

Jack Shadbolt

Scott WATSON

Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, 1990
243 pp., 110 col., 110 b/w illus., \$75.00
Deluxe edition, \$575.00

The trade edition of *Jack Shadbolt* was released in the fall of 1990, along with a deluxe limited edition containing an obligatory signed print. The luxury edition, especially, prompted a good deal of promotional foot-stamping by the publishers. An advertising flyer I received in the mail (because I live in Vancouver and subscribe to *VISA?*) touted the volume as "Canada's art book of the year." It also advised that this was a special "opportunity to reserve a copy of an exceptional collector's edition." Maybe. But if I believed all the claims made in the brochure, I would be more than unusually naive about the ways of the art world. The flyer asserted that:

Jack Shadbolt needs no introduction to anyone who knows and loves Canadian art. Defiantly individualistic yet classically trained, a master of colour, form and painterly expression, he has been one of this country's most important artists for over six decades. ... Only the cooperation of the artist has allowed this edition to be created. It will include as a frontispiece a signed, numbered and hand-coloured print from the artist. ... This edition will be strictly limited, and is offered exclusively by advance subscription. It will not be available for direct sale to the public.

The brochure's message was familiar enough. Shadbolt's "defiant individualism" was the guarantee of his greatness as an artist; the artist was consenting to having his greatness packaged and sold to a select group of art lovers; and only those art lovers with deep pockets should bother to apply for a gilt-edged share in the artist's genius.



Buried beneath this promotional boilerplate was a reference to the author of the book. After informing prospective buyers that *Jack Shadbolt* was "lavish in its use of colour," the flyer added, almost as an afterthought, that the book was "distinguished by a substantial and discerning text by critic Scott Watson." Again the message was familiar. The publishers were declaring that Watson's words were of no more importance (and possibly less, if I understand the brochure correctly) than the colourplates being offered up for the delectation of distracted readers.

An author's subjugation by the publicity machine of a purblind publisher is not an attractive sight. In this case it is particularly unenlightening, for the hyperbolic language of the brochure is bound to have caused some readers to doubt the value of Watson's text. The worse for them. As it turns out, the text of *Jack Shadbolt* is just as advertised, "substantial and discerning," thus confounding the subsidiary role assigned it in the flyer. Moreover, the predilections of the author contradict the

generally rosy claims made in Shadbolt's name. "The reader will notice," Watson writes in the preface, "that I am much more fascinated with the artist's darker side than I am with the charming and amusing artist he also sometimes is." It is a fair warning to any reader tempted to scan the book for affirmative assertions about Shadbolt's love of the British Columbia landscape. Watson delivers on his promise to plumb the caliginous side of Shadbolt's artistic practice. Moreover, he does so in a way that complements the artist's own sombre and obsessive libidinal themes, digging deep into the fetid compost of Shadbolt's pictorial imagination. The intelligence of Watson's digging is, to my mind, what counts in the book; and the "lavish colour" that surrounds the text, alluring though it may be, is merely so much decoration. (By this I obviously do not mean to denigrate the paintings, nor even particularly to criticize the glossy reproductive purposes to which they have been put, but rather to get the priorities straight.)

The book's structure is chronological. Watson follows Shadbolt from Shoeburyness, England, where the artist was born in 1909, to Victoria, B.C., where his family moved in 1914, through his initial art training and encounters with Emily Carr around 1930, right up to the present day. Like Carr, who trained in San Francisco, London and Paris, Shadbolt chose to work abroad as the best means of furthering his development as an artist. In 1937, he signed up for the inaugural class of the Euston Road School—William Coldstream and Victor Pasmore were among its faculty—and in 1938 he moved on to Paris to study with Othon Friesz and later with André Lhote. Shadbolt returned to Canada before the outbreak of war and enlisted in 1942. Although he was not appointed an official war artist, as he had hoped he might be, he did produce a substantial body of war-related work during his travels around Canada and England at the war's end. After the war, he

studied for a time at the Art Students' League in New York, and in the late 1950's and early 1960's he took time off from teaching in Vancouver to paint in Provence and Greece.

