

# Graeme Welch

## Chasing the Savage Parade



Some reflections on growing up in the twentieth century,  
inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's poem  
*Le Bateau Ivre*

## **Graeme Welch**

Born in New Zealand, the son of a cartoonist and commercial illustrator, Graeme Welch seemed to be pre-destined to emulate his father. Instead, he chose to study at the University of Toronto, where he earned his Ph.D. in Chemistry. He subsequently pursued a successful career in scientific research, teaching and administration.

The artist within, however, remained and at mid-career he completed a fine arts degree at Concordia University and began to participate in painting and printmaking exhibitions. Retiring in 2005 from his position as Dean of Pre-University Studies at Dawson College he devoted his full attention to art.

Chasing the Savage Parade is his first major solo exhibition.

## Chasing the Savage Parade

"...some reflections on growing up in the twentieth century, inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's poem *Le Bateau Ivre*"  
(Graeme Welch, 2008)



*Sour Apples*  
oil on canvas  
168 cm x 132 cm

The drawings and paintings exhibited in Graeme Welch's *Chasing the Savage Parade* are evocative of the symbolist poetry of Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) and in particular his pivotal work *Le Bateau Ivre* (*The Drunken Boat*) written when the poet was sixteen years old. Considered to be Rimbaud's most remarkable work, it is thought by many to prefigure the enigmatic life of the poet. The Boat of the poem is "... simultaneously a metaphor of the poet and a personification of a boat. Inanimate, the boat is thus passive, but it is simultaneously active in its function as a metaphor for the poet." (Mader-Lin) The autobiographical 'visionary language' of Rimbaud's quintessential poem serves to inspire the

convergence of pencil, paint and poetics which shapes Welch's symbolist and expressionist visual 'dissertation' of his own adolescent voyage of discovery. As Welch points out, the works are "... reflections on growing up in the twentieth century" inspired by this significant poem. For both Welch and Rimbaud, *Le Bateau Ivre* serves as a metaphor for immoderation, creativity and ultimate sea change.

The nature and power of Rimbaud's writing is found in the poet's *lettre du voyant* where Rimbaud describes the colour and shape his language will take. (Mader Lin)

*Cette langue sera de l'ame, pour l'ame, resumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs, de la pensee accrochant la pensee et tyrant...*

[This language will be of the soul for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought holding on to thought and pulling...]

In this same way, Welch invents on canvas an energetic 'Rimbaudian' vocabulary that is analogous to Rimbaud's poetics, yet uniquely Welch's own creation. The emotional intensity of Rimbaud's adolescent 'sea passage' is manifested, comes of age and is transmuted by Welch into paintings which are "... of the soul for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought holding on to thought and pulling..." While the titles of the works in the exhibition are taken from the stanzas of *Le Bateau Ivre*, Welch maintains that his intention is not to "illustrate" stanza by stanza Rimbaud's voyage of discovery, but rather to "...parallel [in paint] the strength of Rimbaud's [poetic] imagination."

Welch points out that in his estimation, poetry and painting are two different ways of expression. However, he affirms the symmetry between Rimbaud's youthful and profound voyage of the imagination and the symbolic intensity of his own adolescent journey. The Symbolist poet Jean Moreas' description of the intention of symbolism in French literature (*Le Figaro*, 1886) aptly illustrates the confluence of symbolic poetics and symbolic visual art shared by Welch and Rimbaud, and by *Le Bateau Ivre* and *Chasing the Savage Parade*,

