selection of the abundant categories he ascribes to his work, such as abstraction, identity, technology, photography, landscape and figurative painting, to name just a few that he has explored over the past forty or so years. To this we added recent works, most notably the series *Crosses of Faith and Lost Faith*, a new documentary film by Adam Brooks featuring Cliff's three public art commissions for libraries in Winnipeg, Edmonton and Halifax, and *File Card Requiem*—a large aggregation of his signature 3 by 5-inch block paintings that occupied a significant portion of his time from 2017-2018.

I worked with Cliff for nine years as gallerist when he was director and curator at Gallery One One One (now the University of Manitoba School of Art Gallery). During that time, I witnessed and admired his skill as a writer, curator and educator—professional, creative endeavours that have always run parallel to (and informed) his studio practice. In a retrospective exhibition such as

this, I felt it was important to tell a bit of this story through the display of various ephemera from Cliff's curatorial projects in Winnipeg and Halifax, his published writings about art and artists, and the many successful collaborations he has had with individuals from across the cultural spectrum.

Cliff enjoyed the short stories of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, especially "The Library of Babel," which influenced his original decision to adopt the library file card format as his basic unit of creativity in 1981.¹ In "The Library of Babel," Borges proposes the metaphorical concept of the library as the universe, a labyrinth of rooms filled with an endless number of books, and like the universe, the library is vast, infinite and ultimately unknowable.² Borges' conception of the library and a book-centred world resonated with Cliff's panoptic attitude toward artmaking, which considered everything as a potential subject for his art. We agreed the 'library of Babel' would be an appropriate conceptual framework for exploring Cliff's obsession with the library and various strategies to merge the art gallery with the library and for presenting his own creative cosmology.

Libraries and the N.S.C.A.D.

Library File Card Intervention (1981)

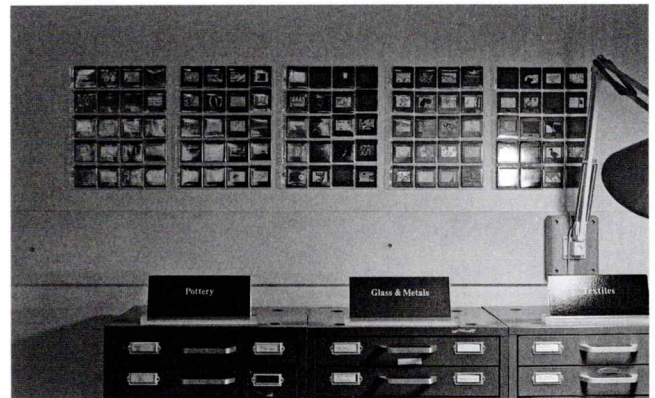
While studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) from 1980-82 in Halifax, Cliff



encountered several conceptual sources and works by other artists that sparked his interest in libraries and contributed to his early adoption of the library index card format in his art. Writing in his essay, *The File Card Works*, he cites Robert Morris's *Card File* (1962) as sparking an early interest in examining the library and its structure.³ The systematic approach to art found in On Kawara's *Date Paintings* (1966) and in the work of Daniel Buren, who adhered to standardized 8.7 cm-wide vertical stripes in his site-installations, also appealed to him.⁴ These influences came together in Cliff's conceptual project, *N.S.C.A.D. Library File Card Intervention* (1981) installed in the school's library.⁵

In his file card 'intervention,' Cliff cut up H. H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art* textbook into 3 by 5-inch "file card size fragments" that he then inserted into "the library's Author/Title catalogue according to an improvised scheme."⁶ As Cliff explains: "The beginning of my work in file card-sized paintings and library installations coincided with the historical demise of the library card and the replacement of card catalogues by computers...."⁷ The project also had a lot to do with the "history of painting. The library projects I did at art school reflected my thinking about the organization of art and documentation in libraries and art galleries, and

about how libraries work."⁸ It should be noted that the NSCAD library file card intervention wasn't Cliff's first foray into the miniature—or the library for that matter. A forerunner was a NSCAD library installation circa 1980–81 consisting of his micro-drawings framed in 35mm slide mounts and hung on the wall in plastic slide sleeves.



Cliff was also encouraged by Benjamin Buchloh's notion of the 'institutional critique.'⁹ Writing in the 1960's, Buchloh urged artists to examine and question society's institutions. For artists, this meant scrutinizing the organization and structure of the art gallery and museums, something American artist Hans Haacke, for instance, effectively took to task in his installations. *N.S.C.A.D. Library File Card Intervention* was an institutional critique of the library and its systems of collecting and ordering knowledge and the beginning of Cliff's lifelong commitment to the 3 by 5-inch index card format. It questions the organization (and authority) of the library and its method of collecting and disseminating information and knowledge according to a prescribed and defined structure called the 'library.' His 'intervention' subverts a pre-conceived taxonomy for

telling the 'history of art' as described by Arnason, and replaces a grand art historical narrative with his own fragmented telling of the story of art. Like Borges in his short stories, Cliff circumvents our expectations of the library card catalogue (or story), by inserting his own work as a way of creating a new metanarrative.

It was one thing for Cliff to create the index card cut-ups of Arnason's textbook. It was quite another, and a more monumental decision in retrospect, to choose the index card size as the format for his life's art production. Cliff acknowledges the importance of his teacher and artist at NSCAD, Eric Cameron, in making the commitment to the file card. He writes: "A study of Cameron led me to take up the file card size format for my painting in 1981."¹⁰ He goes on to say,

My most important teacher and influence at NSCAD was Eric Cameron. Instead of studying *with* Cameron, I was so fascinated by his personality, his ideas, and his work that I decided to study *him*... [Eric Cameron's 'thick paintings'] immediately reminded me of the obsessiveness of Joe Clarence's Jamaican drawings, and of other artists who do things because of an inner compulsion which does not necessarily depend on the feedback of an audience. I have always admired artists who work out of a kind of reasoned compulsion.¹¹

Cameron's influence allowed Cliff to break free of the rigidity of conceptualism. In a sense, Cameron gave

Cliff a kind of permission to make whatever he wanted with his art and to fail at times as well. In Cameron's 'thick paintings,' Cliff saw the potential in making a commitment to a prescribed way of artmaking, even in a format as small as the 3 by 5-inch file card.

