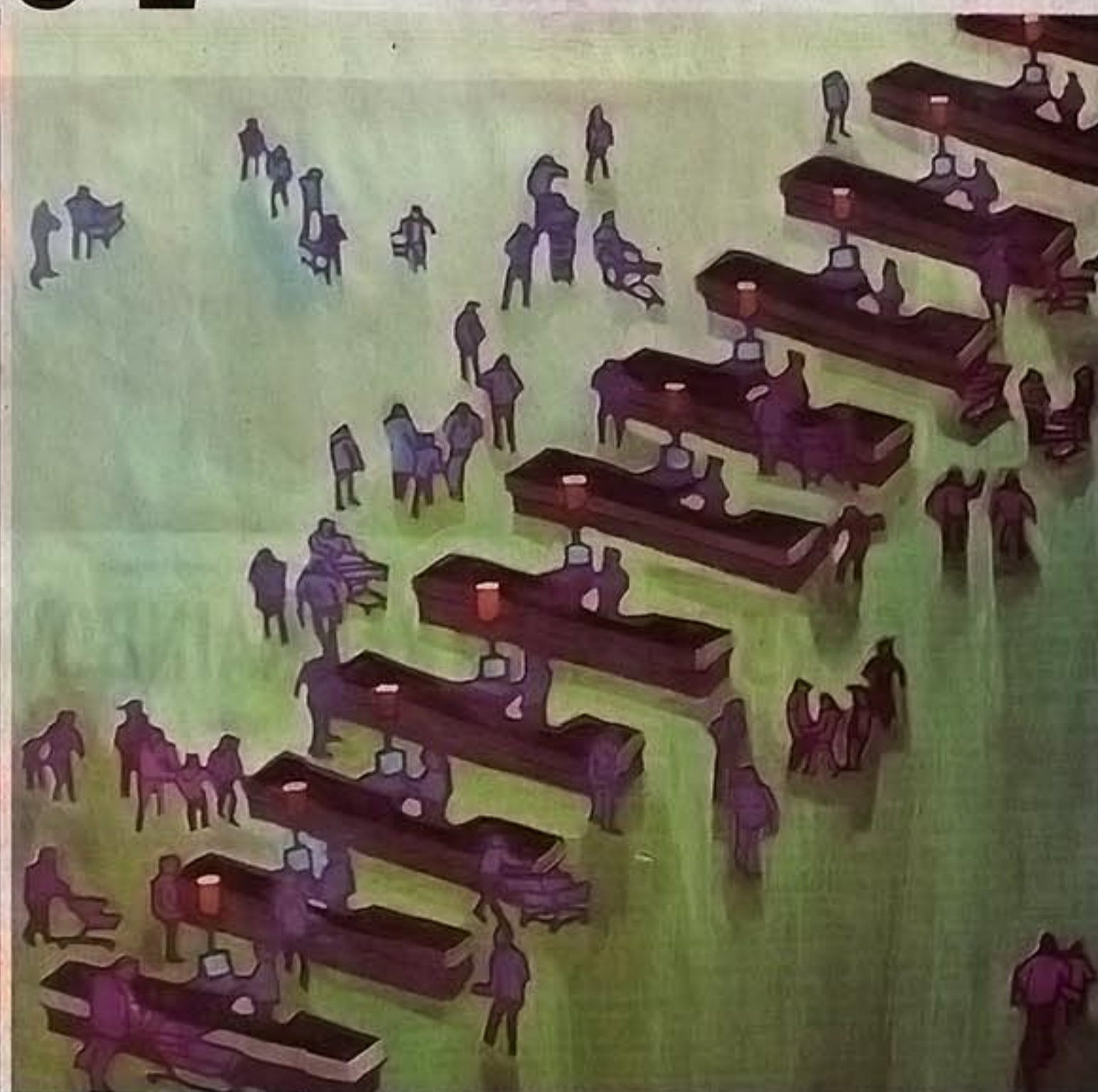
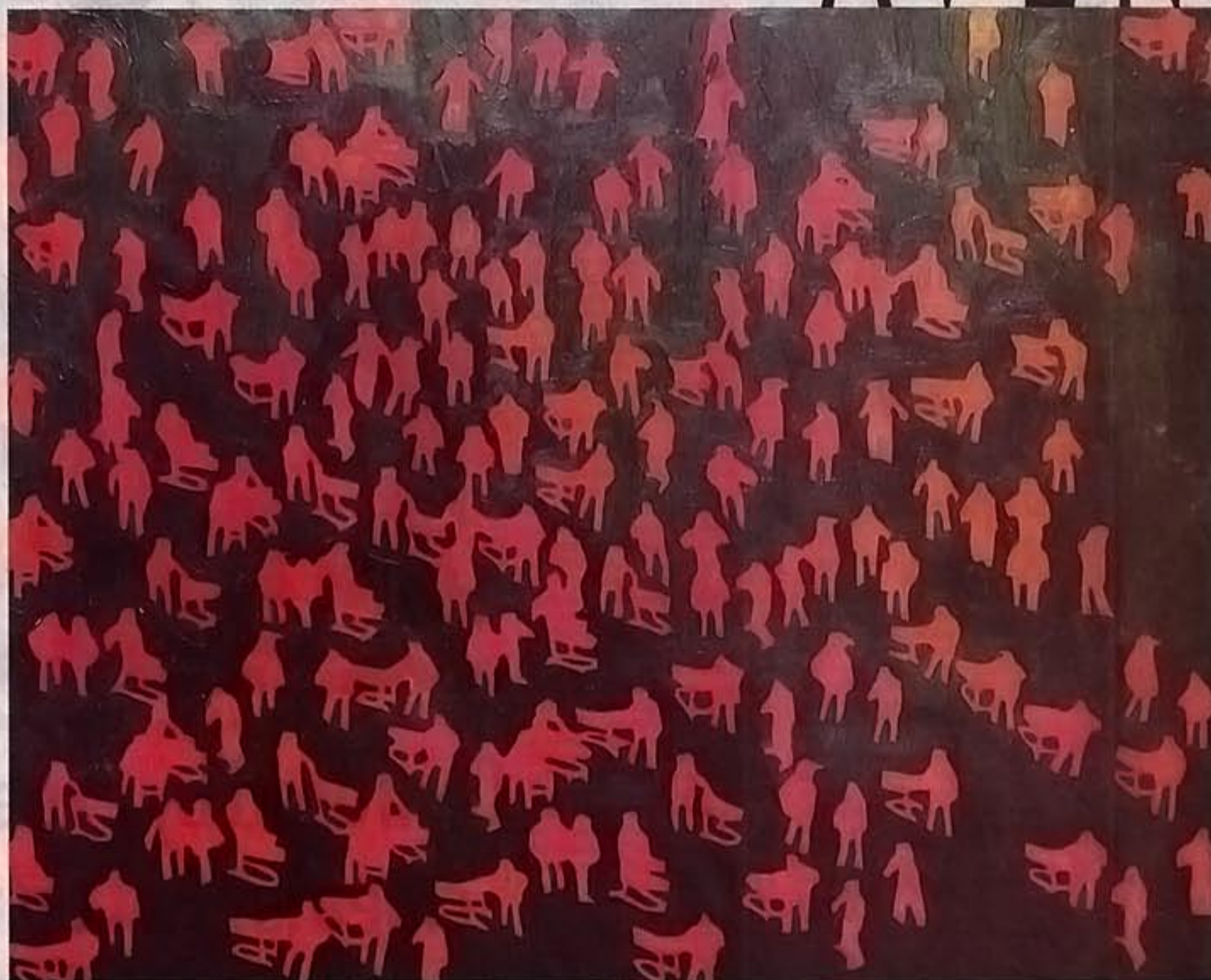


