

An abstract painting featuring a green and yellow vase on the left containing yellow and white flowers. To the right is a dark, circular bowl. The background is a mix of dark and light colors with visible brushstrokes.

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Cover

THE RAZA GROUP

Interview

WILLIAM RONALD

Reviews

**HUDSON / REYNOLDS
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MONTREAL'S RAZA GROUP CANADA'S NEWEST ARTIST TRIO

By Lawrence Sabbath



The Raza Group/L. to R.: Francis Caprani, Gerald Pedros, Scott MacLeod/photo Sandrine Ferst

The Raza Group of Francis Caprani, Scott MacLeod and Gerald Pedros is an anomaly in Canadian art. Nothing quite like these adventurers in paint has ever been encountered in this country. They exhibit wherever their fancies and commissions take them, from local pool halls to foreign

galleries and museums. With no agent and no confining, contractual gallery arrangements, this trio has this year's exhibition calendar booked solid and their 1992 itinerary within and without Canada, is under active negotiation. MacLeod looks after public relations and promotion, Caprani studio matters

and Pedros business affairs, with expenses and profits from group operations split evenly.

Though no one would go so far as to consider them clones, their paintings do sometimes convey that singular impression. Caprani and Pedros have been working together for some 20

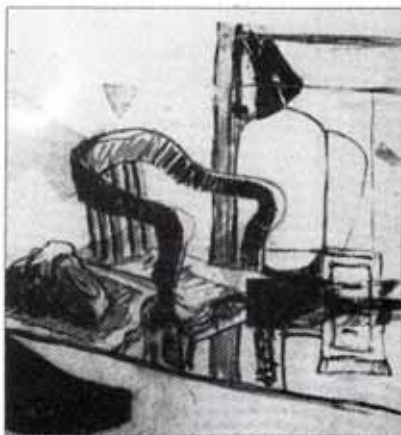
years, either co-signing their paintings, or exhibiting in solo and group shows as occasions demanded. When 21-year-old MacLeod joined them five years ago, there was triple co-signing for several shows. In 1988 they exhibited in Mexico City and from a slum area, Raza, they adopted the name *Raza Group*. They were invited back the following year.



Scott Huot, mixed media on canvas, 5' X 6'5

Though painting as a team on single pieces has since stopped, to this day those paintings have left critics, dealers and collectors often guessing about who was responsible for what part of the finished work, for they would freely alter creative elements by eliminating, painting over and adding to whatever another had started.

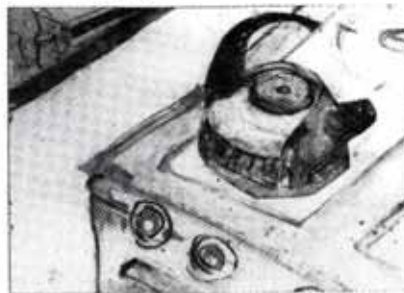
"We have always tried to work on and benefit from each other's strengths," observed Caprani, "and at the same time we share creative ideas. The public sometimes made a big deal about who did what in a painting, but like handwriting, we do see differently the emotions and other aspects of a painting. And yet, while constantly evolving, we have each become more distinct over the years, going our own stylistic ways. There's lots of loyalty here, we're good friends (Pedros has lived in St. Thomas for the last two years), kind of like a little gang or family."



Telephone, Chair, Boudoire, mixed media on paper, 5' X 5'

Non-conformist and unconventional in their artistic ways, the three nonetheless lead conservative, private lives. Caprani, 40, has a wife and three children, while Pedros, 39, is married with two children; MacLeod is single.

Their work methods are pragmatic. Rather than amassing a body of work and then seeking a show, explained Caprani, "we paint for a project when it's booked, even though we don't know in what style our painting might be at the time." For the trio, art is a job, with an acceptable journeyman element. That means they view art as having a valid existence outside conventional and expected places, such as galleries and museums and on collectors' walls.



1601 St. Laurent, mixed media on paper, 20" X 30"

That kind of freewheeling, on-the-road attitude, with little regard for institutional niceties and more interest in alternative sources of exposure, had found expression in the *Raza Group's* first public showing this year. They made 30 paintings (10 each) for *Le Swimming*, a recently opened pool-room and bar on trendy St. Lawrence Boulevard, or *The Main* as it's refer-

ed to by the literati and by dining aficionados.

The site is a renovated, second-floor warehouse, a 5600-foot rectangular room with a bar and 10 state-of-the-art pool and two snooker tables. Facing the entrance is a raised bank of eight video screens, operating à la Nam June Paik and on the same level, spotlit paintings on either side running around the room. The paintings are on masonite panels in two sizes, 20" x 48" and 20" x 42", in single, double and triple clusters. They are in mixed media, mostly figurative compositions with pop culture heroes and heroines and a few self-portraits thrown in. All the paintings are in the familiarly vivid, spontaneous and contemporary, loosley expressionistic mode for which these artists are best-known, though the immediacies of a social and political comment often present in the earlier work of Caprani and Pedros, are noticeably absent here.