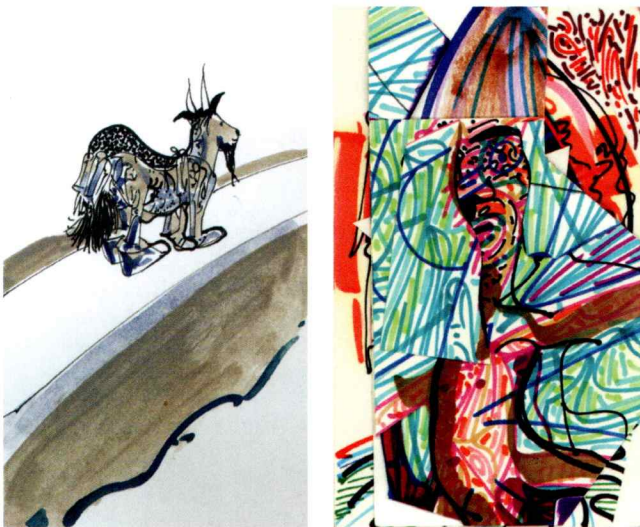
Once established, Cliff proceeded to produce countless file card drawings in a variety of media but primarily using coloured pen and ink, fine-tipped markers, and pencil. Cliff's drawings have an obvious cartoon quality. His pen and ink caricatures on his high school exercise book and drawings of hippie stoners in *Buzzard* magazine (for which he was also editor) suggest the influence of American cartoonist and counter-culture comic book artist Robert Crumb. In fact, one of Cliff's jobs out of high school was as graphic designer for the Fort McMurray Express in 1979, to which he contributed cartoon illustrations, and his first solo show was *Cartoons and Sentences* at the Anna Leonowens Gallery at NSCAD gallery in 1981.¹² A group show held at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in 1981 was also the first time Cliff showed his file card works in a public gallery. His drawings are diaristic in nature and tend to feature bizarre-looking, imagined figures in various distressed emotional states. However, their cartoonish appearance belies Cliff's masterful drawing ability.

Cliff was a quick and eloquent drawer, often attending to several file cards at once, moving swiftly back and forth amongst





the drawings as he worked them up to completion. He seemed to favour graphite pencil for his erotic drawings, male and female nude studies and portraits, a few of which are featured in the *Library of Babel – A Retrospective*. There are rare examples of him working in watercolour, such as the series made in 2009 during a month-long residency at artist Colette Urban's studio in Corner Brook, Newfoundland.¹³ He also employed collage in *An Abdroid*, 2018, a series in which he composed his sliced-up drawings into remarkably successful miniature collages that suggest the structure of Picasso's precise cubist collages,¹⁴ and the colour sensibility of Matisse's 'cut-outs.'



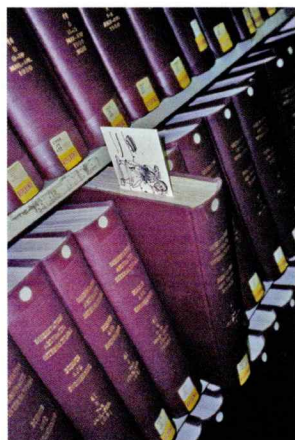
The Library 'Interventions'

Regardless of Cliff's adherence to the conventions of artmaking, his early installations at NSCAD and in Halifax galleries in the 1980s indicate that he thought about his art—and the art object—in unconventional ways and wanted to rethink how art is displayed, valued, and experienced in society. For example, Cliff showed a casual disregard for Walter Benjamin's idea of the art object's 'aura' and the 'preciousness' of art when he exhibited piles of drawings in cardboard boxes for an exhibition at Eyelevel Gallery. Cliff was fond of giving away his drawings—another form of 'devaluing' the significance of the art object—that also served to confound the established commercial art market mechanism for the sale and distribution of his drawings. One of the best examples of Cliff's iconoclastic nature in this vein can be seen in his library 'interventions,' a strategy that caused people to have an art experience with his work when and where it was least expected—while reading a book borrowed from the local library.

While the *N.S.C.A.D. Library File Card Intervention* was the first of what Cliff called his library 'interventions,' he extrapolated from Arnason's cut-ups to using his file card drawings to pursue his abiding interest in merging art and the art experience with the library. As Blake Gopnik writes, Cliff's interventions "began quietly and illicitly," when his "drawings began to appear in books at the Margaret Laurence museum in her hometown of Neepawa [Manitoba]...."¹⁵ With thousands of file card drawings on paper at his disposal, Cliff was

well-equipped to carry out his mission to make his art part of the permanent collection of libraries by short-circuiting the acquisitions process of the library. Robert Enright says, "Eyland became a sort of generous subversive, infiltrating systems with gifts that people could either take away or simply leave alone. He was like a figure out of Jorge Luis Borges, an 'imperfect librarian' inquiring into 'the formless and chaotic nature of almost all books.'"¹⁶ Cliff's library interventions and his later social media posts worked on the same logic: "Each post feels like a discovery, something chanced upon that both disrupts and delights."¹⁷

While at first a guerrilla-like performative action, these interventions evolved into a library-sanctioned archival process with his project *File Card Works Hidden in Books* at the Raymond Fogelman Library at The New School university in New York City.



This intervention was a collaborative project with NSAC curator Kathleen Goncharov and Gail Persky, Raymond Fogelman librarian, who gave Cliff permission to insert his drawings into the library's books.¹⁸ It began in 1997



and continued through to 2005. Cliff visited regularly to insert his drawings at random, and like the excellent archivist he was, he kept careful records of each drawing and the book that received it. The project came to an unceremonious end when a new librarian took over, telling Cliff, "we pay people to take out what people like you put in."¹⁹

Despite the termination of The New School project, over the years Cliff continued (surreptitiously and otherwise) to insert his file card drawings in various books in libraries across the country. During a residency and solo show in 2012 at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives in Ottawa, Cliff made a permanent installation of 1,000 file card drawings.²⁰ These initiatives reflected a shift from his attempts to interrogate the library and its structure to a desire for his art to take up quasi-permanent resident status within the library system.

Postmodern *bricoleur* / Colourist painter

As a student at NSCAD, Cliff chose one-eighth inch Masonite board cut into 3 by 5-inch panels as a support for his paintings. (It was only later in the mid-1990s Cliff adopted the thicker three-quarter inch MDF blocks for his paintings.) Working primarily with acrylic paint on Masonite and an unbridled imagination, Cliff ventured

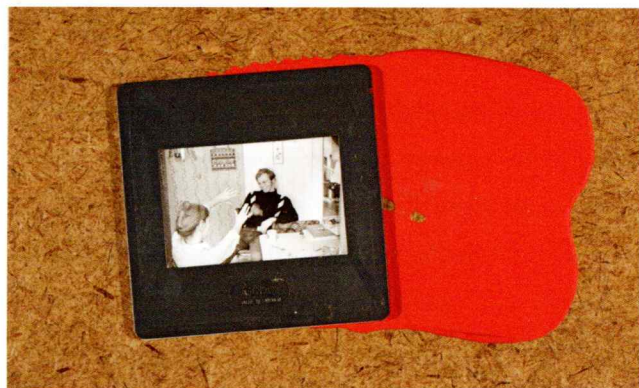
out into a large field of subjects for his paintings and 3 by 5-inch works in general:

I have made abstract 'samples' which resemble tiny excerpts from larger abstract or figurative works or the details of paintings reproduced in conservation books; landscape paintings; figure paintings; portraits; collages with photographs and found objects; paintings and drawings of women I have been close to; many drawings of my parents, sisters and brother and friends.²¹

In the 1980s and 90s, Cliff accumulated a significant inventory of paintings and drawings in a relatively short span of time. However, it is important to keep in mind that Cliff considered each piece a finished work on its own: "I try to make a whole image as I paint, a painting which can exist on its own."²² To this end, each of his drawings is signed and dated, and each painting is given its own title, along with date and signature.