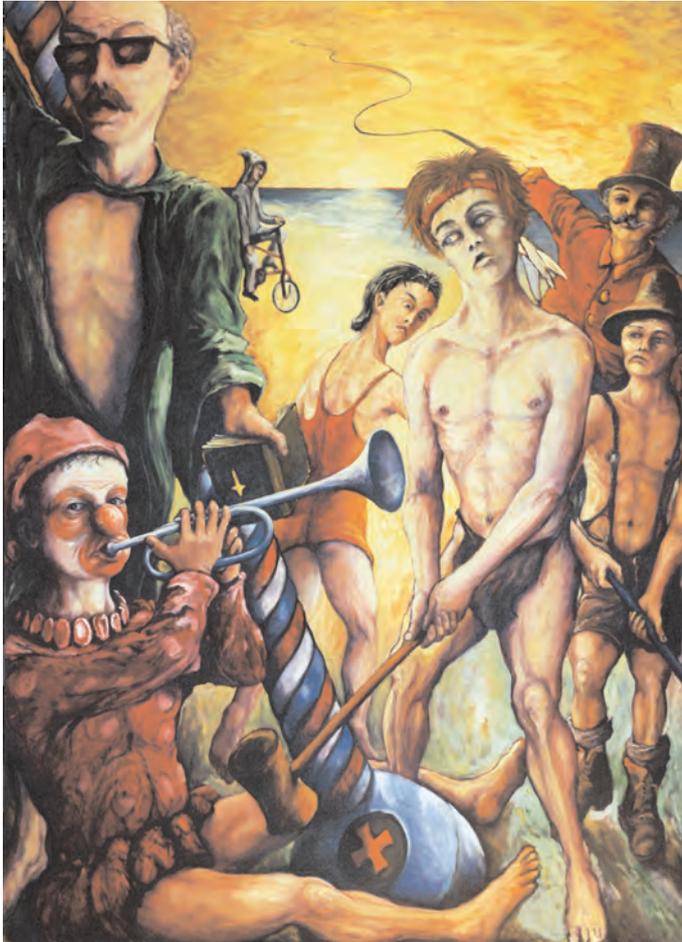
"...Symbolic poetry seeks to clothe the Idea in a perceptible form that nevertheless will not be the ultimate goal in itself, but, which, even as it serves to express the Idea, remains subject to it. The Idea, for its part, must not allow itself to be deprived of the sumptuous robes of external analogies; ... accordingly, in this art, the depictions of nature, the actions of human beings, all the concrete phenomena would not manifest themselves; these are but appearances perceptible to the senses destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas."

The major idea explored in *Le Bateau Ivre*, and *Chasing the Savage Parade* deals with themes of choice, conflict, resolution and in particular the role of the 'voyant.' Once again in his *lettre du voyant* Rimbaud notes the importance of the voyant "I'm a witness at the flowering of my own thought. I watch it and listen to it..." In keeping, therefore, with the autobiographical nature of these works, Welch takes on the same critical stance as Rimbaud. Welch inserts himself in the 'frame' as a singular figure in a number of works and might also be represented in an array of guises in the same work. His paramount critical viewpoint is to conform to Rimbaud's definition of the *voyant* – Welch is the witness to the "flowering" of his own painted creations. We participate.

In *Chasing the Savage Parade*, Welch depicts an assortment of human, animal, and hybrid creatures who are performers in a tumultuous spectacle. This visual 'script' is not a sequential narrative. He points out, however, that there is a "...common thread" that runs throughout the works. Interwoven are a variety



*Ancient Tragedy*  
oil on canvas  
145 cm x 200 cm



*Painted Poles*  
oil on canvas  
200 cm x 145 cm

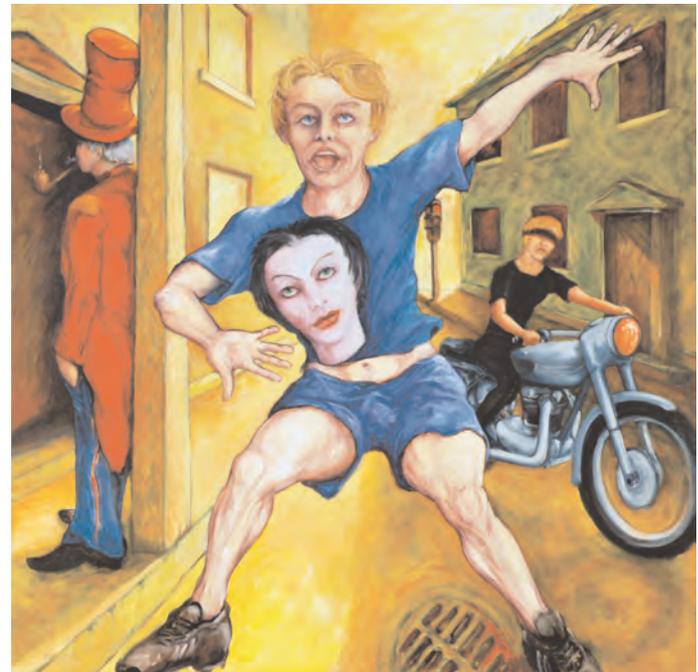
of characters that intermittently reappear in the works and 'act out' scenarios that symbolically document factual or imagined events. Depicted throughout the series are an emblematic schoolboy, a clown or court jester, a nude female reminiscent of Manet's *Olympia*, childhood cowboy heroes, the circus ringmaster, men in business suits and characters wearing bird like masks. As significant in these compositions are representations of WW2 aircraft, motorcars and motorcycles. This deliberately cacophonous assemblage sometimes marks initiation rituals the artist has encountered, confronted, enjoyed, rejected or imagined in his journey from adolescence to adulthood. Welch affirms that while the interpretative possibilities of the painted scenarios are oftentimes inspired by events in his own life, they are not simply illustrative; the universal symbolic elements suggested by these characters are deliberate. He maintains that his intention is for the viewer to interpret the works from a "broader" social, cultural and as well, an introspective point of view.