Questions & Artists

AVENUE



LIKE THE GROUP OF SEVEN IN AISLE SEVEN



Last week, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that consumer spending had stalled. But even if we are spending less, it'll be a long time before retail stores fade from their central role in the patterns of North American daily life. Jack Bishop, a young New Brunswick painter, recently turned his brush to exploring those retail-therapy routines. Now, with a show of his artwork on in Halifax, Bishop talks to Leah Sandals about that oh-so-persistent call of the mall.

Q In the past you've painted standard portraits and landscapes. What inspired this series on retail environments?

A At Christmas time I was doing a lot of shopping with my girlfriend, and I was overwhelmed with the way it gets with the crowds. I've never been a very good shopping buddy with her, but particularly not that day!

As a response, I thought of making a funny paint-

ing of a bunch of people shopping. But rather than making it realistic, I wanted to use repeat pattern, something that could underline the patterns of people's shopping behaviours.

Q New Brunswick artist Glenn Hall has called your work "Tom Thomson at Wal-Mart." What's your reaction to that?

A I'm really humbled by it. I did consider a lot of the Group of Seven's work in the way they used

thick paint application. And I think in many ways that the Group of Seven is the last period of art that a lot of people understand. Here some of those ideas about land have been applied to the retail landscape, or the geography of nowhere, as some people have put it.

Q The way you paint retail environments can read as a critique of consumerism. Yet the art market is also quite consumerist, and your paintings are part of that market. How do you resolve this?

A I think I just had to accept a while ago that because of the way I worked — having a full-time studio practice — showing and selling the work is super-important. Also, I think of these works more as satire than as social realism or heavily political work — because in the end these are paintings, and

they take this form of a precious art object.

Q You used to work in retail. How does that affect the way you made these artworks?

A I actually worked at Kent Building Supplies in the paint department. The fact that I mixed paint for that job brings things full circle in some ways. When I'm mixing colours for my paintings, I already know certain formulas, like two parts magenta and three parts black, from that job. The titles also tore a page from the intercom of the store: "Greater selection, Guaranteed Satisfaction" and all that.

Q These paintings are based on photographs taken in stores. Did you ever run into problems doing that?

A I did take some photographs, mostly as reference for patterns. I'd just go inside the Atlantic

Superstore; they have a food court upstairs, which helps because I'm working with kind of an aerial view. I'm inconspicuous as possible because it's not exactly kosher to be doing these kinds of things. Employees have definitely asserted their authority when they've seen me photographing. But the thing is, I even develop the photographs at Superstore in their lab there, so I'm a customer in a lot of ways.

Q Do you feel discouraged about the levels of consumption in our society?

A I don't know if I feel discouraged. I think it's a good thing that people have the kind of access to food that we do now. We didn't have that a hundred years ago. My goal is to make a kind of modern history painting, something with a narrative or mythology everyone can understand. Some people might be able to look

at it and read the image in terms of "I can remember waiting in line at this box store clearance event." And the bright colours bring it back to a contemporary style, so people can enter in that way, too.

Q What's next for you?

A I've been collecting real estate magazines, those mass-produced flyers with small listings of houses. And I've made a few small collages by cutting out all the houses and turning it into my own gridded-off suburbia. It's been on the shelf for a while ... but I've got a motto that I don't have to use all my good ideas at once.

■ Jack Bishop: ... Customer Service, Please continues to April 18 at Gallery Page and Strange in Halifax. Visit www.pageandstrange.com for more information.

National Post

Clockwise from top left: Jack Bishop's *For Sale, No Purchase Necessary, Variety Pack and Hot Deals* COURTESY GALLERY PAGE AND STRANGE