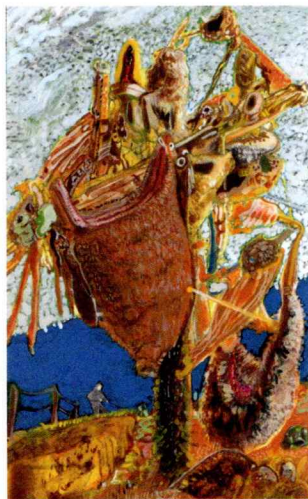
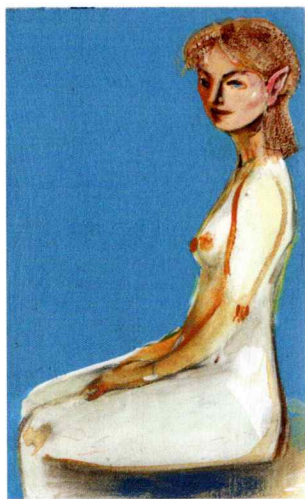
Cliff's early *Timeline Works* from the 1980s and 90s can be highly entertaining. They demonstrate an amusing postmodernist impulse toward artmaking—to *bricoler* or tinker about, as Claude Levi-Strauss would say. Borrowing from the vernacular, Cliff cobbles scraps together into *bricolage* (do-it-yourself) pieces that are often freighted with a deadpan humour that deconstructs and challenges what we might think of as art.²³ As Dr. Oliver Botar explains, "true to his Post-Modern, conceptual origins at NSCAD in Halifax, he

spent his career subverting the very notion of quality in painting and drawing."²⁴ The *bricoleur* comes out in works like *Paint Curtain* (1981) for which Cliff salvaged a scab of white house paint and slapped it onto a piece of Masonite, and *Cassette Tape* (1990) which features a reclaimed busted-up cassette tape smeared with brown paint. Then there is *Cheryl Framing Her Friend's Face* (1976-86), an early example of Cliff's practice of re-working pieces from an earlier body of work—in this case, the previously mentioned NSCAD slide show—into a new artwork.

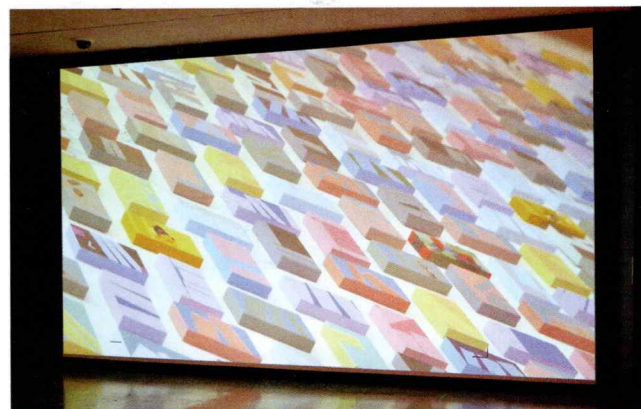


Despite his postmodern tendencies to disrupt the idealism of Modernist art, Cliff carried on many of the art historical traditions of painting and drawing. *Timeline*

Works highlights Cliff's talent as a figurative artist in the graceful portrait *Janet Cardiff with Vulcan Ears* (1996) and *Self-Portrait with Yellow Streak* (1987). His interest in landscape painting is apparent in *A Manitoba Fence Post with Animals* (1995), although in this case with a heavy dose of prairie surrealism that suggests the work of Manitoba painter Ivan Eyre. But above all else, Cliff was a colourist painter. His love of colour is evident throughout the *Library of Babel* exhibition and it is often the first thing that strikes one about his art.



One of the main objectives of the *Library Commissions* film by Adam Brooks was to give viewers a sense of being in the library spaces occupied by Cliff's public art installations. Another benefit from the wall-sized projection of Brook's documentary is the enhancement of Cliff's 3 by 5-inch panels to such a degree that his virtuosity as a painter can be examined and appreciated in greater detail. Looking at his *Bookshelf Paintings* on the 5th level of the Halifax Central Library, one can see Cliff's obvious attachment to formalism in his skill



with composing colour, line, shape and texture: the MDF blocks feature an exquisite blend of geometric and gestural abstraction, simulating stacks of books on library shelves. He combines random daubs of paint with masterful colour combinations that demonstrate an amazing ability to juxtapose unexpected shades together in exciting and pleasing combinations. In general, Cliff embraces an intense colour palette that repeatedly includes chrome yellow, brilliant blue, and lavender that harkens back to the 19th century Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, like Paul Signac, Van Gogh and Seurat. Cliff writes, "I've been fascinated by the Impressionists ever since I was a kid."²⁵ Seurat's pointillist masterpiece *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-1886) was a declared favourite by Cliff and he looked forward to visiting it on the School of Art's yearly student pilgrimage to the Art Institute of Chicago.²⁶

Just as Cliff was not satisfied with exhibiting his file card drawings as art objects alone, he also looked for new purposes for his panel paintings. Cliff's 'captioned' works can be considered another form of intervention



into an existing system, however, in this instance it involved a form of semiotic sign making intended to disrupt the accepted curatorial narrative of exhibition labels. In 2000, Cliff 'captioned' the works of other artists in the

collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia by placing a painting of his own adjacent to the museum label, as an 'indexical' sign. What's at stake here writes Virginia Stephen, is that Cliff's 'labels' are a form of "referencing works in the collection" and opening up the "notion of interpreting art in galleries to include visual conversation between works not installed together as part of a curatorial decision but because an artist saw the work, and responded through making another image."²⁷

Cliff found other opportunities to disrupt our expectations of art and its presentations, by what I call his 'architectural interventions.' This was a favourite exhibition tactic wherein he would hide his tiny paintings in unusual places in the gallery space that artists normally would try to avoid, such as the building's coat rack shelf,



thereby bringing the gallery's infrastructure into play. He enjoyed drawing our attention to light switches, fire alarm pulls, sensors, and so on, that often resembled the size and contents of his art. This exhibition strategy can be read as a short-hand way of equivocating his artwork with the mundane, or the vernacular, a way to diminish the 'high art' status of art and circumvent the artist's ego-making tendencies.

