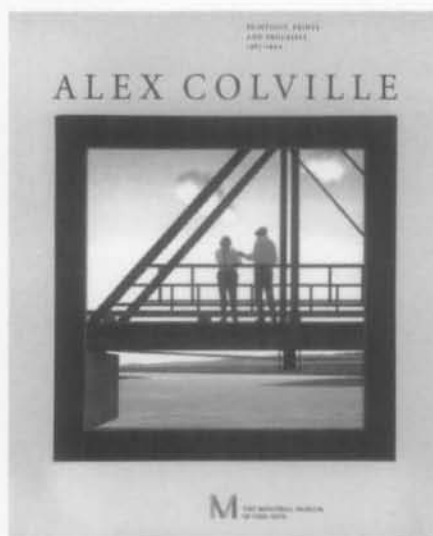




ALEX COLVILLE

Paintings, Prints and
Processes 1983-1994

Philip FRY

Montreal: Montreal Museum of
Fine Arts, 1994

184 p., 61 col., 347 b/w illus.,
\$59.95

(Version en française: *Alex Colville:
peintures, estampes et processus
créatifs 1983-1994*)

ALEX COLVILLE

The Observer Observed

Mark A. CHEETHAM

Canadian Biography Series

Toronto: ECW Press, 1994

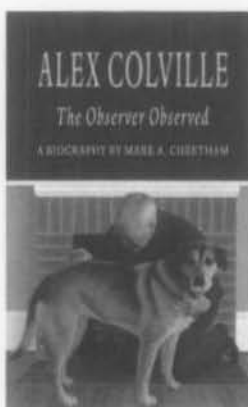
140 p., 1 col., 21 b/w illus., \$14.95

A decade ago - in the year Alex
Colville's retrospective exhibition
opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario

before travelling to other sites in
Canada and Europe - Robert Fulford
described the artist's works as "icons of
Canadianism, the visual expression of
our spirit."¹ A decade before *that*, one
German critic claimed that the Nova
Scotia artist might be "the most promi-
nent, indeed the most important realist
painter in the Western world."²

Times are still very good for
Colville. At age 74 he is perhaps the
best-known and most popular of living
Canadian artists. He is an Officer and
Companion of the Order of Canada, a
Member of the Privy Council of

Canada, a re-
cently retired
member of
the National
Gallery's
Board of Tru-
stees, the reci-
pient of sever-
al honorary
degrees, and
the subject of
major mono-
graphs by



Helen Dow (1972) and David Burnett
(1983).³ His paintings and serigraphs
seem ubiquitous, adorning everything
from a Bruce Cockburn record jacket to
the cover of David Burnett and Marilyn
Schiff's *Contemporary Canadian Art*
(1983).

However, Colville's reception by
critics and historians has often been dis-
tinctly lacking in enthusiasm. Few

have been as unremittingly dismissive as John Bentley Mays who, in his review of the 1983 retrospective, anathematized the works as irredeemably minor and utterly irrelevant to the development of art in Canada, likening them in interest to "a painting of the Last Supper on a thumbtack."⁴ A markedly more positive stance has been struck in a small flurry of recent publications.

These publications range from an exhibition brochure (James Redpath, *Colville: Beings in Time*, 1992) and a short catalogue (Gemey Kelly, *Alex Colville: Selected Drawings*, 1993) to the comparatively substantial *Colville Being Seen: The Serigraphs*, by Michael Bell (1994).⁵ Bell's ambitious and complex fifteen-page essay is laced with quotations from several of the moral and political philosophers most admired by the artist: Martin Heidegger, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt and others. However, *Colville Being Seen* is overshadowed by two more in-depth studies, also published in 1994: Philip Fry's lengthy and profusely illustrated catalogue for a 376-item exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; and Mark Cheetham's biography of the artist.

In *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes...* Fry deals with all the paintings (twenty) and prints (ten) produced by the artist over the eleven-year period from 1983 (the year of the Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective) to 1994. Fry's

selection of preparatory drawings for the paintings and prints comprises only a tiny part of Colville's total output in this medium from the years 1983-94. Still, the catalogue's 341 drawings - ranging from tentative ink sketches to full-colour studies in acrylics - are more than sufficient in number to convey, with breadth and clarity, the artist's working processes.

Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes... consists of an extended introductory discussion of two paintings dating from before 1983, both from the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: *Cyclist and Crow* (1981) and *Church and Horse* (1964). In this section Fry introduces aspects of Colville's art that are explored throughout the rest of the catalogue: technique, authorial intention, and communication with the viewer. Painsstaking formal analyses of the two paintings' surfaces and their underlying compositional organization highlights, above all, the complex web of mutual influence and reinforcement that Fry perceives between these aspects. Such analyses also allow Fry to make insightful references to a host of issues that have dogged Colville scholarship since the early seventies: naturalism; photography; narration; particularity versus generalization of subject; and the relationship between temporality and space.

In the remainder of the catalogue Fry groups together first the paintings, then the drawings, and finally the

prints. Each of these sections is prefaced by brief remarks on medium and technique. Within the sections on the paintings and prints, each work is the subject of a one- or two-page essay. This was obviously impossible and undesirable for each of the 341 drawings, which are instead accompanied by a single eleven-page essay. This essay discusses the evolution of theme and format in series of drawings in order to explore, *inter alia*, the techniques and reasoning behind the three aspects of Colville's work as a draughtsman: "embodiment of the subject matter through life drawings and diagrams...; *geometric structuring* through the determination of format...; and the *authentication* of the image to hold it in the sphere of likelihood by verifying its relationship to the world of everyday experience" (p.103).

Within the sections of the catalogue devoted to the paintings and the serigraphs Fry groups the works not by date ("since serial development does not apply in Colville's case") but by "family affinity." The latter is based in part on the works' immediate subject matter and in part on their broader, more transcendent themes. "This is one of many possible groupings..." Fry notes, "each of which would reflect the life experiences, conditioned perceptions, biases and hopes of those responsible for the [exhibition's] display" (p.28). The fact that Fry relies upon a form of reception theory to give

Colville's *oeuvre* a meaningful structure is singularly appropriate. In 1988 Colville was quoted as confirming his interest in reception theory: "I am a great believer in thinking that ... every individual brings to the examination of any given work of art a different experience, so that the work is different for everybody who looks at it."⁶

Previous writing on Colville's art, while sometimes directing attention to these factors, has rarely pursued them to their logical conclusion. Fry, however, does exactly that. The brief essays that constitute each painting's and serigraph's entry feature narratives and excurses by Fry, recording the personalization of his reactions to, and relations with, the works. "I see the couple standing above as my rowboat drifts slowly towards the bridge, rocking gently," he writes in his discussion/analysis (p.56) of *Couple on Bridge* (1992), thus unabashedly putting himself into the picture. "Have you ever been to Cape Breton?" he asks (p.90), in an effort to involve the reader in the sensations evoked by the view through the car window in *Taxi* (1985). "I," "you," "we" and "us": the personal pronouns recur, signalling Fry's own reactions to the images and his encouragement of the catalogue's readers to make proactive their own viewings of the works.

Fry takes equally seriously Colville's claims that the goal of his art is "to illuminate and enhance the human condition" (Cheetham, p.119). Thus his

discussion of *Target Shooting* (1990) is representative of his sensitivity to these twin concerns - the active role played by the viewer in the production of meaning, and Colville's philosophical ambitions for his work. In this analysis Fry attempts to account for how a nagging sense of uneasiness creeps into what is otherwise a subtly moving scene of a man initiating his adolescent son into target shooting - a sport that does not, despite its equipment, involve bloodshed:

It seems to me - and I hope you can agree - that the urgency that weighs upon us ... is the realization that teaching, that all forms of guidance, or sharing our collective ways and personal experiences, are precariously balanced on an edge that separates love and violence. (p.60)

There exists a distinct danger in this approach to pictorial interpretation. Taking Colville at his word that his art is "not ... a means of soliloquizing but ... a means of communication,"⁷ and that he strives "to render visible the mysteries of the supra-natural world,"⁸ might easily result in texts that are only weakly anchored in the visual evidence of the artworks. In a worst-case situation such texts risk doing more to familiarize the reader with a critic's loose-cannon psyche than to elucidate the paintings and serigraphs themselves.

