

PETE DAKO

Over the Top



Opening Feb. 6TH 4-6 pm to Apr. 14TH 2001

360
THE RESTAURANT
AT THE CN TOWER

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the CN Tower

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Curated by Robert Birch



NON-VICIOUS CIRCLES: THE ART OF PETE DAKO

If there is work more suited for exhibition upon the walls of the 360: The Restaurant at the CN Tower than this sampling of Toronto artist Pete Dako's new paintings, I cannot imagine what it would be. For here, in this quintessentially round and revolving place, are round and potentially revolvable works: saw-blade paintings, CD paintings, paintings on circular plywood cutouts. Even Dako's more conventionalized square and rectangular paintings on canvas are so teeming with raucous, vital imagistic life, with clamourings of close-packed, cartoonish figures yearning to breathe free in the liberating non-stop space a circular format provides, they seem to be only provisionally square and rectangular—as if they're waiting for the right saucer-shape to drop by and scoop them up.



The art-historical term for a circular, disc-like painting, is the *tondo*. The form has been around for a long time. Raphael painted a justly famous tondo depicting Mary and the infant Jesus called *The Madonna della Sedia*. "The incredibly subtle composition", write Renaissance scholars Leopold D. Ettlinger and Helen S. Ettlinger (Raphael, Phaidon, 1987),

"answers perfectly the challenges offered by the circular format while at the same time appearing completely natural" The Madonna's protective, encircling arms, for example, cunningly echo—and satisfyingly nestle within—the powerful, relentless, imperative curve of the canvas's rounded

edge. The Ettlingers also add darkly that "having achieved this, Raphael never worked with the roundel again." The roundel. It's a lovely word, is it not? More lyrical than the rather diminishing, toylike sound of *Tondo*. How about if we refer to Pete Dako's paintings as roundels from here on in? Raphael may never have worked the tondo format again, but many other artists have, right up to the present time. In Canada, Quebec abstractionist Claude Tousignant built almost an entire career on his big, round, optically-dazzling *Gongs* and *Chromatic Accelerators*, the meaning of which lay in their pure, sheer colouris-

tic bravado. And Ontario artist Tony Urquhart has had frequent

recourse to the tondo or roundel form. Indeed, for a book he made in 1985 with the late Canadian writer Matt Cohen called *In Search of Leonardo*, Urquhart contributed eight delicate watercolours in the tondo format, a format whose central if more or less symbolic place within the experience of seeing itself Cohen addresses on the first page of the book: "Through his spyglass Leonardo sees/ Landscape receding into the future/ Round glimpses of tomorrow/ Compromised by the haze of yesterday." Round glimpses of tomorrow. As in that which is seen—and focussed (that is to say artificially curtailed laterally and deepened vertically) by the telescope's round and selective lens.

What is the tondo's program? What does it require—and allow? Well, in the first place, a disc-like format means that it is almost impossible to compose a picture within it—or certainly not in the traditional way. Because of the disappearance of the comforting vertical and horizontal axes within which conventional pictures are constructed, there is suddenly no top