Technology and Christianity

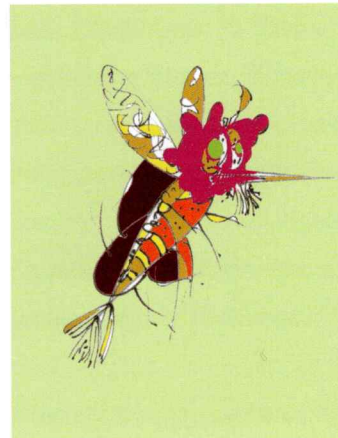
When I look at a cross-section of Cliff's work over the span of forty years, a couple of themes emerge that interest me, aside from his obsession with libraries. One theme is technology, the other is the presence of Christian iconography, especially in the paintings done toward the end of his life. As Alison Gillmor writes about his library interventions, there is evidence that his "ongoing artistic investigation into institutional information systems has overlapped with a massive technological shift, social and cultural shift from book-bound learning to decentered digital data."²⁸ Cliff's bricolage panels in *Cameras, Cell Phones and Hard Drives* are another instance where Cliff senses the digital revolution taking place in society, this time via the introduction of digital-based communication technologies, such as the handheld mobile cell phone in the 1990s. A more ominous subject in this regard are his paintings of glowing atomic bomb mushroom clouds that signify the devastating consequences for humanity resulting from scientific innovation. Incidentally, the A-bomb paintings are also a reminder that Cliff was a child of the Cold War who experienced in the 1960s



TOP, L-R:
Cameras, Cell Phones and Hard Drives, 2003-2018 (detail)

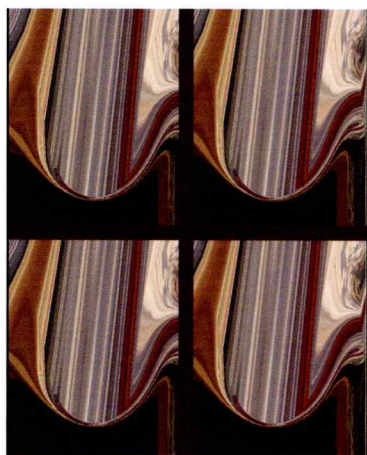
MIDDLE, L-R:
Bomb, 2003, and *Atomic Cloud*, 2003, from the series *Timeline Works*, 1981-2016; *File Card Drawings*, 2008-2010

BOTTOM, L-R:
Ron Eyland (silver), 1998, and *Pam Perkins Utah ID Card*, 1989, from the series *ID Paintings*, 1986-2000



the real fear and anxiety of possible nuclear mass-destruction while living on airforce bases where his father, Ron, worked as an aircraft technician.²⁹

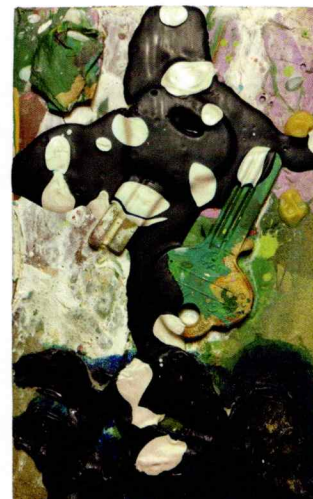
This is not to say that Cliff didn't embrace technology in his artmaking. He exploited the qualities of Polaroid photography in his *ID Paintings*, which feature portraits of his family, friends and artworld colleagues that challenge our understanding of personal identity and point to its manufactured nature. New digital software technologies were always of interest to Cliff and he often found ways to adapt them to his artmaking. In the *Library of Babel* exhibition, *Some Authors*, *Bookshelf Cards*, and *Opioid Wall Book, a Video* are three examples in which he was willing to break the 3 by 5-inch mold he had set for himself. In *Some Authors* he experiments with Adobe Illustrator (A.I.), a vector graphics software, to design his library bookshelves that are lined with books that pay homage to his writer friends and favorite authors. He had also used A.I. software to enhance his black ink file card drawings with colourful and delightful results. Later on, Apple's iPhone and Facebook app became part



and parcel of his life and art practice.

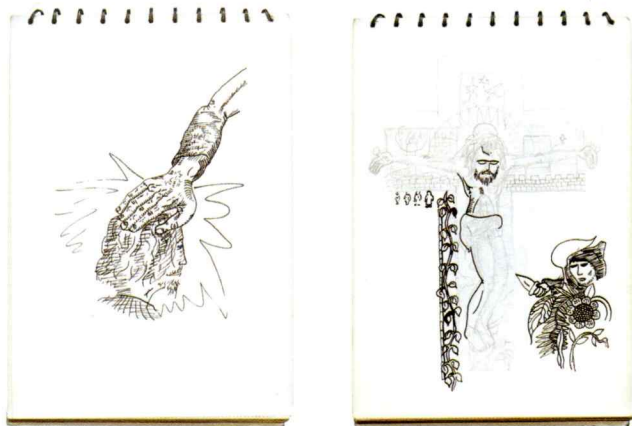
I've never thought of Cliff as an especially religious or spiritual artist (or person for that matter). Cliff's index card format has been related to

medieval miniaturist paintings whose subject was often religious, and his hilarious caricatures at times suggest the doodling of monks bored from labouring for hours on illuminated manuscripts. However, obvious religious symbolism has seldom appeared in Cliff's work until recently. In the *Library of Babel* exhibition, Christianity finds its way into his work through the Christian cross motif in the series, *Treaty Landscapes with Art and Crosses*



of Faith and Lost Faith – from a simple cross composed of two twigs on a gold painted background to a complex abstract panel with two keys (symbolic of St. Peter's keys of the kingdom of Heaven) buried under layers of acrylic paint. Christian iconography in the form of a cross composed of his small paintings is also the subject of his two 3 by 5-foot panel paintings, *Crucifix* and *Crucifix (Homage to Gauguin)*—some of the last paintings he made. It is telling of Cliff's interrelationship between art and faith in *Crucifix (Homage to Gauguin)* where instead of Christ on the cross he has placed an emptied tube of paint.

However, Cliff did have a much deeper, personal relationship to Christianity than his art might suggest. He writes that when he was a teenager, he “wanted to become a saint.”³⁰ This was not a passing remark but a serious aspiration to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Raised an Anglican, Cliff was a young believer and very much committed to doing “good works” in his life.³¹ Putting his faith into action, Cliff volunteered at the Anglican-run Clifton Boys’ Home in Darlington, Jamaica from 1973-1974.³² His letters home and sketches from this period indicate this was a pivotal time in his spiritual seeking.



Reflecting on his time in Jamaica, Cliff writes that it was during that period he lost his faith and became an agnostic: “a person who hopes against hope, open but sceptical, a person of faith and lost faith.”³³ While working at the Home he read the book, *The Misery of Christianity, or A Plea for a Humanity without God* by Joachim Kahl, a former Protestant theologian in Germany, which had a great deal to do with Cliff’s loss of faith.³⁴ The book is a scathing indictment of Christianity—what Kahl calls “a barbaric mythology”—and the Roman Catholic

Church, in particular. Kahl chronicles the sins of the Roman Catholic Church, including its active support of decades of colonial slavery, persecution and punishment of heretics (non-believers), and the repression of women. In Kahl’s view, “Anyone who has never become indignant about Christianity has never really known it.”³⁵ Nonetheless, as an agnostic, Cliff did not entirely break with the idea of the existence of a higher being. Evidence in his artmaking seems to support the notion that faith, Christianity, and the religious values he once held were still on his mind. However, he rarely put these conflicting thoughts so front and centre in his art as he does in *Crosses of Faith and Lost Faith*, which clearly reveals his spiritual dilemma, his struggle between belief and non-belief, and which demonstrates how integrated art and spirituality were with his life.

