

# A bright new talent emerges in a big way

Lisa Birke captivates with her large, complex and utterly mesmerizing canvases.

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SUN VISUAL ART CRITIC

**L**isa Birke's instructors at art school used to tell her there was a right way and a wrong way to approach galleries about showing her work. The right way was to make a dignified first contact by mail, with a sheet of slides and a carefully constructed résumé. The wrong way, they said, was to just show up at the gallery with her portfolio.

Birke, who is clear-eyed and 23, thought the right way sounded cold and distant, so she opted for a more direct approach. She began to do the rounds of Vancouver's commercial art galleries, portfolio in hand. Like many beginning artists, she heard a list of variations on the theme of "no" until she arrived at Bau-Xi Gallery, the South Granville institution that has shown the work of artists such as Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith, Alastair Bell and Joe Plaskett.

Birke's quiet confidence and open demeanor carried her through any intimidation she may have felt approaching so august an emporium. Director Xisa Huang liked Birke's work enough to ask for a studio visit.

The result, a year later, is a series of large, complex, utterly mesmerizing canvases that herald the arrival on Vancouver's art scene of a painting talent the likes of which hasn't been seen here in almost a generation. The last great painter to pop up in Vancouver was Attila Richard Lukacs in the 1980s. Since then, many other fine artists have used paint as a strategy — which is to say that they approach their work intellectually. But Lukacs, and now Birke, paint with all the trilling, unself-conscious gusto of nightingales singing.

Birke's paintings that appear in the Bau-Xi's Looking to the Future show are stunningly good for an artist less than a year out of school. They combine aspects of traditional landscape painting, still life, satire, text elements, art-historical references, biblical allusions and

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**HIGHER CALLING:** This Lisa Birke painting is called "When a bugle blew and back he looked the hunter knew his goose was cooked." The 23-year-old artist's debut Bau-Xi show is creating a stir among serious collectors in Vancouver.



MESMERIZING from C5

# Canvases dance with colour

graffiti culture. In *They were tired of cleaning up...*, Birke equips the 30,000-year-old stone fertility figure Venus of Willendorf with an apron and feather duster, and has its arm snake off like a rubber band toward the life-giving forefinger of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel *Creation* peeking through clouds. In *...the hunter knew his goose was cooked*, she spreads a forest-side banquet in the most rococo *nature morte* style, complete with a sumptuous wildfowl hung to cure and hunting horns, into the midst of which she flings a two-dimensional cartoon fox, a human skull, lemons and a slab of salmon steak.

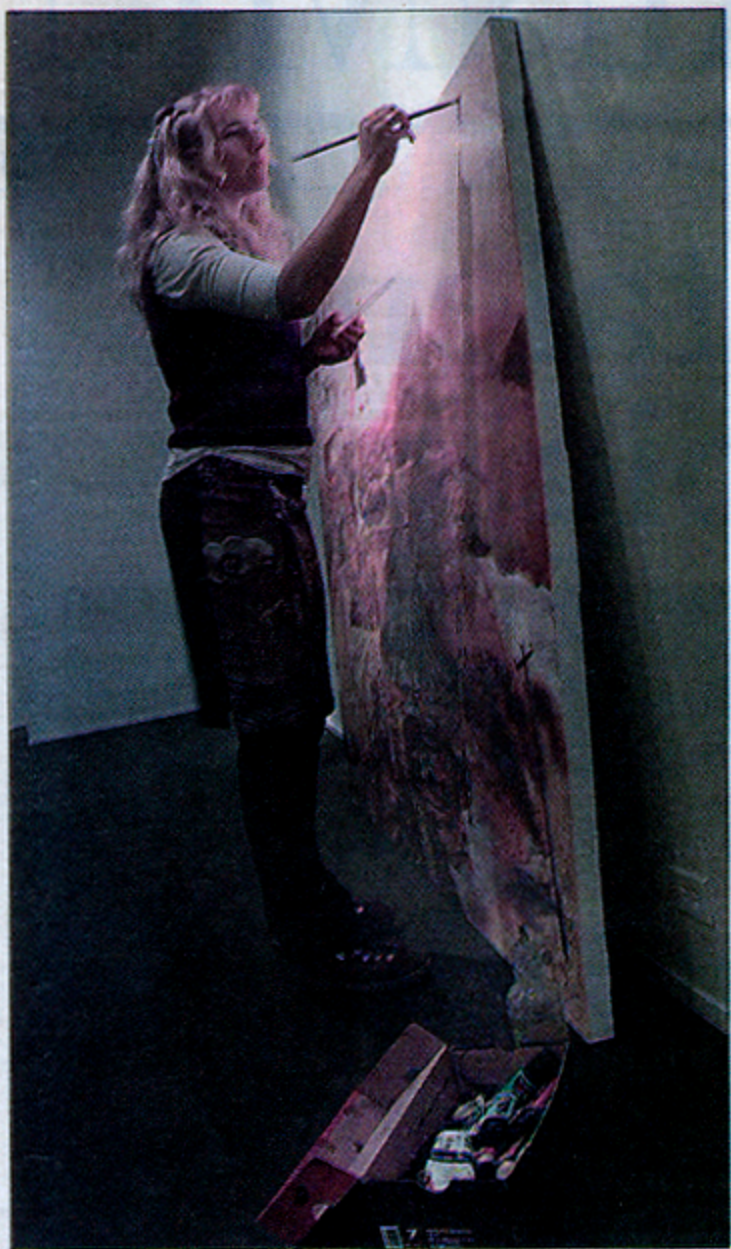
Her canvases dance with colour and false starts. A perfectly rendered landscape scene may suddenly twist into a flat, two-dimensional cartoon view, for instance. Or characters may scrawl across the picture plane, rendered in ropey strings of fabric paint, a lighthearted graffiti.

Birke, who was born in the Bavarian alps and moved to Vancouver Island when she was six, spent a semester of her art-school years in Australia, an experience she says was pivotal in her development.

"I was overwhelmed by the colour and the sense of space there," she says, still a little Bavarian-looking, with her braided hair coiled on her head and anchored beneath a kerchief. "I started looking at landscape there, and the way that Australian artists use their landscape — this mood they seem to be able to create that is playful at one level but also morbid and lonely at the same time."

Birke is the daughter of artists — her father is an illustrator and photographer, her mother a textile artist — whose life to date has been an extended conversation on the subject of art. As a child travelling with her parents, she haunted Europe's great museums, where the whimsical details of masters such as Bosch and Cranach the Elder caught her fancy.

Today, her own canvases are leavened by a similar peanut gallery of amusing creatures. In *Ark Gone Awry*, for instance, a harrowing tempest image in which a circus of animals is filing on to a dangerously heeled-over galleon, some animal with large purple flippers has fallen from



STEVE BOSCH/Vancouver Sun

**THE ARTIST'S EYE:** Lisa Birke does a little touch up work on one of her pieces at the Bau-Xi Gallery.

the gang plank and is backstroking through the storm.

For years at Emily Carr, Birke's teachers tried to get her to stick to a more two-dimensional form of representation. When she got to Australia, she says, she "tried hard to do what all the instructors had said not to." She began to explore her own idiosyncratic mixture of realist three-dimensions and cartoon flatness, of pushing and pulling single figures between the two, and then of overpainting her careful oils with stick figures

dripped out of tubes of fabric paint.

Birke brought 12 canvas to Bau-Xi for her inaugural show (an event in which she completely eclipses such senior artists as Laurie Papou and Margaretha Bootsma). Almost all her canvases have sold.

"Australia was the most wonderful blank slate for me," Birke says. "No one there knew what my work was like. No one knew who I was. I was completely free to be myself."