Leslie's Kitchen, mixed media on canvas, 5' X 5'

Club co-owner Maurice Holder said that "we commissioned *The Raza Group* because we know their work, they have a good rating and their price was reasonable. We think the result is great." Said the three, the money "paid back the \$10,000 we personally spent on our show in Cologne last October, and then some. This kind of commissioned work is part of our future, so we would like more."

They are in good company. There's a long tradition of tavern, saloon and bar decorations, often with reclining ladies-of-the-night in diaphanous déshabille. If one can judge by early Hollywood movies of the American

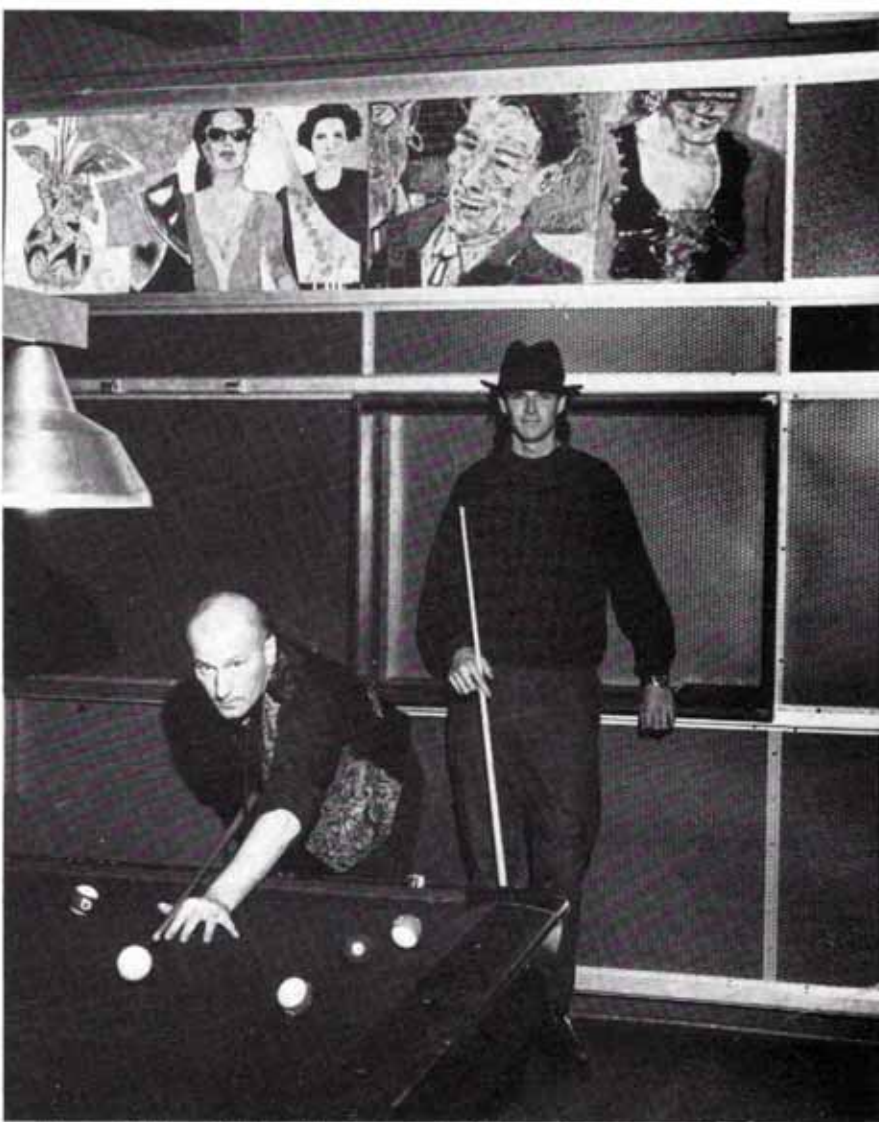
West, those artists were a busy lot. "If Michelangelo can get away with painting in a church," remarked Caprani, "we can do the same in a poolroom. There's nothing different here from a gallery exhibition or subway art. We're putting paintings into space where people can see them."

"No, it's not debasing at all. I wouldn't show this work if I didn't like it. This was a very specific commission. The owners were interested in Vogue-type fashion images, considering the people who would be here. Our paintings continue the horizontal line and the figurative themes of the video screens. Purists might say we're doing something unholy, but it's just another way of making a living at what we do. It takes us out of the gallery trap as being the only way of selling our paintings."

Scott was of the opinion that "we have provided a visual decorum, enhanced the idea of a pool hall and offered greater accessibility to the public, for a longer period of time than is possible with a gallery. If Christo can wrap islands in pink fabric, we can do pool halls."

Pedros received blueprints of the room by mail and did not see the completed work until later: "I'm used to seeing my work in galleries, on pristine white walls and not fighting with the environment. I might have made my paintings brighter had I seen this room which has so many competing objects around. But it does work for what it is. It's part of the entertainment, not unlike big frescos in a church. I like commissioned work. You take what you have learned about how to make an image for mass consumption and maybe you can explore that further. No, it's not demeaning work. This was a dialogue between me living in a small town and an upscale club patron."