All was not lost though for Cliff when he was in Jamaica. While volunteering at the Home he met a young orphan boy, Joe Clarence, a resident at Clifton Boys’ Home who inspired Cliff to finally commit to becoming an artist and eventually enroll at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1980. Cliff describes Clarence as “an illiterate, shy epileptic...[with] a profound stutter [who] was obsessed with drawing, putting stubby pencil points to any scrap of paper he could find.”³⁶ Cliff was impressed by the “schematic, graphic qualities” of Clarence’s “outsider” work, which at the time reminded him of Australian Aboriginal art and Paul Klee. But it seems that Clarence’s stubborn determination to make art under desperate conditions is what most impressed Cliff and inspired him to make art.³⁷ Craig Love says,



"It was the first time Cliff had seen anyone make art that way, a force of desire and will against all odds."³⁸ In other words, if Joe Clarence could do it, poor and disadvantaged as he was, there was no excuse left for him not to become an artist.

Books, Libraries, Librarians

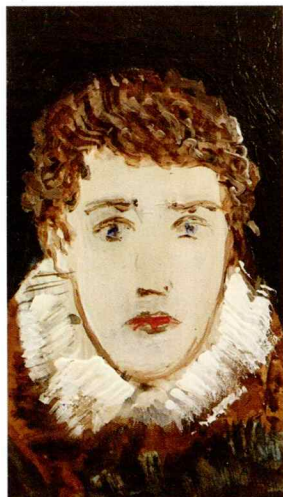
Cliff was a bibliophile to the core. His love of reading and spending time in libraries is acknowledged in his autobiographical writing. He often skipped classes in high school to instead spend hours in the local library with his head in the clouds.³⁹ Cliff has always considered the library the most important art institution in society and in his opinion more of an art institution than the gallery. Cliff explains:

[It's] because art galleries are a little odd... they put things in white cubes, and they don't give you the context. Libraries always give you a context. That's the way the institution works. Libraries are always about the knowledge around the object. But art galleries are not about that. They're always about obscuring the knowledge of the object.⁴⁰

So it is not surprising that his art came to be associated with the library and its components, including books, bookshelves, authors and librarians. In fact, the nexus of the library and art gallery is at the centre of Cliff's art practice. It has been the objective of his practice to bring the library into the art gallery and vice versa, accomplishing a kind of cross-fertilization between art and the library. Several major works in the *Library of Babel* retrospective explore this central aspect of his art.

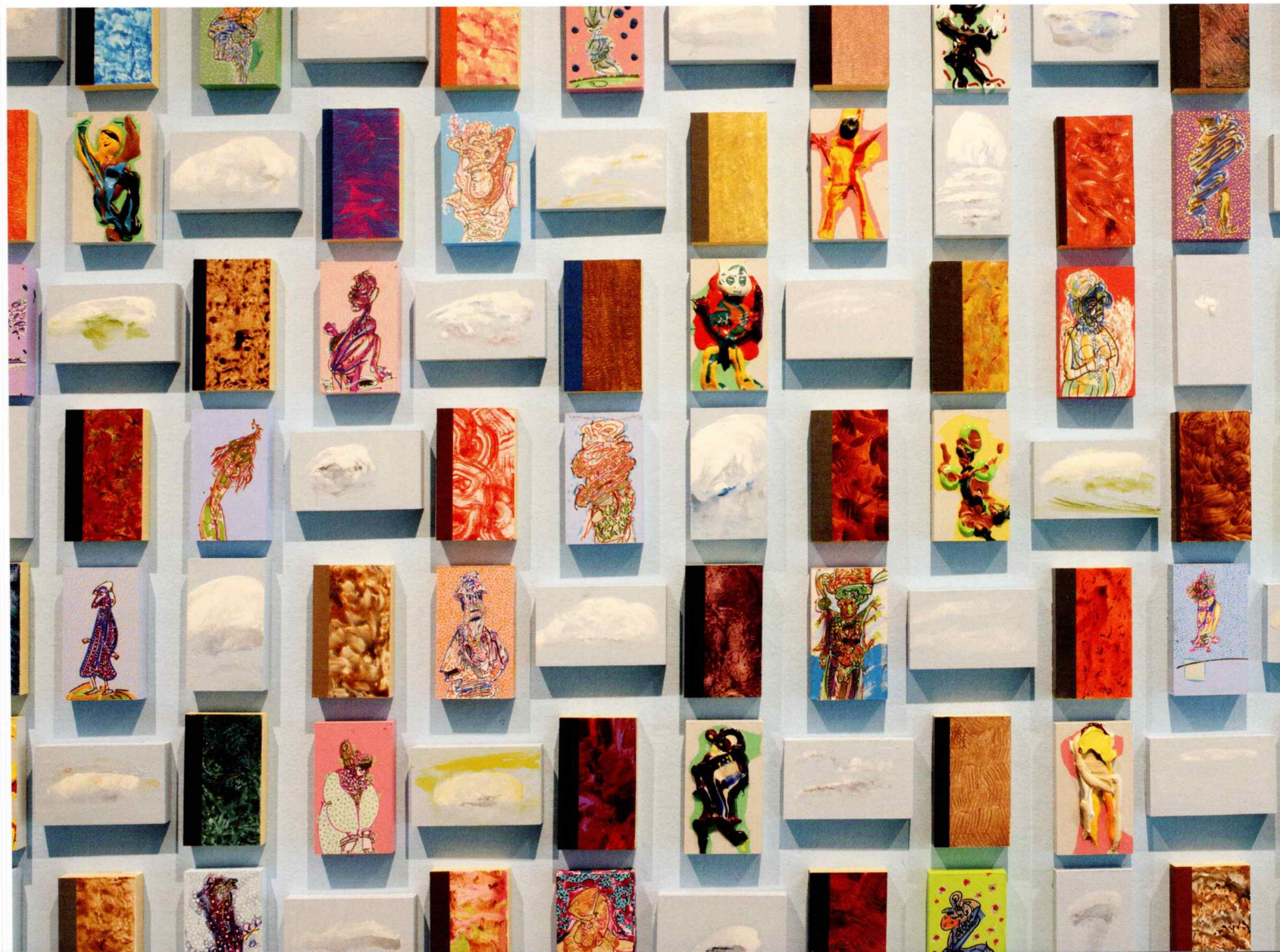
One obvious way he sets out to make the art gallery a 'library' is to make his own books. Donated to the Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery, the installation *Book Paintings – The Moose Jaw Series* consists of 300 faux book paintings on 3 by 5 by 3/4-inch MDF blocks, each imaginary volume having its own title.⁴¹ *Some Authors* supplies bookshelves and numerous volumes with the names of authors that Cliff admired, and he pays homage to fictitious librarians in such works as *28 Librarians* and *Librarians, Books and Clouds*. He has also created 'wall books' like *Opioid Wall Book*, *A Video* that push further the





From the series *28 Librarians*
2014-2017 (detail)

BELOW:
Librarians, Books and Clouds
2014-2016 (detail)



book/library metaphor within the gallery setting and he made his own booklets to be collected by libraries, small collections of elements from his art clipped together. In this manner, Cliff stocks his own imaginary library with books, shelves, and library staff.

