

## ON THE RECENT WORK OF NICK TAGGART

by Jan Tumlir, Summer 2001

The art of gardening provides plentiful opportunities for minute observation as well as expansive dreaming. Drawn into the alternately beautiful, grotesque and even tragic "dramas," as Nick Taggart likes to call them, occurring underfoot throughout every square inch or so of his lush and fertile property, I imagine him putting down his pruning shears from time to time, to take mental note. There is a casual sort of process at work here, related to the daily practice of tending to the plants and the land, as well as to drawing; a dispersed and circuitous, as opposed to direct, connection obtaining between these two realms of the great out- and indoors, the garden and the studio. One imagines the artist shuttling between them, with all the reorientations this implies from the so-called "real" to the represented, but ultimately these categories are not quite as distinct as one might assume, and in effect a good part of Taggart's work over the past few years has been devoted to collapsing the distance between them.

An earlier piece now hanging in the living-room depicts a series of notorious art works - highlights from recent art history - arranged into something like romantic pairs. Finely observed and rendered, their slightly impacted materiality, exaggerated perspectives and consistent lack of coloring forcefully proclaims their photomechanical source. These are pictures of pictures, products of a machinic process over and above the partly hand-made nature of their respective referents - partly, because evanescent: the various found-object strategies depicted therein have made the artist's hand a central now-present/now-absent concern - though now translated back into the wholly hand-made context of Taggart's own representational practice. The drawings and paintings upstairs in the artist's studio would appear to have left these concerns behind for a closer engagement with the actual stuff of this world, but first looks are deceiving. If an acute romanticism seems to pervade his view of the surrounding landscape, it should not be understood as the flip side of a more critical sort of inquiry into the contemporary substance of the image - this inquiry continues.

Let's not forget that Romanticism itself appears in direct response to the emergence of a new industrial culture of simulacra and kitsch, never quite assuming the stance of blunt opposition we still tend to freight it with. For the Romantic, that is, nature provides not only a "way out" but also "in," the organic form doubling as a kind of explanation for the artificial works of man. The idea that some sort of meaning can be extracted from the vast indifference of these mineral, vegetable and animal worlds that impinge on every side of our own also occurs in response to Taggart's recent drawings and paintings, however dimly. Yet here the message is emphatically relocated to a shifting, convulsive zone in-between empirical observation and the fantastic play of the artistic imagination - Taggart's own, and by extension also that of his various sources and references, which run the gamut between Durer and Audubon.

This space is concretely articulated in the form of Taggart's own home which takes full advantage of our temperate climes by opening the borders, at every opportunity, between the domestic interior and its exterior landscape. One imagines the artist shuttling between them, his repetitive passage from outside to in, from inside to out, commemorated in a series of works that are themselves convulsive, a series of negotiations between the perceptual and hallucinatory, micro and macro, the detail and the gestalt.