Fry, however, avoids this. His reading of each painting always comprises

the last paragraph of a three-paragraph description/analysis of the work in question. In every case, this paragraph grows organically out of the two preceding ones. The first paragraph of each text is descriptively straightforward, focusing for the most part on what all viewers can agree they see in the images: figures, actions, setting, composition, colour, and physical positioning of the viewer in relation to the scene. The second paragraph, at least for the essays on the paintings, always discusses the mathematical grid engineered by the artist as a basis for the physical organization of the figures and objects within the images.⁹

This sort of rigorous geometric analysis is long overdue. In their monographs, Helen Dow and David Burnett include only sporadic and brief references to the complex skeletons of squares, rectangles, circles, hexagons and other geometric shapes that flower across Colville's drawings and that underlie his paintings and serigraphs. Fry, on the other hand, gives several specific examples of how the underlying geometries generate, and are generated by, the expressive relationships between the visual elements of the images, and of how they support the speculative "narratives" that he (and we) are required to weave from the paintings and serigraphs. Fry also includes, early in the catalogue, a very useful explanation of the four devices most commonly used by Colville in his

geometric grids: the golden section, the golden rectangle (with its related root-2 to root-9 rectangles), Le Corbusier's "Modulor," and the Fibonacci series (in which each successive number is the sum of the preceding two).

None of this makes for easy perusal; readers will need rulers and protractors to benefit fully from Fry's analyses of the artworks' geometric layouts. They will also require a significant degree of faith that the effectiveness Colville claims for his elaborate mathematical fabrications actually exceeds that of less rarefied instances of compositional structure reinforcing thematic content. The artist insists that it is because the organization of the images is largely determined by rigorous mathematical bases that he can deal convincingly with universal themes, generalized by the active viewer from the comparatively particularized figures and objects represented in the paintings and serigraphs. As he states, "Form and content ... are inseparable; neither one can be isolated effectively from its companion for individual examination."¹⁰

It is therefore fitting that the greatest strengths of Fry's texts on individual paintings and serigraphs are to be found in the implicit and explicit links that he establishes between form (mathematical structure) and content - both particularized content (the surface "narrative" of the image) and generalized content (the image's more transcendent implications). In the 1991

painting *Arrival*, a man pilots a pleasure boat (only his hand, guiding the tiller, is visible, in the foreground) towards a woman waiting on a dock. The idea of water as an agent of separation is an old one in Colville's art, dating back at least to *Four Figures on a Wharf* (1952), a visual memento of his wartime yearning to leave Europe and return to his wife in Canada. In the catalogue Fry identifies the underlying themes of *Arrival* as the binary phenomena that he believes animate the relationship between the man in the boat and the woman on the dock: separation and reunion, dependence and independence, longing and fulfillment. At the same time he considers how the geometry of the painting's composition generates and reinforces these binary opposites, by means of contradictory visual cues grounded in the painting's mathematical structure:

The distance that remains to be covered by sailing into the depth of the picture is clearly indicated by the emphatic change of scale between the hand and the woman; but the boat and wharf are both tied into a strong geometric pattern that tends to compress the pictorial gap by pulling the wharf forward from the middle ground towards the picture plane. ... [In addition, the] vertical divisions correspond to elements of the image - the right side of the mast, the posts rising above ground level and the right side of the ladder - effectively making the boat and wharf

part of the same pattern. (p.31-32)

As in *Arrival*, so in the other paintings and serigraphs: Fry discerns a series of universal themes suggested by imagery drawn from Colville's local environment and, in many cases, imbued with his trademark evocation of unease and foreboding. That the universal is implicit in the particular is hinted visually through the eradication or blurring of specific identity. Figures do such things as shield their faces or turn their backs; in *Arrival* we see only the hand of the man, while the woman is too far away to be discerned clearly. Among the universal themes intimated by Fry are: the complex bond between dependence, independence and individuality (*Looking Down*, 1988); the conditions of inter-relationship between human ideals, the non-human world and technology (*Floating Woman*, 1990); and the nature and conditions of human action (*White Canoe*, 1987).