Cliff reverses this process by taking his art into libraries, such as in the already mentioned file card interventions, but most obviously in his marvelous library commissions in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Halifax. In both instances he's interested in making his artwork a permanent part of the library's collection, of inserting the art—or aesthetic experience—into the public library.

The Library Commissions

The impressive library commissions captured in Adam Brooks' short documentary *Cliff Eyland: Library Commissions* are perhaps Cliff's crowning artistic achievements. Cliff received the Millennium Library public art commission for the Winnipeg Public Library in 2005, and nine years later he received two more commissions: the Meadows Library in Edmonton and the Halifax Central Library. Although the three installations do share many things in common, such as being composed of Cliff's signature index card size paintings, there are significant differences amongst them in theme and presentation.

Cliff's installation, *Untitled*, at the Millennium Library opened in 2005 and featured 1,000 miniature mixed media works on Masonite, MDF board, and 3 by 5-inch

paintings made directly on the wall—a feature that is unique to the Millennium Library installation. As Tricia Wasney writes, *Untitled* was an on-going project that Cliff expanded to more than 1800 works, covering a wide range of subjects including “landscapes, skies, and figures and faces of people,” to become a visual experience of his time in Winnipeg and Manitoba.



The Millennium Library is also a memorial, Cliff's way of honoring and remembering ordinary people.⁴² In Cliff's view, society has a way of heroicising only the most celebrated, most accomplished in their field, or wealthiest. For many of the paintings, Cliff has given the painting a title selected from the names of random people he sourced from Winnipeg newspaper obituaries from 2004-2005.⁴³ Some names are familiar to us while others are not, such as the work dedicated to the memory of Linda Rogers (nee Asselin). A painting of the sun about to be eclipsed by the moon is dedicated to the memory of Winnipeg sculptor, Marcien Lemay,

creator of the Louis Riel sculpture that stands in front of St. Boniface College in Winnipeg.

Like the Winnipeg commission, the Meadows Library installation is also a form of honouring or remembrance. For this commission Cliff created *Sculptures in*



Landscapes, a collection of nearly 600 block paintings on three-quarter inch MDF board installed in the children's section of the library that reads as a disassembled landscape painting.⁴⁴ The installation with its miniature landscapes populated with modernist abstract sculptures is an homage to Alberta artists, such as Peter Hide, who produced large steel Modernist sculptures in the 1970s and 80s. Other panels feature imaginary trees, inspired by the windbreaks that surround and protect prairie farms from the elements. *Sculptures in Landscapes* is a rare instance where Cliff has composed a single image from an aggregation of his painted panels. With a lovely, soft tonal range in colour the paintings convey a much

calmer, reflective response in the viewer than his other library commissions.

The Halifax Central Library installation was commissioned in 2014 for the stunning new Halifax library. Installed on two levels, the completed installation is truly monumental in both scale and quantity of paintings. *File Card Works*, installed on the Main Level contains a staggering 2,894 individual paintings while *Bookshelf Paintings* presented on the 5th Level holds another 1,030 abstract block paintings for a total display of 3,924 pieces.⁴⁵ *File Card Works* occupies more than 600 square feet of wall space, beautifully situated behind the library's borrowers service desk. The paintings are arranged on the wall in order to accommodate the physical architecture of the building. They frame the doorway and a window to the inner workings of the library, and mingle with the sensors and switches on the wall, invoking the vernacular of the building's functionality as part of the experience of his art.

First impressions of *File Card Works* are of a dazzling confusion of objects, images, subjects, and colour sensations so vast and dense with visual information it can be overwhelming and difficult to know where to begin looking. It makes me think of Borges' short story "The Book of Sand," in which the narrator encounters a book that has no beginning and no end. Worse yet, as he thumbs through the pages, he can't find his way back to a page he was just reading. Like Borges' troubled reader, the viewer of Cliff's public art installations can get caught in a maze of false starts, countless distractions,



and endless searching back and forth in an attempt to comprehend Cliff's work. However, Cliff does offer help with looking at the Halifax piece. Unlike the Millennium Library, which has a random or "scattered cataloguing"⁴⁶ as its organizing principle, the Halifax installation is set in a tight grid of paintings that helps to stabilize the viewer's experience. It also draws upon five discernable themes.⁴⁷

The black and white 'iPhone paintings' are probably the first paintings that pop out when looking at *File Card Works*. They consist of black and white photographs Cliff took of library staff working in the old Halifax library building that he glued to MDF blocks and then added the distinctive black iPhone bezel around each image.

A second theme consists of hundreds of dull grey and green treed landscape paintings that Cliff describes as being "reminiscent of the endless drives I made between Halifax and Amherst."⁴⁸ As to be expected he has included his book paintings and numerous imaginary librarians. A fascinating historical theme emerges in *File Card Works* based on a series of decommissioned library index cards from the Federation of Nova Scotia Heritage. A selection of paintings from this series is included in the *Library of Babel* exhibition in the panel painting *63 File Card Paintings on a White Wall*. In 1983, Cliff annotated the original file cards, often with his own witty comments and drawings, then affixed them to the blocks and added paint, literally fusing art and the library. Here again is Cliff's tendency to memorialize in

his public art installations. *File Card Works* can be seen as an homage to the library and librarians, his birthplace and Maritime heritage.



Cliff's public art installations are large-scale examples of what Eric Cameron calls a "system and sensibility" that informs Cliff's art practice.⁴⁹ Cameron observes that Cliff embraces the duality of a conceptual system with the sensibility of the aesthetic experience, which is to say there are two ways to look at Cliff's art. On the one hand, when we appreciate the beauty of Cliff's paintings it's all about sensibility. However, we can also spend time focusing on the form (the 3 by 5-inch format) and content of his paintings, drawings, and collages. Then it

is all about a system, a way of his "empirically testing" what we "identify as works of art."⁵⁰ Cameron argues that both elements exist in Cliff's work at the same time, but we can only look at one mode or the other at any given moment.