A few years back the trio showed together at Galerie Samuel Lallouz as a group. But time has been moving the three stylistically away from each other, according to Caprani. Pedros agreed: "These paintings clearly show we are going in different directions, especially Francis and me. He



Le Swimming(detail) pool hall installation/L. to R. Francis Caprani, Scott MacLeod/photo by Daniel Collins

works his surfaces in a way that's different from me. He is more de Kooning, while I am more from the Matisse school in composition and with large blocks of color. As for Scott, he held his ground with us in Cologne and is really going out on his own."

That eight-day exhibition in Cologne consisted of 15 paintings (five each) at the Ernst Brandt Gallery, in a downtown art area" noted Pedros, "somewhat like Toronto's Yorkville, with David Hockney showing a few doors away. Posters of us were everywhere and we would be stopped on the street: "Aren't you the guys in the posters?"

The Canada Council turned down their applications for funding and they were too late for a Quebec government

or a corporate grant. The Canadian cultural attaché gave a talk at the vernissage to a hundred spectators, but there were no sales, and no newspaper coverage they know of. The exhibition was organized by a Russian-speaking acquaintance who is working on other exhibitions for this year.

"We loved the experience," said Scott and Pedros, "our work was more flamboyant and brighter than the art in other galleries and our Canadian prices were comparatively lower than European prices. Meeting a lot of people was stimulating. But we also found out how few Canadians were going outside their boundaries and that they were not a force at all."

In answer to criticisms that are



Gerald Pedros, *Self Portrait*, acrylic on wood, 22" X 42" / colour courtesy Raza Graphics

voiced about Canadian artists running off to Europe and elsewhere, Pedros had a ready reply: "Sure it takes more time and energy and money to exhibit outside Canada, but this is a small country and out there are other cultures, with feedback different from what we get here. We do sell our paintings in Canada and we have collectors but part of being an artist is, yes, to have impossible dreams, to dream large."

Next stop for those 15 paintings shown at Cologne could be Düsseldorf, later or two museums in Leningrad, if their Russian connection can finalize arrangements. "If Coca-Cola and McDonald's can sponsor Michael Jackson on a world tour," said Caprani, "why not us?"

Meanwhile, there's a joint project in Mexico that begins June 1 at Galerie Simon Blais in Montreal, for two weeks. *Totem de Pierre* is the French name of the Quebec-Mexico exhibition that L'Atelier de l'Île, a print workshop in Val David, spent three years organizing. Funding is from The Canada Council and External Affairs departments, Mexico through its embassy in Ottawa and from Quebec's departments of cultural affairs and international affairs.

Caprani, Pedros and Scott are members of the Atelier and are participating as individual members and not as *The Raza Group*. They and seven

other Atelier members and one Mexican printmaker who worked there last year, have made one print each for 11 poems which they selected from among 20 written by Benito Luis Diaz. The Mexican poet wrote them about his experiences in Val David where he gave readings two years ago.

Each print will face its matching poem in eight numbered albums. The prints are in grand format, 30" x 40" (76 x 100 cm) and are in a broad variety of techniques — woodblock, etching, lithography, silkscreen, etc., some with hand-applied mixed media. An illustrated catalogue also accompanies the collection. Taking part from the Atelier are Bonnie Baxter, Paul Ballard, Catherine Aubertot, Jocelyne Aird-Bélanger, Gilles Boisvert, Kittie Bruneau, Jocelyne Petit and Roberto Ferreyra who made his print while at the Atelier.

Under the title of *Totem de Piedra*, the collection will be shown at the Museo Nacional de la Estampa in Mexico City from July 3 to August 15 and for six weeks from August 23 at the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo in Morélia. Later, if negotiations go well, the collection could be on display in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver and Chicago as well.

Beyond that is a *Raza Group* idea that could well be one of the most daring and visionary in many years, a homage to the Group of Seven. Pedros,

Scott and Caprani readily admit that "when we were young we made fun of the Group of Seven. Only later did we realize they were brilliant painters. And now we have this old fashioned idea of paying homage to them." They also admit the dangers, "for we have never focused on landscape, simply because we never had the time. We understand the reverence for them, so what we are proposing means going into the big den of guys who established the Canadian landscape. "We certainly don't want to paint the way they did. We would retrace their routes and show how the landscape they painted could be interpreted in a contemporary manner, in the spirit of what they did as outdoor painters.

"We need time to work out the logistics for a show, perhaps for the summer of '92, to find sponsors, maybe CNR or Via Rail, as was done for the Group of Seven. Every summer we (Francis and Pedros) go on canoe trips, do on-the-spot-studies, like the Seven and then work them over in our studios. "With some railway support, we would exhibit coast to coast what each of us has done. That's a big challenge, but we're working on it." □

Author:
Lawrence Sabbath is a freelance Montreal art critic.