All such evaluations are, of course, largely unquantifiable, and therefore open to objections. "The slight puzzles built into these pictures invite many fantasies and prohibit none," claimed John Bentley Mays in 1983, "so art-historical fantasies become as plausible as any other sort."¹¹ Nonetheless, Fry's thorough interweaving of description, formal analysis and judicious speculation - all grounded in Colville's own insistence upon the ambitious purposes he has set for his art - represents a sincere attempt actually to come to terms with

the works at a profound level. He thus goes well beyond merely describing surfaces and superficial effects, while at the same time adhering to the strictures that David Burnett outlined in 1983 to avoid "misreading" the works as mere slices of narrative: "The picture ... is the whole of its meaning, rather than one moment for which we must construct the prior and succeeding moments."¹²

In an unintended but fortuitous pairing, Fry's catalogue is neatly complemented by Mark Cheetham's book, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*. Unlike Fry's catalogue, Cheetham's book is primarily biographical in approach. And, in the same way that Fry takes seriously the artist's statements about communication and meaning in his art, Cheetham steers close to a comment Colville made to him in a 1992 letter: "I am inclined to think that the divisions between 'the life' and 'the work' are false, at least in my case - I have tried to work at both" (p.13). Cheetham therefore sets out on an exploration of the links between biography and art:

I am not the first person to have noticed the correspondence between Colville's life and art. ... I argue, however, that there is more than a resemblance, that Colville has explicitly fashioned his life after his artistic ideals. (p.132, note #1)

"Increasingly his life resembles one of his carefully planned and meticulously executed paintings," Cheetham states elsewhere in his book. "So har-

moniously intermingled are Colville's life and work that we learn more about him if we view his life as one of his paintings" (p.12). The assertion that life imitates art (rather than *vice-versa*) is never as well-established as Cheetham claims. But, this caveat aside, his book argues convincingly that both phenomena - Colville's life and his art - have been shaped by remarkably similar overarching concerns.

To his credit, Cheetham's treatment of this subject never slips into the trap identified by Gemey Kelly in her *Selected Drawings* catalogue: "Attempts to explain the meaning of Colville's figures are often premised on the facts of autobiography, an approach which conflates the figure with the model...." Cheetham is obviously in agreement with Kelly that "the drawings suggest that it is the human condition rather than the human form, either real or ideal, which interests [Colville]...."¹³ He accordingly builds his comparison between Colville's life and art not by searching out literal correlations, but by exploring three broad themes: "self-presentation, the fragility and affirmation of life, and the art of philosophizing" (p.14).

An integral aspect of self-presentation is what the artist refers to as self-fashioning. In this he has been strongly influenced by philosophers such as the French Existentialists, with their vision of the rational individual exercising freedom of choice within a universe

without rules. In Colville's case, according to Cheetham, this has had an impact on both his life (in his concern for systematically acquiring sufficient financial security and power to have the luxury of making his own decisions within an inherently unpredictable world) and his artworks (which exemplify methodical rationalism in their development and execution). As Cheetham tellingly phrases it, Colville affirms that we can "make our lives conform to our choices, just as a finished painting will follow from careful preparatory drawings" (p.22).

Cheetham's additional comments on how Colville's life and art have both been molded by his convictions about "the fragility and affirmation of life" and his fondness for "the art of philosophizing" are comparably absorbing. In these regards he sees Colville as someone whose approach to life and art owes much to his experiences with war and illness, his knowledge of his father's disappointments, and his intense sense of rootedness and place, as well as his favourite authors, artists and philosophers.

However, the tightness of the argument in support of Cheetham's central thesis about the echoing relationship between life and art can lead to the occasional *lacunae* in his text. Specifically, he sometimes tends to see the character of Colville's art as being determined almost exclusively by the artist's personal history and predilections when

in fact more general influences - well beyond Colville acting as an isolated rational agent making his own choices - may be operative. For example, Cheetham is intrigued by Colville's remarks on his two-year tenure as a war artist during the Second World War (1944-46): "In a certain sense I was writing letters home for these people [soldiers], depicting their lives, the dugouts, tanks, where they lived" (p.33). Cheetham proposes that this conception of Colville's war work encouraged an interest in everyday objects and events that accorded well with his personal interests:

Colville's detached observation of what surrounded the soldiers in World War II, as well as the world in which he now lives, is fundamental to his way of being in the world. Although he did see action in the war - and vividly recalls an assault in the Mediterranean in which he took part - he has always tended to celebrate the routine. 'It's very difficult to describe what war is like,' he says.... 'Much of nothing happen[s].' (p.37)