Another way to look at Cliff's library commissions in Halifax and Winnipeg in particular is to abandon the search for an ordering, or an overarching narrative, and instead look at the individual paintings as fragments of information. Cliff's artistic enterprise can be seen as a response to the blizzard of visual images forthcoming from living in a digital world, a world that can lead to option paralysis and making the search for meaning absurd. Earl Miller writes that under these conditions, "a fragmented way of seeing is currently more appropriate than a slow, spiritual consideration, the way Modernists once wanted art to be viewed, and the way many galleries still do."⁵¹ Cliff embraces the idea of fragmentation in this way: "Sometimes I think of my individual paintings as being like one Cubist facet broken off from a larger painting the way a hologram breaks up: in a hologram, each fragment contains a whole image."⁵²

A Constant Producer and Collaborator

Cliff was a constant producer who had a rich career outside of the studio. His creative endeavours, as a curator, writer and educator, often merged with and informed his art practice. In a nutshell, writing about art, organizing exhibitions and teaching studio art classes have always been second nature to Cliff, and as much

a part of his art practice as making his 3 by 5-inch drawings and paintings. Cliff began his career as a curator and art writer in the Maritimes in the 1980s soon after graduating from NSCAD in 1982, when he became a curatorial intern at Mount St. Vincent University Gallery in Halifax and later as exhibitions officer at TUNS (Technical University of Nova Scotia, now Dalhousie University) from 1985-1994. During his time in Halifax, Cliff was a prolific writer contributing his own curatorial essays and reviews to Arts Atlantic magazine as well as for the many exhibitions he organized.

In 1994, Cliff moved to Winnipeg, where his wife Pam Perkins took up a teaching post in the English department at the University of Manitoba. Cliff continued to teach summers part-time at NSCAD (1994-95) while living in Winnipeg. Eventually he was hired as a studio professor at the University of Manitoba School of Art where he taught painting from 1998 to 2013. At the same time, Cliff became director of Gallery One One One at the School of Art, a position he held for twelve years from 1998-2010. During that time Cliff was involved in more than fifty projects for the gallery, curating many of the gallery's shows as well as designing the gallery's website and producing CD-ROM exhibition catalogues—one of the first public galleries in Canada to publish digitally itg ithe proudly liked to claim.⁵³

An overview of Cliff's curatorial programming at Gallery One One One reveals a strong feminist sensibility. He constantly strived for gender balance in solo and group exhibitions. He also made it the gallery's mandate to

feature exhibitions of School of Art faculty and he was especially gratified to give recent fine arts graduates from the School, such as Dominique Rey, Paul Butler and KC Adams, their first professional museum shows. Exhibitions curated by Cliff leaned toward painters and painting. One of his first shows as gallery director, *Six Painters*, featured such artists as Harold Town and Diane Whitehouse, and *Newton's Prism: Layer Painting* included Eric Cameron, Jeffrey Spalding, Gerald Ferguson, and John Armstrong among others and introduced students to some of Canada's leading painters.⁵⁴

Through Cliff's efforts Gallery One One One made inroads into presenting and collecting works by First Nations artists. Cliff was well aware of the marginalization of Indigenous artists in the Canadian art scene. As director/curator of the gallery he attempted to change the status quo through such exhibitions as *Kakegamic*, a collections exhibition that featured the work of the Kakegamic brothers, Goyce and Joshim, from Sandy Lake, Ontario,⁵⁵ and gave space to Indigenous voices through guest essays by curator Catherine Mattes and writer and art educator Leah Fontaine. *Wintercount*, an exhibition of seven First Nations artists from Manitoba and organized by Amy Karlinsky and Indigenous artist Colleen Cutschall, brought the work of First Nations artists and curators into the mainstream of contemporary Canadian art through a bus shelter/billboard project in downtown Winnipeg.⁵⁶ In his own work, *Treaty Landscapes with Art and Crosses of Faith and Lost Faith* continued Cliff's investigation into First Nations' concerns. *Treaty Landscapes with Art* in particular can be seen as a personal acknowledgement

that his art practice resided on Indigenous territory: "Especially living in Wpg [I am] aware of the notion that every piece of land is spiritually occupied by some kind of treaty or some kind of legal arrangement that allows its use and even if we break the treaties these are still treaty landscapes."⁵⁷ In my view, merging *Crosses of Faith and Lost Faith* with this awareness also points to the colonial impact of Christianity on the spirituality of Canada's First Nations.

Using the gallery's resources and his own experience as an artist, Cliff was teacher and educator on many fronts. He used the gallery and its exhibition program to teach the curatorial language of exhibitions as well as the basic principles of proper art handling, conservation, and collections management. His classroom teaching combined an unstoppable creative energy with an encyclopedic knowledge of art and artists that inspired and motivated his students, influencing a generation of Manitoba artists, such as the Two-Six collective. At the same time, Cliff's regular postings on social media about art, and published art writings in *Border Crossings* magazine, were lessons in themselves for the learning for those students wishing to participate in the critical discourse of contemporary art in Canada.

It is commonly thought that what we're really seeking in life is a connection with other people, a community. Cliff created community. He connected easily with people and his studio was as much a place for artmaking as it was a hub for the art world to hang out together with Cliff. He extended this sense of community to include

the general public with the opening of the L'Briary (Library Gallery) in his Arthur Street studio in 2003, inviting people to see his latest curatorial effort. From what I experienced working with Cliff at Gallery One One One, a defining quality of Cliff's character was his collaborative nature, not only in his curation but also in his artmaking. Cliff's collaborators included a galaxy of family members, friends, artists, filmmakers, musicians, academics, art writers and fellow curators. Friends and family have often been the subject of Cliff's art, such as in *ID Paintings* where Cliff's father Ron, Cliff's wife Pam Perkins, and his NSCAD and artworld colleagues are the subjects of his Polaroid photos.

At Gallery One One One, the *Border Crossings Study Centre* project stands out as one of Cliff's most successful collaborations, in terms of merging the library with the art gallery. Commissioned by Cliff, the project brought together *Border Crossings* editors and writers, Meeka Walsh and Robert Enright, and designers Neil Minuk, Eduardo Aquino and Karen Shanski.⁵⁸ The BCSC exhibition provided a "unique, portable archive of the magazine's 27-year publishing history" and on the gallery's walls included works by Manitoba artists featured on the covers of the magazine.⁵⁹ This marvelous exhibition encapsulated Cliff's love of books, magazines, reading and writing in a portable library that eventually travelled to several countries.

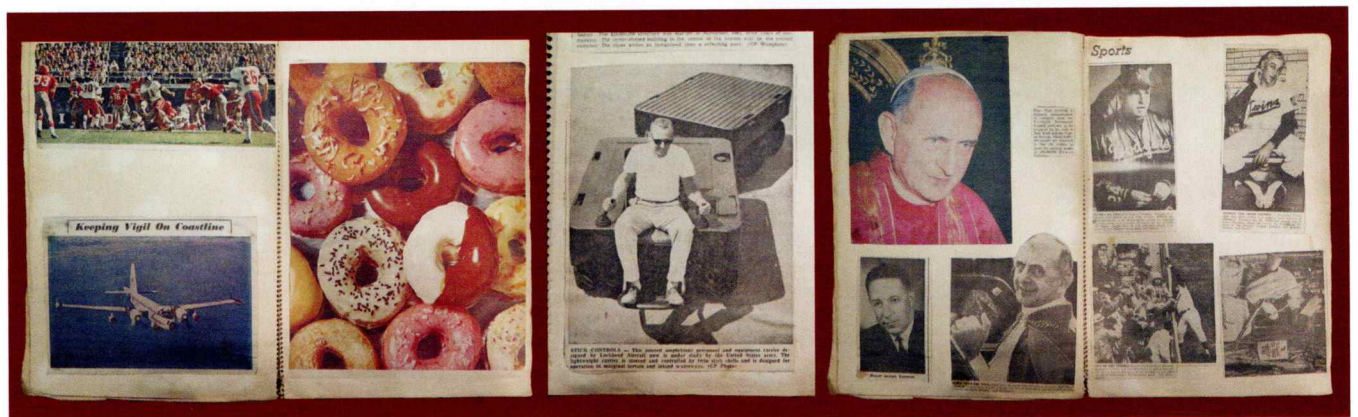
Other major curatorial collaborations occurred with co-curator Susan Gibson Garvey on the project and publication, *Uses of the Vernacular in Contemporary Nova*