Welch posits the "...idea of two alter egos" which might compositionally and symbolically appear as "angels' and 'demons' manifested in some form or other

throughout the works." The conflict suggested by this theme is aligned to the overriding notion of the struggle between good and evil. His imagery alludes to traditional signifiers of struggle as well as his own idiosyncratic motifs. In works such as *Painted Poles*, the circus ringmaster, whip in hand presides as an authority figure. The Ring Master appears again in *Sour Apples* and *Unforgettable Saps* in a more passive demeanour. In particular, the imagery in the work entitled *Sour Apples* deals even more directly with choice, conflict, resolution, and angel vs. demon requisites. The railway tracks demarcate the journey that the bewildered schoolboy [Welch], with his back to the viewer, must undertake as he advances from boyhood to adolescence. Welch suggests that the confrontation between the winged youth and the masked aggressor might signify a "moral dilemma such as the struggle between the flesh and moral and religious guilt. The modern couple departing on the train possibly anticipates a traditional future relationship." The quandary of choice is presided over by the 'pope' who represents "religious authority;" but now officiates as a startled onlooker. Each canvas is not meant to be read in sequential order, but rather, provoked by Rimbaud's poetic imagery,



*Durango Kid*



*Unforgettable Saps*  
oil on canvas  
127 cm x 127 cm



Red Sky  
oil on canvas  
165 cm x 140 cm

as visual metaphors denoting universal and elemental significance. Contradictory forces have been noted as a critical element in Rimbaud's poetics and this posture also ignites these compositions. Welch's imagery is shaped by travesty and idealism, irony and sincerity, drama and comedy, the past and the present. These epithets are relative not only to Welch's art works but as well to communal human circumstance when autobiography is the core of the literary or visual creation.



Arthur Rackham's Poe

While many of the circumstances depicted in *Chasing the Savage Parade* are purposely ambiguous, Welch firmly acknowledges that his approach to painting is influenced by the enigmatic paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century artist Bosch, as well as the 'modernist' principles of 'canonized' 20<sup>th</sup> century expressionist artists such as Max Beckmann and Otto Dix. Other distinct influences are Arthur Rackham's illustrations of Edgar Allan Poe's tales of mystery. As well, Hollywood inspired imagery such as films and movie posters of the 50's play a pivotal role in Welch's visual compilations. These influences are clearly seen in the work entitled *Red Sky*. The inspiration for the charging white

horse is based on both the four legged 'partner' of the 1950's cowboy icon The Durango Kid, Welch's boyhood hero, and as well, Rackham's evocative illustrations. The shoes worn by the naked reclining female were inspired by Hollywood legend Moira Shearer's film, "Red Shoes."

The multidimensional aspects of these works are readily characterized and contextualized as 'post-modern,' often described as a contemporary and sardonic approach to creating art by simply appropriating those art historical styles which emerged between the 1860's and the 1950's. Some art historians have derided cynical appropriation as one dimensional, limiting, and the equivalent of cultural cannibalism. (Lawson) In a more positive light, however, it is generally conceded that artworks bearing the post-modern caption might also represent a desire to go beyond mere sardonic appropriation. It might be contended that the ambition of post modern invention is to resolve a particular scenario based on genuine experiment and personal discovery within a contemporary context. Welch's paintings embrace the latter elements.



Red Shoes

It is evident that Welch, in a similar, but not exact manner as his expressionist forbears, asserts the stylistic characteristics that highlight description, symbolism and subjective experience. (Lawson) As these artists did, Welch also rejects a traditional academic approach focused on canons of compositional regularity and predictability. He asserts, however, a visual autobiography that is simultaneously provoked by Rimbaud's poetic imagery and ventures beyond the compositional characteristics of early 20<sup>th</sup> century expressionist art. More importantly, the narrative presented by Welch is exclusively his own and is framed by Welch's legitimate authorship. He has created a distinct and singular kaleidoscopic history defined by a personal symbolic content which speaks for itself and to the viewer. I suggest that while the incidents depicted are constrained by canvas, paint and frame, mere reminiscence is replaced by unadulterated and perceptible genuine revelation.

Lois Eames-Valliant, 2008

#### SOURCES

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## Graeme Welch

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Graeme Welch  
*Arthur Rimbaud*  
graphite on paper

Back cover:  
Graeme Welch  
*Self portrait*  
graphite on paper



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