

**A HISTORY OF ART IN ALBERTA  
1905-1970**

Nancy TOWNSHEND

Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2005

304p., illus., \$39.95



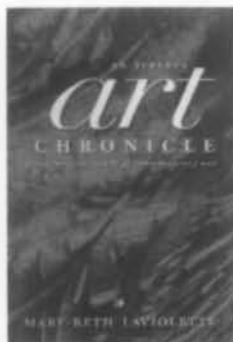
**AN ALBERTA ART CHRONICLE**

*Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art*

Mary-Beth LAVIOLETTE

Canmore: Altitude Publishing, 2006

544p., illus., \$39.95



State anniversaries are occasions to reflect on what went before and to construct narratives that impart a level of order and coherence on the events of the past. Alberta's centennial in 2005 saw the publication of two major accounts of artistic practice in the province: Nancy Townshend's *A History of Art in Alberta: 1905-1970* and Mary Beth Laviolette's *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art*. Although different in structure, style and scope, together these two publications provide an overview of one hundred years of artistic production in Alberta. Given the dearth of comprehensive histories of the art of the province, they will be much-used reference sources for many years to come.

Reviewing these books provides an opportunity to think through the characteristics and requirements of the art history survey text. As Robert

Nelson<sup>1</sup> noted in 1997, it functions as the *map* of art history, a characterization that underscores the spatial range as well as the directional quality of the genre. Surveys thus play a central role in establishing chronology and historical development, locating important centers of artistic activity, as well as formulating a list of artists and works that are deemed to have value. Since their inception in the late eighteenth century, museums have been shaping and reshaping the list of great artists; but it is with the printed global survey texts of post-war America that such lists were refined and the canon of important works and their creators were disseminated across North American universities. That the survey is a powerful ideological force should be no surprise: over the past decades the general art history survey has been under constant attack, most notably from feminist art historians querying the lack of women artists included in the list (and the manner in which those lucky few have been incorporated into the narrative), to post-colonial critiques of the positioning of “non-western” artistic practices both historical and contemporary, and the more recent questioning of the value of insisting on a teleological narrative of artistic progress in the wake of post-modern critiques of master-narratives. Nevertheless, the art history survey remains the most dominant pedagogical instrument in university art department curricula, if only because of the familiarity of the model and the ease with which mass-produced textbooks provide material support for the delivery of course content.

The concerns raised in considering the organizational structure of the general survey are just as easily transposed onto existing surveys of Canadian art. These much smaller volumes prompt similar questions of the nature of canon formation, the dominance of artistic progress as an organizational trope and, while not entirely unique to Canadian surveys, the mapping of artistic progress onto a prevailing narrative of national becoming. A cursory look at surveys of artmaking in Canada produced over the past one hundred years presents the image of chronological development from the arrival of French settlers to the present. In the still-widely used volumes of J. Russell Harper (*Painting in Canada: A History*, 1966, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1977) and Dennis Reid (*A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 1973, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1988), painting was the only medium examined, formal description dominated the text, and the volumes’ narrative structure depended on national artistic development that pivoted on two artistic moments: the formation of the Group of Seven and the emergence of international abstraction. Anne Newlands’ *Canadian Art: From its Beginnings to 2000* (2000) and Joan Murray’s *Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century* (1999) are more recent publications that both expand the range of media considered and add artists ignored in the previous surveys, most notably artists of First Nations ancestry. Neither, however, has given much consideration to the nature of the survey itself or to the terms within which a national canon is formed.

Into this field come *A History of Art in Alberta: 1905-1970* and *An Alberta Art Chronicle*. One of the main challenges acknowledged by both authors was the production of the art history of a province that has been marginalized in the major surveys of Canadian art. In the publications cited above, the centrality of artists from Eastern and Central Canada goes unquestioned, with Vancouver and more recently Winnipeg as representative of “the West.” A rationale for such marginalization can be made in relation to the dominance (in terms of economic as well as cultural clout) of the older and larger cities of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, and their ability to anoint the players in the national and even international art scene. A counterpoint to such thinking can come from the argument that a vibrant cultural scene – and an active arts community intent on getting its work seen outside of the immediate geographical context – will produce institutions that can play a leadership role in bringing local artists to a broader audience. A key example would be Winnipeg’s Plug In Gallery whose director Wayne Baerwaldt successfully nominated Janet Cardiff (then professor of Fine Art at the University of Lethbridge) as Canada’s representative to the 2001 Venice Biennial. An earlier example was the ability of Regina College to turn the Emma Lake Workshops into an international gathering-place for modernist artists in the 1960s and early 70s. Although both might be considered the exceptions that test the rule, they do suggest that cultural power in Canada is not as centralized or as powerful as might be thought.

The marginalization of Alberta art from mainstream accounts of Canadian art production – both historical and contemporary – nevertheless remains an issue that many artists in the province feel quite strongly. In her introduction to *A History of Art in Alberta 1905-1970*, Nancy Townshend writes: “Alberta’s art deserves to be written on its own terms, with Alberta as its own centre of artmaking.” (p.i) On the one hand, this is very clearly an appeal to examine art on its own merit, outside of assessments of “fit” with models from central Canada that might have been in play from time to time. This seems particularly useful in Alberta where art institutions have a relatively recent history: the Edmonton Museum of Arts, the province’s first art gallery, was incorporated in 1924 but suffered through a series of inadequate temporary locations and had few acquisitions until 1952; the Alberta Society of Artists was formed in 1931 through the efforts of British immigrant artist A.C. Leighton as a means of professionalizing artistic practice throughout the province; and H.G. Glyde was hired in 1946 by the University of Alberta in Edmonton to set up a Department of Fine Arts. While the institutional model might have come from elsewhere, the creation of spaces for making, teaching and exhibiting art resulted in the formation of a local sphere for the exploration and testing of (local) ideas.