Precisely: much of nothing happens. For most soldiers on active duty the War consisted of long stretches of boredom, punctuated by bouts of bloodiness; and the bloodiness often happened so quickly, in such chaotic circumstances and on such a colossal physical scale, that it could be very difficult to capture in sketches or paintings. In addition, sketching horrific

scenes was not something that art students were trained to do. Indeed, the nihilistic nature of the War contradicted what many held to be the essentially life-affirming nature of the fine arts. Certainly Cheetham must be right: the fact that Colville favoured undramatic scenes says something important about his character and is almost without doubt linked to his continuing preference for quotidian subjects. Nonetheless, it is also true that selecting subjects showing "the emptiness and tedium of war, not its drama or the heroism of its combatants" (p.41), distinguished the work not only of Colville, but of most other Canadian as well as British war artists who had direct exposure to the devastation and plentiful evidence of inhumanity in Europe. Other, more general contributing factors must therefore be proposed to provide a more global account of Colville's records of the Second World War.

In Cheetham's defence it must be noted that elsewhere in his book he demonstrates that he does not subscribe to a reductivist approach in which Colville's personality is seen as the sole or single most important well-spring for his art. For example, he expresses reservations about the idea, proposed by others, that the artist's emotional numbness when he went to sketch at Belsen was a specifically personal emotional reaction, and therefore inherently "of a piece with his later aversion to the depiction of human

emotion, witnessed by ... [his] preference [for] ... averted faces."¹⁴ Cheetham agrees that "Colville does distance himself emotionally," but adds an important qualifier: "In the face of such cruelty and suffering, who wouldn't?" (p.38). Colville's reaction is here seen within its proper frame: the larger reality of a war powerful enough to either determine or alter less compelling contexts.

Overall, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* is a lively and informative study, even if its scholarly usefulness is sometimes compromised by the fact that it reads as a book written for a general audience. Although the narrative contains intriguing references and some difficult-to-trace quotations, there are only eleven notes for some one hundred pages of text. There are also a few factual errors, the two most surprising being a reference to "Goodrich" Roberts (p.108) and the claim that Colville relies upon one-point perspective (p.107). In fact - as Fry's analyses of the structural organization of the paintings and prints demonstrates - Colville does not necessarily restrict himself to a single vanishing point.

One final concern is the fact that the book tends to tip the balance between discussion of art and discussion of biography decisively in favour of the latter, even though Cheetham wishes to argue that Colville "has explicitly fashioned his life after his artistic ideals." Fully ten of the twenty-one illustrations are

photographs of the artist. Of the remaining eleven, all but one are reproductions of paintings; the exception is a wartime drawing not showing the trademark geometric gridwork of Colville's subsequent drawings. More sustained discussion of the art, and especially of these later drawings, would seem to be more fundamental to Cheetham's overall thesis than is the case in his book. Such a discussion could concentrate more deeply upon three topics in particular: how the extraordinarily complex mathematical schemata are constructed (for this we must turn to Fry's catalogue); how the grids are specifically intended to reinforce the same ideals of control and rationality that Cheetham shows to be integral to Colville's life as a whole; and how the drawings' evolutionary development in long series systematically and painstakingly pins down even minute details of future paintings and prints.

Although both Cheetham and Fry deal with Colville's work in terms of the artist's intentions and goals, they approach their subject from markedly different standpoints and use significantly different methods of description and analysis. Reading them in tandem can thus be illuminating. Perhaps the clearest example of this may be obtained by scrutinizing their respective treatments of *Western Star* (1985). In this painting a man standing by a freight truck ("Western Star") is photographing a woman, who has

turned her back to the viewer. Both figures' faces are invisible to us, thus minimizing any temptation to address the painting as if it were principally a representation of an autobiographical - or other, comparably specific - situation.

