

# State of the Art

Vancouver Lifestyles Magazine's Art Guide

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SOFA

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# artist profiles

with michelle hopkins

Lisa Birke, Eri Ishii, and Dr. Robert Bondar head our list for our artist profile for the spring of 2006.



**L**ISA BIRKE, the moose, the RCMP, the beaver, the Great White North and hockey — all symbols de facto Canadian.

Artist Lisa Birke renders her large-scale whimsical paintings into works of great Canadian pride in her exhibit entitled *Canadians: And all Places in Between*, at the Bau-Xi Gallery Feb. 4 to 18.

This desire to create Canadiana narratives stems from Birke's need to make us question our identity.

"As Canadians we often damn our unique imagery and culture for more established or exotic ones, such as European or Asian, and I was no exception," says Birke. "I want to get people pulled into my paintings and get them to have a deeper appreciation for this great country of ours."

She also loves to inject a little humour in her work, as is evident in just about all 25 large-scale paintings on exhibit.

"There's this perception that an artist should be brooding and dark," quips Birke, who says humour was an integral part of her formative years. "Even in art school [Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design], I always thought humour was a great way to approach art."

Take for example the Great Canadian Siamese Moose Trophy. The piece features a beer bottle in the left-hand corner of the painting and depicts a moose that obviously inhibited in a little too much beer.

That's her unique quirky way. Birke mixes Canadian mass media references, pop culture and imagery to create oil canvas paintings that are eye-catching and visually symbolic — beautifully chaotic to the point of technicolour mayhem.

Birke creates her works of art by layering styles and concepts — similar to the way television and the Internet superimpose images.

Her exhibit also includes an old Sears cedar canoe salvaged by Birke, which hangs proudly in the mezzanine of the gallery.

"It's part of what I wanted to present... nostalgia and our Canadian ideals and lifestyles," says Birke.

Over a two-month long trek Birke — armed with an easel and a handcrafted oil panel box (to preserve her paints) — set out for the wilds of the Prairies, the Yukon, our province, and to Alberta.

"This renewed my passion and love for Canada," says the German-born Birke. "I followed in the footsteps of Canada's seven [the Group of Seven artists] landscape Greats, and I set out in the wilds with my moon to explore and paint.

"I amassed a wealth of images which opened my eyes to who we are as Canadians."

**Discover Lisa Birke's *Canadians: And all Places in Between* on exhibit at the Bau-Xi Gallery from Feb. 4-18 at 3045 Granville Street. Her works can be viewed online at [www.bau-xi.com](http://www.bau-xi.com).**

**E**RI ISHII. An image of a child eerily standing still in a haze haunts you, yet after observing the painting a little longer the young male begins to seem more real than ghostlike.

Somehow, he becomes a symbol for the fear that, sadly, some children live with everyday. You are immersed and mesmerized by Eri Ishii's painting entitled *I'm Afraid*. The painting is part of the artist's exhibition entitled *Solitude*, which opens February 11 at the Ian Tan Gallery.

"I wanted to create an image of a figure frozen in a vast field," explains Ishii. "The aim was to create an image that elicits uneasy feelings and has ambiguous meanings by using 'non-serious' colours."

By that she means her use of muted colours, which consequently appears to make the figures engulfed and wrapped in dense cloud and fog. It also seems that Ishii's interplay in the act of drawing between leaving a trace/ghost-like image and composing a meaning culminates in the artist's ongoing investigation of presence/absence through drawing and performance.

"Three years ago I began exploring figures in motion," says Ishii. "I wanted to investigate the emotional implications of people in flight."

"Over time, the meanings of these images changed from fear, anxiety, urgency to liberation, independence and solitude."

Ishii captivates the viewer with her ongoing commentary on aloneness and the fragility of life. But don't think for a minute that you will leave feeling deep sadness.

Using layers of paint and wax, Ishii creates incredible depth perception and movement in her work. The ghostlike images in every one of her 11 canvases on exhibit pull you back into this world via canvas.

"Through my interest in exploring the human struggles, I hope to address such issues as oppression and its consequences, resiliency and interrelations between motion and emotions," says Ishii.

How did this unique art form develop? Ishii says she felt stifled by the Japanese culture and came into her own when she immigrated to Canada a little over 16 years ago. In 2000, Ishii was awarded a scholarship to study with renowned Canadian artist Norman Yudin.

"He was my mentor and strongly influenced my work," says Ishii.