

PLACES OF THEIR OWN

Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo

Sharyn Rohlfen UDALL

New Haven and London: Yale

University Press, 2000

366 p., 60 col., 101 b/w illus., \$65.00

THE LAUGHING ONE:

A Journey to Emily Carr

Susan CREAN

Toronto: HarperFlamingo Collins, 2001

496 p., 25 b/w illus., \$32.00

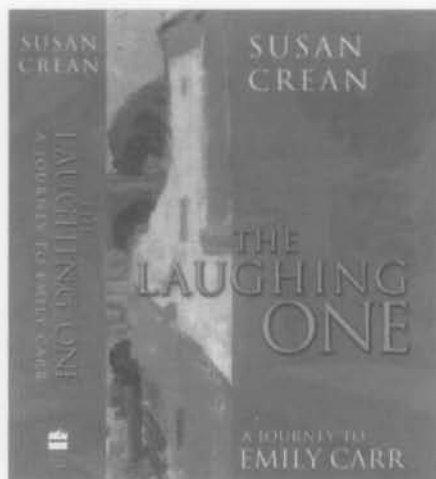
From a nadir reached in the 1960s when works by the artists of the Group of Seven and their contemporaries looked hopelessly dated and sentimental, there has been a resurgence of interest and enthusiasm in and for this work on the part of subsequent generations of critics, curators, art historians and collectors. The numerous publications and exhibitions, and soaring auction prices for Canadian landscape painting of the 1910s to the 40s would have been hard to predict when abstraction was ruling the day. But this work is hot again, and the interest shows no sign of abating. Witness these two books from 2000 and 2001, both of which deal with Emily Carr, who has already received so much attention. Is there anything new to be said? Both authors, Sharyn Udall and Susan Crean, seem to think so. Actually, Udall, Professor of Art History at the



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College of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is to be commended for conceiving of her worthy but challenging project, which also had an exhibition component. The show of works by Carr, as well as her counterparts in Mexico and

the US – Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe – opened at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in June 2001, as the first stop on a North-American tour. As is often the practice these days, the exhibition does not have an accompanying catalogue *per se*, but Udall’s book is meant to serve that purpose as well as functioning as a stand-alone publication. In this way it can be marketed and distributed as a trade publication, with the aim of garnering a wider readership.

Susan Crean’s book is, as her subtitle tells us, a personal take on and tribute to Emily Carr, and is neither biography nor an art historical monograph. Its success, then, ultimately depends on each reader’s take on Crean. Does one enjoy her “voice” and feel in tune with her observations and ruminations, or not? Do her passages of invented writings attributed to Carr hold water sufficiently and ring true enough with a reader? I have long felt an interest in and an affinity for Susan Crean, beginning in 1976 when she came out with her consciousness-raising (to use a phrase from that era) tome *Who’s Afraid of Canadian Culture?*. Nationalistic, but not jingoistic, left-wing but not ridiculously radical, Crean has written and lectured on Canadian culture and cultural issues. She has struck me as a thinker and writer who ponders issues deeply and from all sides, not one to glibly spout worn paradigms. Her initial

university studies were actually in art history, so I was intrigued to see what she would have to say about Emily Carr from a personal perspective. *The Laughing One* has the feel of a novel in design and structure. Not intended as a coffee table book, it is illustrated only in black and white, with vintage shots of Emily Carr and several reproductions of some of her key works mixed in with Crean’s own photographs of Carr’s painting places as they exist now. Her art history training serves her well both in terms of her discussions of Carr’s paintings and the odd reference or foray she makes into discussions of or comparisons with other artists, such as Picasso and his relationship to primitive art, juxtaposed to Carr and hers in the First Nations images. Crean’s descriptions in these cases read well and do not strike any false notes.

A reader beginning Udall’s book on Carr, Kahlo and O’Keeffe can hardly be blamed for having high expectations; the topic is so rich with opportunity, and the pressure must have been on for Udall to create a book that does justice to the work of these three giant figures, each a “lone” female artist, each a touchstone in the early to middle years of the twentieth century for her respective North American country. *Places of Their Own* also functions as a tribute, and as an in-depth, intensively feminist, analysis of the themes, structures, and forms of their

art, with a bit of discussion on their public careers and critical/curatorial receptions. Udall makes it clear that she is not writing biographies, as these have been done thoroughly elsewhere. But a reader setting out with *Places of Their Own*, expecting a rapturous ride, hoping to have new light shed on the art and thinking of these three fascinating artists, perhaps wishing to learn more of their innermost thoughts and on sources/meanings for their images, the book is a sad disappointment. How could a writer kill this topic? Start with dry, awkward writing, sprinkle in grammatical errors, add an impossible structure that does not fit with the work at hand, and skip any conclusion at all that could have attempted to tie things together. Make sure that words like nature, body, self and myth are used in such a way that there is always the implication of an initial capital. This device will make reference to "Theory." Do this inexorably so that the reader finds the writing tiresome, and eventually annoying. Use stilted, awkward phraseology and handle ideas in a clumsy manner. Does Udall like, enjoy or admire the paintings and drawings of these three artists? What attracted her to this topic? What connections does she feel to the art of these three women? After reading this book, there is still no way to know. What about their work made Carr, O'Keeffe and Kahlo good or interesting

artists? This is not touched upon. Granted, there is no story to be told of contacts, cross-fertilizations, or influences among the artists. Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe met only a handful of times, and each time briefly. And, as unlikely as it seems, in fact, Emily Carr met Georgia O'Keeffe once quickly during a visit to New York in 1930. As one might suspect, Emily Carr and Frida Kahlo, separated by the most geography, never met.

