

S

teven Lamb is a big strapping man with a gentle voice

At the age of 14, he decided to become an artist. Born in 1958 in Sofia, Bulgaria Lamb's art education began in high school and continued at the Academy of Fine Arts where he studied illustration and print-making.

Then came two years of compulsory military service. When that was finished he continued his education at the Academy of Graphic Art and Painting in Leipzig, in what was still then, East Germany.

There he studied German painting techniques, anatomy, lettering and illustration. On his return to Bulgaria, he worked as a self-employed artist. Lamb considers his greatest influences to be Peter Schtelzman, whom he studied under in Leipzig, Toulouse Lautrec and Honoré Daumier.

For his first solo exhibition in Sofia in 1986, Lamb displayed a series of paintings based on Boccaccio's Decameron. By 1988 he was exhibiting in Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden. He was invited to exhibit in Cuba and that is how Lamb arrived in Canada.

When the plane landed in Newfoundland to refuel, Lamb left his paintings behind and applied for refugee status. He worked in St. John's as a print-maker and illustrator and in 1993 he was a prize-winner at the International Art Competition at 54 Gallery in Soho, New York. The same year he moved to Montréal and the following year became a Canadian citizen.

In Montréal Lamb worked with collector Martin Overland on a series of paintings evoking the nostalgia of Montréal, a vein he still mines today.

Lamb paints street and café scenes. He classifies them by subject, musicians, winter scenes, circus performers dancers, plein air and sports, among

others. Lamb's work is a little difficult to categorize. It is filled with people who have become characters in one way or another. He has studied the work of post First World War German painters who specialized in the grotesque. But, his simplified lines and sometimes his use of colour also echo naïve art.

Where those German painters who favoured grotesque exaggeration empl-

oyed a blunt stick, Lamb uses a fine point and whimsical humour.

"My art isn't really naïve. It is closer to the grotesque school which is a style of German painting. People have a tendency to want to show themselves at their best, bigger and more intelligent than they are. Look at my painting, *The Fourth Tenor*, three celebrated opera singers accompanied by a pig who ta-

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BERLIN, 2005, 14 x 10 in.



POSTHUMOUS, 2002, 10 x 8 in.



Steven Lamb Sees better with humour

res himself for a tenor simply because he is wearing a bow tie. I like to make fun of life, make people smile and laugh at human nature to help keep us from being too serious."

Lamb demonstrates his humour by contrasting nature with humanity. He likes to use animal life to provide levity. And so a ladybug will balance on an orchestra conductor's baton, a spider will spin his web on a violinist's bow or a penguin will tap his feet around a cellist. "Look at the penguins marching around the musicians who are sad because they don't have anyone to perform for except the animals who are applauding by marching around them automatically without having any idea of what is going on."

Lamb often works from the photographs he takes in Old Montréal. He works and reworks his material until it bears little resemblance to the originals. He starts by drawing an outline on paper and then transfers it to canvas or to canvas mounted on board or simply board itself. He will add texture to his acrylic undercoat by brushing in sand or using a spatula to spread paste.

When he is working on faces he starts with pastel pencils and then paints over them with watercolours. To provide depth to his acrylics he will use a swab dipped in alcohol to bring out highlights, all of which are techniques he learned in Europe.

His cityscapes evoke a sense of nostalgia for times past. "The atmosphere of Old Montréal reminds me of Bulgaria. I see the people on the street, the curious onlookers, the horse drawn carriages and the old postcards showing tramways, all of which could be in Sofia."

If Lamb likes to use cityscapes that are bathed in time, he dresses his subjects in a more modern manner. "The clothes

could be from the 19th or beginning of the 20th century, they are just old enough to give an impression of the past. To help express this sense of nostalgia that I feel myself that makes me feel that I am neither here nor there. My mother is Bulgarian and my father is Greek. I was brought up in both countries, emigrated to another country. I'm a citizen of the world."

Sometimes Lamb seems a little world weary, like a Humphrey Bogart character. Lamb's characters are always looking somewhere else, they never look you directly in the face. In *The Card Players*, one of the players is holding aces while looking at a bird perched on his hat, who can see all the other players' cards and who tells him what to do, in much the same way Jiminy Cricket is the voice of Pinocchio's conscience.

In effect these characters are looking at themselves, searching for what to say next, trying to give form to their thoughts, just as their creator works in silence trying to express himself.

A serious and prolific producer, Steven Lamb has painted close to 300 works in nine years, mainly in small formats. In the future Lamb hopes to experiment with ways of combining oils into his mixed media and he wants to get back to working in a larger format, on a new series of characters. █

Nadia Nadege