As long as Watson fixes on Shadbolt's peregrinations and other biographical details, the book can be described as solid and workmanlike. Once in a while, however, there is a glimpse of what is to come. Writing about Shadbolt's "disjointed" aspirations for his painting in 1944, Watson observes:

In the very act of imagining an integrated work of art, [Shadbolt] saw things as fragments and partial, as if the works of Dante, Donne and Blake were not whole, but multiaspected, to be reassembled at will. This confusion, which appeared whenever he was despondent, resulted in trying to gather in himself all his empathetic reactions to works of art as if they could reconstitute themselves in him. (p.33)

The passage refers to a statement prepared by Shadbolt for an exhibition of his work at Eaton's department store in Toronto. The artist wrote of "the austere narrative of Dante, the incisive mysticism of John Donne, the burning innocence of Blake" as paralleling in literature what he hoped to achieve in painting—not forgetting, of course, "the 'terrible crystal' of Manley Hopkins..., the mood of Chinese poems and the satirical, yet tender romance of Don Quixote." This literary stew is a measure of Shadbolt's ambition and reading at the time; bathetic, no doubt, but preferable to a recipe with no ingredients at all. Let there be no misunderstanding, Shadbolt is a pedant. The book allows us to gauge the range of his thinking; what is wise as well as hare-brained in his writings.

Beginning with "Form, Flux and Energy" and "Images of Power," two chapters appearing about midway through the book, Watson shifts his emphasis from recitation to interpretation. What chiefly interests him are Shadbolt's paintings since 1960, when the

artist had just turned fifty, and the force of their sexualized imagery. "In returning to some of the motifs and themes of the fifties," Watson writes of some paintings produced around 1970, "[Shadbolt] unleashed a stream of sexually violent images. The works were ferocious, giving vent once again to Shadbolt's vision of the dark forces that lurk beneath the surfaces men and women exhibit to each other." (p.119) Watson interprets the central female figure in *Bride*, a large triptych executed over a four-year period from 1970-74, as both a sacrificial victim and a fertility fetish, an image of tribal restriction and erotic longing. He comments that in paintings like *Bride*, the artist attracts the viewer to the work by means of a richly ornamented surface. By the time the viewer has begun to comprehend what is being represented—the sheer erotic violence of the imagery—it is too late to turn away.

Watson's accounts of a work such as *Bride* are the fullest and most convincing written to date on Shadbolt's prodigious output. They are accompanied by relevant references to Marshall McLuhan and Joseph Beuys, to mention two of the prophets of modernity adduced in the book, as well as the likely sources of Shadbolt's imagination. Watson is mistaken, however, to have passed up an opportunity to explain his own theoretical position. As readers, we have a right to expect a reckoning of his intellectual coordinates. Are they post-Freudian or post-Jungian? In proposing a psycho-sexual interpretation of Shadbolt's mature paintings, does he lean toward Jacques Lacan or Leo Bersani? It is possible to guess at the answers, but we should not be required to do so.

The book will generate debate among those interested in Northwest Coast native art. Watson goes to some lengths to demonstrate the complexity of Shadbolt's relationship to native culture. He does not try to disguise Shadbolt's early attitudes to native subject matter, his patronizing view of it as both "romantic and pathetic." At one point Watson

comments that "[Shadbolt] saw the contrast between past greatness, as embodied in the artifacts in the provincial museum, and the present poverty of reserve life as startling and tragic but inevitable." (pp. 6-7)

Nevertheless, it is also true that Shadbolt (like Carr) looked to native art to substantiate what was most vital in his own work. Native art functioned as a form of authentication for his own modernist endeavours. By appropriating aspects of the native heritage and finding continuities between it and Westcoast modernism, Shadbolt contrived to escape—at least partially—the European paradigm. It might be argued that there was a basic contradiction in his attempt to have it both ways; in the process, what was native was bound to be subsumed beneath what was modern. The present generation of First Nations people, determined to preserve their cultural heritage and their land, would certainly recognize the flaw in the construction. And so does Watson. His text is sensitive not only to the artist himself, but also to the environment in which he worked. It is a shame that some of its sensitivity did not rub off on the book's publicists.

JOHN O'BRIAN

University of British Columbia