

THE CRISIS OF ABSTRACTION
IN CANADA

The 1950s

Denise LECLERC

with a technical essay by Marion H.

BARCLAY

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Denise Leclerc, the National Gallery's curator of Later Canadian Art, who organized the exhibition *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*, purports to "pay tribute to the creativity manifested by Canadian artists in the course of a singularly rich and productive period in the artistic life of the nation," which has previously been neglected in the history of Canadian art. She attempts to redress the isolation that the artists themselves had felt during that time by bringing together work from across the country to effect a synthesis.

The author offers the caveat (perhaps to circumvent the type of criticism often levelled at the National Gallery for favouring some regions of the country over others) that she did not set out to construct a complete history of abstract art in Canada in the 1950's, but chose instead to focus on the more daring experiments in specific locales. Indeed the *leit-motif* of the catalogue is experimentation. It also contains an excellent and accessible essay by Marion Barclay, Senior Conservator of Paintings and Contemporary Art at the National Gallery, entitled "Materials Used in Certain Canadian Abstract Paintings of the 1950s." In addition many of the catalogue entries carry

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technical notes concerning such materials, and explanations as to how their use affected the formal aspects of the works.

As Denise Leclerc intended, the catalogue succeeds in bringing together works from across the country (excepting the Maritime provinces - one assumes that no daring experimentation was going on there). This is its strength and major contribution. Whereas many Canadian art historians have been apt to explore narrow pockets of enquiry, focusing on individual artists and regions, here was an opportunity to see familiar and lesser-known works in a broader national context and under the critical light of the 1990's - something that the National Gallery of Canada, with its national mandate and relatively rich resources, is uniquely positioned to do.

Its appearance is timely. Perhaps the appeal of this period is now a matter of nostalgia. There is a certain humanity in-

herent in the aging surfaces of Duco and Lucite 44, applied with such vigour forty years ago, that speaks directly to us in the 1990's - they bear the marks of having "passed through time." Alternatively, now that so much time has elapsed since these works were created, we will have perhaps gained a new objectivity with which to view them. On an international level, much attention has been bestowed upon the 1950's over the past decade; *The Crisis of Abstraction* itself has been in the planning since the early eighties. In 1982, the then-modest British periodical *Artscribe* devoted three issues to the fifties (and later the sixties and seventies) in order to present some of the essential facts of the period and to combine this history with a critical reevaluation. In 1987 Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery undertook a reappraisal of the New York School in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, followed a year later by *Les Années cinquante*, mounted by the Centre Georges Pompidou, which typically took a multi-disciplinary, multi-national and encyclopedic approach to the decade. Recently in 1990, the papers from the "Hot Paint for Cold War" symposium held at the University of British Columbia in 1986 were published under the title *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*. This put artistic activity in at least one part of Canada into an international context.

Now a reevaluation of the period is occurring farther afield. For example, the Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand, mounted an exhibition devoted to the 1950's in 1992, and the Powerhouse

Museum in Sydney, Australia, recently featured 1950's design. In Canada, touring contemporaneously with *The Crisis of Abstraction* is an exhibition organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery entitled "Achieving the Modern: Abstract Painting and Design in the 1950s." The forthcoming catalogue presents the decade somewhat differently from Leclerc's: it is a more collaborative venture with essays by the curator Robert McKaskell ("Changing Academics: The Rise of Abstraction in Canadian Painting"), art historian Sandra Paikowsky ("Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting"), and two essays on design by Virginia Wright and Allan Collier ("Design in Central and Eastern Canada" and "Design in Western Canada"). Its definition of what constitutes "modern" is significantly broader than that offered in the National Gallery show.

The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s catalogue ostensibly divides itself into three sections: an essay of the same title by Denise Leclerc; the catalogue entries; and Marion Barclay's essay, with appendices and bibliography. But in the course of reading, I found the tripartite division occurred somewhat differently due to the type of information imparted in each section; that is, Leclerc's essay split itself between the introductory material and the three "regional sections," with the catalogue constituting the third section.

Leclerc's essay is well-researched and cogent. Framed as a historical narrative, it is also concerned with the socio-political and economic background of each region represented in the exhibition. Le-

clerc has kept abreast of all of the most recent literature in her field. She defines her terms at the outset, and by including a short history of abstract art in Canada prior to 1950 provides a useful historical context for what follows.

The next "section" as per my division, deals with the three regions as defined by the author and roughly reflects the layout of the exhibition as it was installed in Ottawa: that is, Montréal, Toronto, and the West (Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary and Vancouver). Leclerc admits this to be an arbitrary division and I think as an organizing principle for the book it is an unfortunate one. For one thing, it is never made explicit why the Maritime provinces are not included, and for another, I think Vancouver's unique position on the Pacific Rim with its "British intellect, Oriental sensitivity, and Mediterranean...hedonism" (p.73) argues for a discussion independent of the three prairie provinces.

