

The one and only John Scott

VISUAL ARTS

Gary Michael Dault

Although artist John Scott had begun to sell briskly even during the opening-night party at the recently established Nicholas Metivier Gallery, his current solo exhibition of new drawings — his first at this rather prestigious Toronto gallery — already bears so many red dots on the walls, it looks as if the whole place has come down with the chicken pox.

It makes sense, given that Toronto collectors finally seem to have figured out that this clearly legendary draughtsman-painter, winner of a Toronto Arts Award and recipient of the country's first Governor-General's Award for Visual Arts, is the genuine article — and a hot ticket.

Scott is one of those truly original artists whose work, until now, invariably struck people as both desirable and off-putting at the same time. Labouring at his difficult and yet instantly compelling body of drawings (most of them remarkably grubby and distressed, as well as severe and troubling) since the mid-1970s, Scott has survived repeated and alternating waves of both astonishing professional success ("This is the third or fourth time I've been an overnight sensation," he told me recently), and crushing and indeed almost insurmountable personal difficulties.

In the 30 years I've known him, in the 30 years we've been friends, I've seen his big, forceful, sociologically acute, culturally searching drawings acquired by every major museum in Canada (while he was still in his 30s). And, by contrast, I've watched him suffer from years of neglect and the sort of critical eclipse that almost amounts to abuse.

I've seen him contract and surmount Bell's palsy, watched in horror as his body gave way — mysteriously — to osteoporosis, crumpling him rapidly into the shape of the letter C and dealing him an immense amount of physical pain as it robbed him of four or five inches of his former height.

John Scott is the only person I've ever known who was actually hit by lightning — twice. I don't even want



A drawing of Stephen Hawking, one of Scott's heroes, is desirable and off-putting at the same time.

to think about the number of motorcycle accidents he's had: It's entirely appropriate that one of the works in his current exhibition is his beloved Suzuki Katana motorcycle, painted black, splashed with blood-like red paint, and then bedecked with roses — the motorcycle as votive offering, as cautionary tale, as memorial, as monument.

All the while, the drawing, the making, has never stopped. John's hand is always in motion. If he's not in his studio working, he makes hundreds of little gnarled drawings on wet cocktail napkins at the Horseshoe Tavern or one of his other haunts.

There's nobody like John Scott and maybe that's just as well. I accompanied him once to the hospital so that he could have a portion of his skin removed in order to dry it, stretch it (I guess "tan it" is the term), tattoo it with concentration



Twister: messy, but selling briskly.

Canada's first winner of a Governor General Award for Visual Arts is a hot ticket and an overnight sensation — again.

camp-like numbers and mount it in a vitrine — all as part of an elaborate and agonizing Holocaust memorial work he was fabricating.

It was at a time of his greatest physical discomfort, too, that he made a work that turned out to be the biggest draw the National Gallery of Canada ever had: his famous *Trans Am Apocalypse #3* — a stock Pontiac Trans Am which he roughly painted over with thick black paint and into the turgid surface of which he proceeded to score, with a nail, the entire Book of Revelation from the Bible. The piece was almost a kind of monastic work, involving as much penance as pleasure.

But, as Nietzsche assured us, that which does not kill us makes us stronger. This current exhibition is a big show of new drawings, many of which are among the finest things Scott has ever done. Given the fact that he was a Windsor, Ont., street kid who dragged himself up on the streets of neighbouring Detroit (I guess it was cooler across the river), Scott's intellectual achievements have always been impressive. (Say something to him about Heidegger and see what happens.) And the show reflects them: He draws his heroes — who are often afflicted and divided: Stephen Hawking (one of the best drawings I've ever seen from Scott), art guru and mystic Joseph Beuys (as Oedipus, with his eyes torn out), artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (early poverty and death-imbued fame intermixed), Paterson Ewen (whose career fell into two totally opposed halves), Bruce Wayne/Batman. It's hard to say what the wan portrait of Lord Black is doing here. But everything else in the show is raw, fierce, scary and visionary (including a superb wall-sized study called *Heartless (Icarus)*, of a black screaming nuclear bomber heading straight up).

And everything is messy, really, really, really messy. Because John simply hasn't time to be careful. He's too busy being real.

John Scott shows at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery to Dec. 31, 451 King St. W., 416-205-9000.