



—Star photo by Reg Innell

"I HAVE suffered over these paintings," says 29-year-old Michaela Berman of the air-brushed depictions of dead whales she produced following a trip to Black

Fish (Killer Whale) Sound. "There is anguish and ecstasy in my work," she says. The paintings can be seen in exhibition that opened today at Isaacs Gallery.

Provocative whale paintings point out artist's obsession

By GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Oceans of Blood is the provocative title of an exhibition of provocative paintings that opened today at the Isaacs Gallery, 832 Yonge St.

The paintings, enormous air-brushed depictions of dead whales, are the work of 29-year-old artist and film-maker Michaela Berman. Miss Berman, as obviously in the grip of an obsession as was the Ancient Mariner, sees it as her task to make concrete a rhapsodic saga of pain, beauty, other worldly intelligence and mystical belief that the whale seems to embody for her.

Nobody could argue with her qualifications for the job. Miss Berman's painstaking pictures are the product of the kind of first-hand experience that most of us would be happy to forgo.

Driven from Toronto to Alert Bay, B.C. by a force she has decided to call "fate", Miss Berman and her companion, musician Douglas Pringle, after living with the village's Kwakiutl Indians for about 10 days, set sail in what the artist calls a "meagre boat" for—they weren't sure where.

Suddenly, as they say in novels, "the water was raging", the sea was "deep and profound", the night, black. "We didn't know whether we were going to make it," Miss Berman recalled breathlessly. "There we were in this boat, surrounded by whales. It was ecstatic. I had visions. I changed."

The upshot of all this is that the whales, apparently acting in some concerted way, guided the artist and Pringle to Crawcroft Island, a not very hospitable speck right in the middle of Black Fish (Killer Whale) Sound. "We lived there for three months—like Adam and Eve. The whales got to know us," said Miss Berman. "Douglas had an instrument and I sang."

"Something happened to me up there," she went on. "Something that gave me discipline (before this I was a minimal artist). Now Goya talks to me. And Grunewald."

When she returned to Toronto, Miss Berman taught herself to use the airbrush and set to work. "There is anguish and ecstasy in my work," she says. "I lived these paintings. They were my mission."

The four paintings that make up the show took two years to complete. "They have nothing at all to do with contemporary super-realism," the artist insists—an opinion not shared by this reviewer.

And yet the artist's special pleading is compelling. "I have suffered over these paintings," she proclaims. "I am a tragic heroine."