I assume that the relative space devoted to each city reflects the amount of significant and "daring experimentation" that took place there over the decade. For example, significant attention had been given to Montréal and Toronto which does not however take us much beyond the existing literature. And are we to believe that there was a death of experimental artists working in Winnipeg in the fifties, when L. LeMoine FitzGerald is held up as the sole representative? Do artists such as Tony Tascona, Don Reichert, McCleary Drope, or Bruce Head not deserve a mention? No one would dispute FitzGerald's preeminence on the Winnipeg art scene even into the fifties,

but his methodical and highly personal approach to abstraction which had evolved out of years of representational work seems out of place here without consideration of others of his generation. I would have felt more comfortable with comparable attention being paid to Bertram Brooker (albeit, a lesser artist) or if Lawren S. Harris had been included in the relevant sections. Hortense Gordon and Jock Macdonald were also born before the turn of the century, but their place within the orbit of Painters Eleven makes their inclusion here unquestionable.

While the luxury of viewing the exhibition allows for one type of synthesis to which the author was aspiring - an experience which permits the viewer to make cross-comparisons and draw her own conclusions - the catalogue is less successful in this respect. I am disappointed that the opportunity has been missed whereby certain critical issues could have been addressed and artistic activity in the fifties evaluated across this broad country truly as a whole, rather than as a string of isolated pockets of activity, seemingly unrelated to each other. Leclerc cites critic Rodolphe de Repentigny's observation in 1955 that "[e]xchanges between the most dynamic regions of the country in terms of artistic activity are not yet significant enough to allow an enriching osmosis to take place" (p.78). Yet artists were known to each other across provincial boundaries, as the author points out on numerous occasions, through national exhibitions (Québec artist Jean-Paul Mousseau won first prize in the Winnipeg Show in 1955), and through *Canadian Art* magazine (Marion Nicoll's source for

the automatistes).

Even if actual contact among the regions were to prove a less than fruitful avenue of enquiry, cross-regional comparisons could have been thought-provoking and also effected a synthesis. How do we otherwise explain the "manifold forms of artistic expression" (p.9)? Paul-Emile Borduas observed in 1956 that "people work on the same clear ideas in Tokyo, Montreal, New York or Paris. What is not yet understood is that the answers are different for each place." Why then did abstraction take on a different form in Vancouver than in Montréal and how was the exercise of achieving the modern fundamentally different in Montréal than in Toronto? This was touched upon in a colloquium on "Music, Dance, Film, Art and Art Criticism in Canada in the Fifties," March 28, 1993, held in conjunction with the exhibition in Ottawa. What was it about cultural isolation that "permitted this art to be sustained by divergent currents" (p.9)? How well understood was so-called Abstract Expressionism north of the 49th parallel and where was Canada positioned in the artistic arena relative to Europe and the United States in the 1950's? Quotes by William Ronald and Harold Town provide a clue (p.78), as does the Riopelle entry in the catalogue section. Leclerc observes that "a plausible explanation for Riopelle's success in the early fifties, ...is that for a brief period he managed to bridge the gap between the aesthetic concerns of two worlds, the European and the American. He was able to achieve an equilibrium, just at the definitive moment when the scales were tipping ir-

revocably towards New York" (p.170). This says much about Canadian culture in general.

Another theme I had hoped to see addressed is that of the activity of women artists during this period. Not that one expects to see equal representation of prominent male and female artists; that would have been to distort history. But why is this the case? There is no discussion of why only seven out of 59 artists were women, three of whom (Gordon, Luke and Nicoll) had reached artistic maturity by 1950.

Here again is an issue only alluded to. In her discussion of Rita Letendre, the author quotes Sandra Paikowsky's observation that "the recognition of Montréal women painters during the 1950's was unusual" (p.138). It is interesting to observe how the status of women artists fluctuated according to the prevailing aesthetic of the day. After a brief rise to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century, women artists were marginalized when the aesthetic changed from one of domestic subjects, to a more "masculine" approach based on promoting nationalism in the arts. Only a handful of women, related in some way to members of the all-male Group of Seven showed with them in a peripheral way as invited contributors. When the tide turned and the demand arose for a more socially-conscious art that addressed crises facing society in the thirties and forties, women artists became visible once more, only to fade back into obscurity with the influence of American "machismo" on Canada. Leclerc mentions that the Americans perceived themselves as superior for

possessing a masculine sensibility in the arts as distinct from what they considered the "effeminate European sensibility" (p.39). It is interesting to consider that during the fifties, Canada was positioning herself within the international arena, both politically and artistically - another form of national self-consciousness that harkens back to the 1920's.

Leclerc endorses de Repentigny's belief that a preoccupation with evaluating the Canadian-ness of these works is an unnecessary source of anxiety (p.77), since she feels that the best work of the period falls fully within the international sphere and thus transcends issues of nationalism. But however "universal" its language may be, Canadian abstract art of the fifties undeniably has its own peculiar accents : a unique synthesis of French, British and American sources. This catalogue presents the French and American influences well, but falls short in its evaluation of the relative importance of British postwar artists like Graham Sutherland, whose work was being purchased for the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Toronto throughout the fifties.

Finally, over half the book is given over to the catalogue section in which all the works are illustrated in black and white. Since this final section of the publication is meant to be used for reference, it is organized alphabetically by artist, but as such does not dovetail with any other section of the catalogue and information offered in the entries often repeats the main text. Practically speaking, it is difficult to use in the exhibition because of its large size, and the Perfect

binding will not withstand prolonged and repeated consultation. This rather defeats the purpose, since the most valuable contribution made by *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* is as a solid reference tool for Canadian art of the period.

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