Crean's book is better and more engagingly written. Including accounts of her own trips in the 1990s up and down coastal British Columbia retracing Carr's footsteps, she provides detailed accounts of the locales such as Alert Bay and the Skeena River as they are now, which forms a fascinating counterpoint to her descriptions of how they were during Carr's time, and to Carr's own descriptions of the same places. Less integrated and less riveting are her long and fact-filled sections about current political issues in BC such as controversies around the logging industry. Crean uses a chronological structure for her book, and each chapter is centred on a different period or trip or location in Emily Carr's life or art. The weakest components within these units are the passages of thought or dialogue that Crean has invented when Carr's writings are scarce, which she terms "informed speculation" on her part. Because the material is presented seamlessly, however, it takes a

vigilant reader to figure out which passages are genuine Carr and which are invented. Crean clearly wished to avoid having her book come across or be billed as an academic study, and this is perhaps why she eschews the use of footnotes. She refers *en passant* to many of the published writings on Emily Carr, citing the authors' names (Doris Shadbolt, Maria Tippet, Gerta Moray, Megan Bice and Marcia Crosby) but does not indicate from which work (let alone what page) by a given author she is quoting. Therefore, any reader wishing to find the passage quoted would have a challenging and unnecessarily time-consuming task.

The book crescendoes at the end when Crean looks hard and pointedly at the big question: Carr's use of native material – both stories and images – and how true she was to the material, how loyal in her relationships with first nations individuals, and how bound by the views of her own culture that saw the natives as members of a doomed and dying civilization. Crean is a good writer, but ultimately, sadly, she is not a great writer; her prose does not lift off the page, come alive, and transport the reader. At best it presents interesting, pertinent information in a readable manner. At worst, it can be pedestrian and at times almost hectoring in tone.

Sharyn Udall's book on Carr, Kahlo and O'Keeffe is oddly-shaped:

tall, narrow, and thick. The reproductions of art are of excellent quality, their colour accurate and rich, and of good size, making the volume a veritable feast for the eyes. All illustrations appear immediately adjacent to the text in which they are discussed and all are keyed within the text with figure numbers. The caption to each reproduction gives the full information for the image, so the reader does not have to flip to a list to find out the location of the work, for example. Udall has included an index and a tripartite chronology, but no bibliography. The design of the book is a little odd; the top margins of each page are very tiny and the bottom ones have been super-sized, so that the text hangs high on each page, giving the impression of having been misprinted in the wrong position. It is very difficult to make sense of the book's structure. Sections and sub-sections are confusing in the typographic styles assigned to them, and they do not appear in the Table of Contents. We are given a clue to the source of her troublesome structure in Udall's acknowledgments. In her first line she thanks students in her seminars on the three artists at the University of New Mexico, Santa Fe, that she taught in 1995 and 1998 and the texts may relate to research done by her graduate students. Perhaps in other hands or in other cases, this approach could work as a methodology, but it would still need a summing up,

an overview and some cross-referencing to make a coherent project. As it is, the short, separate sections in which iconographical themes are explored individually (trees, birds, eyes, animals, bones, the house image, stones, landscape as self-portrait, and landscape as body, for example) are not related one to the other.

Another difficult aspect of the book is Udall's overly simplistic and/or inaccurate encapsulations and references to complex or arcane bodies of thought, spiritual or metaphysical practices or belief systems or philosophies. For example, she writes on p.134: "O'Keeffe may have been thinking more generally of the Sung ideals of yin and yang, the male and female principles symbolizing the duality and rhythm of nature." I do not claim to be an expert by any means on ancient Chinese philosophical/metaphysical concepts, but I do not recall ever hearing yin and yang described as ideals, nor reduced to representing strictly male and female energies (though that is one direction/layer of meaning in which the yin/yang motif may point). And what would the rhythm of nature be? At times, Udall's text descends to the meaningless and the reader wonders where the publisher's editor was; she writes on p.197, "In Kahlo's work, deep nature surfaces,"; and on p.124: "Carr's formidable tree painting *Grey* also invites a larger discussion of the ways all three

painters used tree imagery as a vehicle of artistic exploration. Trees attract myth and tradition, providing some of the most richly layered symbolic material available to artists; they represent an ancient, widespread link between humanity and nature." This passage reads as though Udall is grasping for what she wants to say in a second language. To my mind a tree is a non-sentient being, and cannot invite anything, although our contemplation of its image could. Trees themselves do not attract myths; they do, however, appear in myths. And, how can trees be a link between humans and nature when they are part of nature? (And of course, so are we.)

In aim, of course, the two books are entirely different, so cannot be compared one to the other in any direct way. Susan Crean's project was ultimately something of a personal conceit that risked not being as interesting to her reader as it was to herself. Perhaps the straightforward, chronological approach was, in the end, a bit of a straight-jacket and Crean might have done better to have invented a more experimental format or form of some sort. Although I was optimistic and predisposed to like the book, Crean's text never actually came alive for me.

In *Places of Their Own* I would have liked to see more work on the links among Carr, O'Keeffe and Kahlo that could have been teased out and

explored; for example, more discussion on the childlessness of each woman, more on the shared aspects of their work, as well as an informed analysis of the ways in which each engaged with native/indigenous art of her area. I would have omitted the section on the artists' fashion senses and styles of dress. I think I winced and cringed the hardest at Udall's mini-topic on the over-weight, sixty-seven-year-old Emily Carr as the image of a mountain.

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