For Fry, the scene opens up larger questions intimated in other of Colville's paintings: loneliness, consolation, illusion, and the strange mixture of dependence and independence that leaves its stamp on all human relationships. He writes:

The [truck] stop ... [is] an intersection where solitary people meet, recognize their loneliness without actually admitting it, then go on their way encouraged by the unassuming gentleness of smiles and a bit of conversation. The man almost steps forward in his eagerness to try and capture some moments of joy in the memory of an image; she hesitates to respond, knowing that what was precious in those moments is already past. (p.86)

This reading is bolstered by Fry's analysis of the painting's geometry, which "tends to accentuate the couple's bilateral relationship while setting up the red truck as an intruder or at least the potential agent of separation." And this, in turn, is bound up with the baggage of personal experience that Fry brings to the painting. Indeed, he even alerts us as to how the image evokes for him memories of one truck stop in particular. His reading of the painting is thus rooted in the formal organization

of the image, in his own reactions to it, and in Colville's claims of philosophical content.

Conversely, Cheetham's discussion of *Western Star* concentrates on the interface between Colville's biography and his art, with the focal point being the concept of power. The representation in *Western Star* of a woman held captive by the gaze of her male companion is seen as one of many instances of the artist's fascination with power. This is something that Cheetham has already established as a basic theme that informs the organization of Colville's life as much as it does the content and structure of his art. The painting is then examined as an instance of disjunction between contemporary social thought and Colville's own views - a splendid example of how the artist's self-fashioning and self-presentation can be at variance with social trends not contained within the intellectual framework he chooses for himself. The artist's bewildered reaction to charges of misogyny, after *Western Star* appeared on the cover of Acadia University's academic calendar, confirms earlier references to the essential conservatism of his nature. He had actually wanted to show, quotes Cheetham, "[that] women [are] mysterious, attractive.' 'I don't consider women ... ordinary people'...." (p.76)

Colville's art has long provoked markedly different reactions and interpretations, from the adulation of Helen

Dow to the contempt of John Bentley Mays. The paradigmatic case of *Western Star* makes it clear that Fry and Cheetham each suggest insights, points of view and avenues of interpretation that are not necessarily presented, or developed at comparable length, by the other. Whatever one's opinion of the merits of the paintings, serigraphs and drawings, there is much in Fry and in Cheetham to foster the development of richer, more fully rounded ways of looking at them.

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Notes

1 Robert FULFORD, "Painter Laureate," *Saturday Night* (July 1983), 5. Richard A. PERRY took sharp exception to this view; see "Alex Colville: Why Have We Made Him Head Boy of Canadian Painters?," *Canadian Forum* (March 1985), 6-12.

2 Hans OHFF, "Provinziell wie Caspar David Friedrich," *Der Tagesspiegel/Feuilleton* (Berlin) (25 Aug. 1971): 4.

3 Helen J. DOW, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1972); David BURNETT, *Colville* (Art Gallery of Ontario/McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1983).

4 John Bentley MAYS, "Colville's Importance Exaggerated," *Globe and Mail* (23 July 1983), E-13.

5 REDPATH's brochure was for an

exhibition at the W.K.P. Gallery (North Bay, Ontario) of selected paintings, serigraphs and drawings produced from 1952 to 1992 and including all the preparatory drawings for the 1992 painting *Traveller*. KELLY's catalogue accompanied a travelling exhibition of 61 drawings (1949-92), organized by the Owens Art Gallery of Mount Allison University as an overview of Colville's principal thematic concerns. *Colville Being Seen* (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1994) deals with the thirty-two serigraphs produced by Colville over the past four decades.

6 Alex COLVILLE, quoted in Mark A. CHEETHAM, "The World, the Work, and the Artist: Colville and the Communality of Vision," *RACAR* 15, no.1 (1988): 59.

7 Alex COLVILLE, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," printed in DOW, 207.

8 Alex COLVILLE, quoted in *Statements 18 Canadian Artists, 1967* (Regina: Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1967), 36.

9 After using this approach in his descriptions of twenty-two paintings Fry has made his point, and largely abandons it in the essays on the ten serigraphs. The second paragraphs of these latter essays concentrate primarily on how the visual elements within the images evolved in the preparatory drawings for each of the prints.

10 COLVILLE, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," in DOW, 206. DOW and BURNETT include some analyses of this type, but not as consistently or in as much detail as Fry.

11 MAYS, E-13.

12 BURNETT, 19.

13 Gemey KELLY, *Alex Colville: Selected Drawings* (Sackville: Mount Allison University, Owens Art Gallery, 1993), 2.

14 Cheetham is quoting PERRY, 9.