



Harold Town
Vale Variation #166, 1975
Essay by Sarah Stanners, PhD
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Harold Town, *Vale Variation #166, 1975*, painting on arborite.

“Town was his own competitor” (1) is an apt description of Harold Town (1924-1993) by Robert Fulford, who was thinking in retrospect on the vast array of work that this Canadian artist challenged himself with in continually original ways. Town’s name is perhaps most synonymous with Painters Eleven—a group of mostly Toronto-based artists who banded together in 1953 with only the drive to paint abstractly and secure exhibitions in common. Disagreements were common amongst these painters and Town’s refusal to have the big-time New York art critic Clement Greenberg visit his studio for a critique session in 1957 is an infamous case. Town did not feel the need for outside approval and certainly did not want to pay for the critic’s visit either. Painters Eleven (a name coined by Town himself) dissolved by 1960. Town was always more interested in raising his own bar than having it nudged by others. His unapologetic attitude rubbed many people the wrong way but it made his artistic resolve fierce.

David P. Silcox, long-time friend and now executor of the artist’s estate, once called Town a “compulsive accumulator.” (2) Forever rescuing found objects for future use in his art—as either inspiration or placement in assemblage—the artistic detritus was high in Town’s studio. In fact, the artist maintained multiple studios: separate rooms for drawing, etching, and sculpture, as well as two painting studios in the famous Studio Building developed by Lawren Harris and Dr. James MacCallum in 1914. Gordon



MacNamara, who purchased the building in 1948, was never shy about complaining about the state of the floor in Town's studio where he produced his *Snap Paintings* that repeatedly flung excessive amounts of paint about the room as he snapped paint-laden strings back against the picture plane.

While Town was driven by his own inclinations, his *Vale Variations* series, which dates from 1972 to 1977, proves that he certainly did find inspiration in the work of other artists around him. The *Vale Variations*, of which there are hundreds of manifestations, were all inspired by the drawing of his long-time friend and fellow artist, Florence Vale (1909-2003). Vale's ink-on-paper drawing, titled *Pyramid of Roses* (1965), measures only 11.4 x 16.2 cm, but it had a mighty effect on Town's work as it remained in his studio for decades. In Vale's influential piece, a slightly off-centre pyramid is surrounded by six earthly nudes, while an unknowing angel sits upon a cloud with its back turned to the unabashed scene of frivolity below. The drawing is childlike and liberated—a tone that comes through in most of Town's *Vale Variation* artworks. Vale's *Pyramid of Roses* depicts one nude woman performing a headstand, while another slides inverted down the side of the pyramid. At least three of Town's nude silhouettes in *Vale Variation #166* (September-October 1975) perform similar acrobatics, and like Vale's female figures, Town's nudes seem to defy gravity even with their mighty curves. One cannot help but think of Matisse's simple but strong cut-out works from his later life. Yet, for Town, drawing remained paramount in this series, both as a point of departure (inspired from Vale's ink drawing) and as a matter of execution. As with some other works in this series, Town used a draughtsman's tool called a French curve. Made of a stiff material such as plastic, wood, or metal, a French curve is essentially a template or stencil of variously sized curves, which allow the artist to create smooth and continuous lines as they trace their pencil or knife along the template.

With *Vale Variation #166*, we see a picture within a picture, contained all around (like a frame) with another picture. The figures in the frame and in the larger internal picture seem to care not about this apparent disconnection between the two spaces as they throw limbs and extremities into and out of the 'frame'. The smallest interior picture scene remains autonomous and makes the most direct reference to the seminal drawing by Vale with its pyramid in grey. Atop the pyramid in Town's work is an abstracted green form, which recalls the ignorant angel from Vale's ink drawing. Town echoes the cloud-bound angel again in the top right corner of *Vale Variation #166*. Town's *Vale Variations* were made in hundreds of sizes, colours, and media, and *Vale Variation #166* excels in the sense of balance between innocence and sexuality, all in joyous colour.

(1) Robert Fulford, an introduction to "Magnificent Decade: The Art of Harold Town, 1955-1965," (Toronto: *The Moore Gallery*, 1997).

(2) David P. Silcox, *Works of Art and Eclectic Ephemera from the Studio of the Late Harold Town*, RCA, OSA, OC, (Toronto: Ritchies, 15 September 2003).

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