On the other hand, Townshend's call for a focus on "Alberta as its own center of artmaking" could equally be seen as a methodological imperative, which seeks to identify an essential characteristic that marks art made in the province. In writing about the emergence of modernism in the work of Maxwell Bates, W.L. Stevenson, Roy Kiyooka and Illingworth Kerr during the 1940s and 50s, Townshend underlines the individualism of each of these artists and their unwillingness to follow an existing model: "the individualism in Alberta's post-war art till 1970 was so substantial, the commitment to making art in Alberta so resolved that a true flowering of Alberta's post-war modern art occurred, this time strong enough to stem off artificial dominant cultures that held no relevance to, and in Alberta." (p.99) This rhetoric of pioneer individualism can be found in many accounts of Alberta's history, particularly as a response to perceptions of backwardness or conservatism. In these narratives, individualism is a useful strategy for an active differentiation from the political and/or cultural center of the nation. Employed as both a reactive and a proactive strategy, Alberta's presentation of itself as pioneer, renegade and self-sufficient loner has consistently worked to enhance the province's self-image. Conveniently, such attributes are also key to art historical notions of avant-gardism, a concept that fits well into Townshend's narrative of Alberta's modernist art historical past.

Mary-Beth Laviolette takes up the story of Alberta's artistic production in 1970 and is much more explicit about the organizational imperative of the survey format. Stating from the outset that the book will show evidence of her own intellectual interests and geographical location, Laviolette frames *An Alberta Art Chronicle* as an "adventure" rather than a strict or exhaustive survey of art activity in the province. The sense of location comes through not only in the situatedness of the author but in the book's organization: the first quarter addresses the question of place, with a particular emphasis on landscape and how successive generations of artists have responded to the physical (geographical) characteristics of Alberta, either through straightforward landscape painting, photography or forms that explore a more abstract but nevertheless potent sense of location; and two other sections trace the distinctive trajectories of artmaking in the major cities of Edmonton and Calgary. The final section uses thematic groupings to discuss the history of ceramics in Alberta, feminism, post-modernism and more recent artistic practices.

At over five hundred pages, Laviolette's book is extensive and will be a particularly useful introduction to the work of artists known and unknown outside the province, and the conditions that have contributed to the development of their work. Her discussion of art institutions is particularly helpful as it provides an explanatory context for some of the idiosyncrasies of Alberta's recent

art history. One example that Laviolette explores at some length is the dramatically different kind of artmaking produced in Edmonton and Calgary: Edmonton's longstanding support of formalist painting and sculptural traditions is discussed in terms of the formative influences of the University of Alberta's Department of Art and Design and the staff of the Edmonton Art Gallery throughout the 1970s and 80s. In contrast, Calgary developed a somewhat more diverse set of practices through the pedagogical framework provided by the Alberta College of Art, as well as the differently structured Department of Art at the University of Calgary. As Laviolette notes, the presence of alternative art spaces in both cities was instrumental in enabling a diversity of artistic practices, but Calgary seems to have been more successful in building on this diversity and helping to bring Alberta's artists greater national and international recognition.

One of the differences between Townshend's and Laviolette's books lies in their approach to the idea of a unique or distinct "Alberta" art. Throughout her text, Townshend demonstrates an interest in identifying the characteristics that unify Alberta's most important artists. By privileging the work of modernists in the province, she argues that a shared sense of individualism and a belief in subjective approaches to artmaking enabled artists like Maxwell Bates, W.L. Stevenson and Marion Nicoll to break away from the imitative conservatism of their British-trained teachers and find their own voice. Laviolette, in contrast, is more interested in how Alberta as a physical and psychic space has shaped the work of artists in the province. Even when she is discussing artists working in similar genres (landscape, video, steel sculpture), she is less concerned with identifying common characteristics than with thinking through how the artists' interactions with their physical and artistic location have shaped their practice. This questioning extends to a reflection on the "place" of Alberta art within the larger national imaginary: "Alberta artists somehow sense that beyond all the imported influences and traditions, the prairie west was and still is 'radically and absolutely different from the East in every respect.'" (p.127) Although Laviolette discusses the lack of critical engagement with Alberta artists by critics from Eastern and Central Canada, she does so by raising the much more general question of whether recognition "from outside" is the only form of artistic or critical legitimacy. She thus problematizes the center/periphery relationship that seems to plague so many writers on Canadian (let alone Alberta) culture not by ignoring it, but by foregrounding the question of "the regional" as both a grounded sense of place (where one is from) and as a critical stance that implies a certain rejection of the inherent dominance of the center.

Writing any kind of survey is a complicated business, and the added pressure of providing an overarching narrative that will better link the artists and works selected for (re)presentation only adds to the challenge. Both Nancy

Townshend and Mary-Beth Laviolette's books are useful contributions to any history of Canadian art – particularly if one of the challenges currently facing the writing of art history is the questioning of the very terms along which the (national) canon is formed. Of the two, Townshend's book is possibly the less successful as the author favours a disjointed style of writing and is hampered by a need to locate an essential "Alberta" character. Laviolette is much more aware of the limitations of the survey genre and organizes her extensive discussion of over one hundred and seventy artists in order to examine some of the received ideas (both within and outside the province) about the nature of artistic production in Alberta. As a result, her book is not only a valuable reference guide but also a considered reflection on how artistic communities are formed, and the impact of geographical and social spaces on the work of artists. If some of the global surveys cited at the beginning of this review had been more cognizant of the necessity of thinking more critically about "place" in the history of artistic production, then the "map" of art history might contain a few new routes.

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#### Note

- 1 Robert S. NELSON, "The Map of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997): 28-40.