Scotian Art.⁶⁰ Together they provide a valuable critical analysis of “folk art” in Nova Scotia, calling into question the notion of folk art and its association with Nova Scotia art and artists. John Murchie, the librarian at NSCAD, worked together with Cliff and wrote the evocative introductory essay for the seminal 1992 exhibition *The 100,000 Names of Art*, for St. Mary’s University Art Gallery, Halifax.⁶¹ In Winnipeg, Cliff joined forces with film professor George Toles for *Status Updates*, a lengthy five-year undertaking where Cliff supplied artworks to accompany Toles’ daily stories on his Facebook page.⁶² Close friend Dr. Jeanne Randolph, together with Cliff, delivered *The Art School Anatomies Project*: “an ongoing investigation... about what art schools were, what they are now, and what they could be.”⁶³

Cliff’s collaborative impulse expanded in many different directions. It included Winnipeg filmmaker Guy Maddin and experimental musical adventures that started as far back as *The Babbies Upstairs* in Halifax, to the

outrageous antics of Winnipeg performance group, The Abzurbs, in which Cliff channeled the spirit of a Newfoundland ‘mummer,’ and Satan’s Chew Toys, the ‘house band’ at Cliff’s studio in later years. A commission for the Alt Hotel in Winnipeg, brokered by Cliff’s dealer Howard Gurevich, resulted in Cliff working with the hotel to install eight of his 3 by 5-inch paintings in each of the hotel’s 160 rooms.

The biographical documentary of Cliff by Winnipeg filmmaker Adam Brooks was Cliff’s last and perhaps his most poignant collaboration. Completed in 2021, Brooks’ film *Cliff: a portrait of an artist* is a deeply personal portrayal as Brooks follows Cliff on his post-surgery journey after a double-lung transplant on November 25, 2016, brought on by sarcoidosis. Disarmingly intimate and emotionally moving, the film captures Cliff opening up to Brooks in candid conversation and with surprisingly humorous observations about his life, art, living with his illness and death.



Childhood scrapbooks, c. 1960-1967



Last Thoughts

Even as a young child Cliff embraced a broad curiosity of the world and sought to collect and examine fragments from everything in it. His childhood scrapbooks are a cornucopia of collecting. They include newspaper clippings from a school trip to Expo '67, professional athletes, Pope Paul's visit to New York, oddball inventions, popular (and not so popular) bands from the '60s, the latest automobiles from General Motors and Ford, ferocious spiders, corny jokes, airplanes, and sprinkle doughnuts. Cliff brought a sense of this childhood fascination and playfulness into his art. This approach requires an attitude of acceptance, of non-judgement, and a sense of humour that demands not taking oneself

too seriously. In retrospect, we can see Cliff carry this attitude right through to his final years of life captured in Brooks' film.

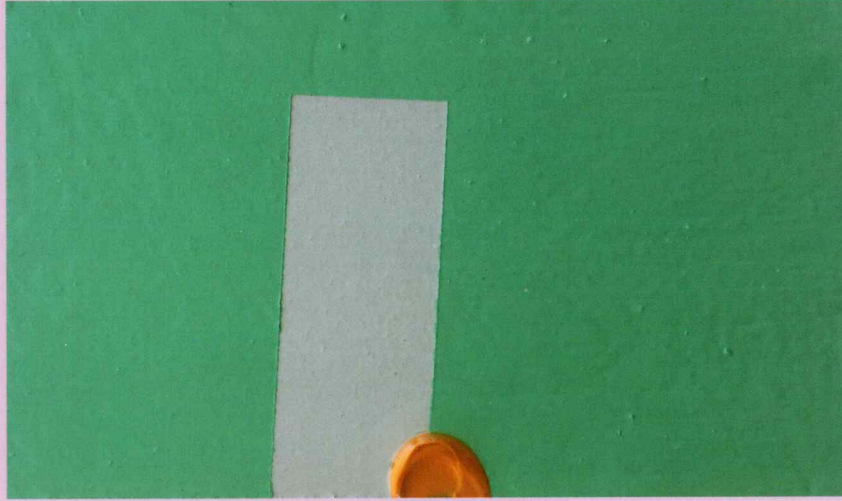
It was a revelation to learn that Cliff's three library commissions have an element of paying homage, to remembering or honouring, but perhaps this is not so surprising considering Cliff's spiritual nature and exceptional generosity that inclined him to think of others ahead of himself. He always strived to make his art democratic, anti-ego and accessible to everyone. Here, the library served as his ideal instrument: one of the few remaining public institutions that is free and open to everyone.

The *Library of Babel* retrospective began as a collaboration between artist and curator. Since Cliff passed away, sadly, on May 16, 2020 before we completed the journey, the exhibition has become both a survey and an affirmation of a truly remarkable Canadian artist as well a memorial to a dear friend whose resilient and positive life force gave so much to the communities in which he lived. *File Card Requiem* was one of the last series Cliff worked on. Composed of hundreds of MDF blocks painted in shades of chocolate brown and black, it is an elegiac composition in honour of his love for and engagement with the library and all that it represents.

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- 28 Alison Gillmor, "Cliff Eyland," *Border Crossings Magazine*, Vol. 34, No. 2, June, July, August 2015, p. 90-91.
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- 42 Cliff Eyland, Interview with Robert B. Epp (Winnipeg, October 23, 2018).
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 The actual number of works for *Sculptures in Landscapes* is 567 paintings, counted by the author, February 12, 2019. The original commission was for 1,000 paintings, but due to architectural changes to the library building Cliff was given a different and smaller wall than was originally planned for his commission. Cliff left the extra paintings with the Edmonton Arts Council that has them in storage for future use.
- 45 Since the inception of Cliff's installation at the Halifax Central Library, the media has consistently and erroneously published that the Halifax library installation contains 5,000 paintings. At my request, library staff did a count of Cliff's paintings in the library. On September 18, 2020, Karen Dahl, Senior Manager, Programming & Community Engagement for the Halifax Public Libraries confirmed the following numbers: *File Card Works*, installed on the Main Level contains 2,894 individual paintings and *Bookshelf Paintings* installed on the 5th Level holds another 1,030 abstract block paintings for a total display of 3,924 pieces by Cliff.
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