

Notebook

by Robert Fulford
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Saturday Night



If we can't
save the whales,
maybe
we can't save
ourselves

Something in the modern imagination responds to the whale as a metaphor of kindness and peace. The whale is as destructive of other creatures as any mammal but in our time we've come to see it not as the terrifying leviathan of the Bible or the monstrous opponent of Captain Ahab but as a gentle and defenceless giant, poetic rather than frightening. You can buy records of whales singing, and picture books full of lovely drawings of whales. There is now a romance of the whale.

Michael Berman, the Toronto artist in the picture on the next page, represents in her work and in her conversation this view of whales.

She and her friend Douglas Pringle, the composer, spent some time examining killer whales close up in the Pacific Ocean off northern British Columbia. The result is a series of remarkable paintings that were recently exhibited for the first time at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto.

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Berman believes she communed with the whales. She sang to them—and they, she says, sang to her. The whales took over some part of her personality. Berman is given to self-dramatization, and she likes to say things like: "The images that have seized me are powerful, they evoke lost passions, truthful visions of mankind, they reveal the instinctual pulse of our being."

Her enormous whale pictures—they are as large as eight feet by sixteen feet—are done in a commercial style, with an airbrush. But they have an eloquence and a sense

of pity that rise above the usual limitations of the style.

Berman saw her whales alive but the ones she paints are dead or half dead—either being sliced up by Eskimos or hung in a sling inside the freight section of an airplane, on the way to public display in a tank for tourists. It is this vision of the whale as doomed and defeated that obsesses her—not the grand, intelligent mammal plunging through the ocean but the beached, killed, or imprisoned victim of human carelessness.

In their death or distress Berman's whales become symbols of vulnerability; and this is what links them to humans. In the twentieth century, men and whales—both for the first time—face the possibility of extinction. People who love whales (and Berman has done some film work for the Project Jonah organization) sense the relationship between the world's largest mammal and the world's most developed mammal. There's a kind of desperation and poignancy in the way many of us talk and think about whales and perhaps this comes from a sense that if we can't save the whales we can't save ourselves. The way Berman catches this combination of pity, self-pity, and dread is what makes her work memorable.