

KENNETH LOCHHEAD

Garden of Light

Ted FRASER

Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2005

95p., illus., \$28



The sense I have of the goals of independent curator Ted Fraser for this exhibition and catalogue project on Ken Lochhead (1926-2006) is that he wanted to bring together many of the best paintings by this now late, important artist to create an old-fashioned retrospective exhibition. He also wanted to write a detailed catalogue essay that would make a claim for Lochhead's art as a major *œuvre*, from his earliest years on through to the present. Fraser definitely wants us to stop focusing only on those heady Regina Five years that catapulted Lochhead onto the international stage. In this specific aspect Fraser has set out to right a perceived wrong, and it is a tall order. We can certainly admire him for this – the way one would cheer for anyone who had set himself a challenging task – and Fraser rolled up his sleeves and went at it with gusto.

His text is massive – at thirty thousand words – and it has no divisions; we just have to read it all in one long run. The numbered sections (there are five) have no titles, and the text just flows continuously past these numbers, like water around rocks in a stream. None of the sections boasts an introduction or a conclusion or links between the previous or next sections. It is evident from the onset that Fraser has spent a great deal of time talking with the artist and looking at the work. Some of Fraser's best writing in the catalogue is about the paintings themselves; he loses himself in them and writes passionately and enthusiastically, with great verve and understanding. He takes his time and goes into detail, reconstructing the artist's early years of training and travel, setting the foundation for his lengthy discussions of Lochhead's mature works. The text is never dry and it has an inner momentum that carries us along from phase to phase of Lochhead's career. At times the writing is almost rhapsodic; Fraser says of the artist's years as a student:

“The world teems with vital surprise” and from another passage on his early work: “his alert brush sweeping....”

However once in a while Fraser's take on events seems surprisingly deadpan. For example, he tells us that Lochhead and his first wife moved from Regina to Balgonie, Saskatchewan in 1954. He does not explain or speculate as to why this decision was made: did they want to live closer to the land, experience aspects of the rural life in Saskatchewan? Most readers would not know – I didn't – that Balgonie is a tiny village (population in 2005 of 1000), situated twenty-three kilometers east of Regina. Life did prove fruitful there and Lochhead became acquainted with a genuine-article folk artist, R.C. McCarger, who was the railroad station master in Balgonie. In a similar vein, Fraser tells us coolly that in 1958-59, using funds received for his 1958 airport mural commission in Gander, Newfoundland, the artist travelled with his wife and small children to Rome for eight months and then around Europe for four more months. This must have been a horrendous enterprise of planning and childcare, and speaks to me so eloquently of both Lochhead's keen desire and the value he placed on seeing works by the great masters in the real. But Fraser mentions it without commenting on its unusual nature, as though the family had done something commonplace like going on an afternoon picnic. One other example of this oddly detached tone happens when Fraser describes the creation of the fictional woman artist Win Hedore by artists Ted Godwin (*win*), Ken Lochhead (*hed*) and Ronald Bloore (*ore*). Hedore made and exhibited art using found objects, including gigantic sculptures from wrecked cars. This weird, improbable and hilarious hoax is recounted in the same tone used in describing the invitation of leaders to the Emma Lake workshops.

The book's black-and-white photographs are an excellent selection and addition to the reader's experience. Many show Lochhead in his various studios over the years. The colour reproductions are ganged up in groups and arranged chronologically, which works well as we read our way through the text as it also has a chronological structure. The overall design is workable, if somewhat unremarkable; to my mind this is far the better alternative for an art catalogue than a design that calls attention to itself. There are, however, a few bothersome errors and usages that should have been dealt with by the publication's editor: Toni Onley is spelled as Tony and Takao Tanabe is called Takeo; Fraser uses both “morph” and “impact” as verbs. The terms “modernism” and “formalism” are not defined but neither are they used interchangeably, so at times I found it impossible to understand what Fraser was driving at.

Much of Fraser's text is devoted to recounting the facts of Lochhead's life as they pertained to his painting, but without going into any personal, biographical details about his marriages or children or other relationships. Some of that story is now so well-known. In 1950, at the age of twenty-four, Lochhead was named Director of the School of Art at Regina College (later the Regina campus of the

University of Saskatchewan, now the University of Regina). In 1955 he established annual two-week workshops for professional artists in August at an old art camp site on Emma Lake in northern Saskatchewan, so that local artists could meet and benefit firsthand from contact with artists of stature from elsewhere. While its first leaders were Canadian artists (Jack Shadbolt in 1955 and Joe Plaskett in 1956), subsequent invitations were almost all to well-known artists from New York. This led to heated controversies that have never been resolved.

At this point, some fifty years later, I would venture that there will never be a resolution about what happened in the late fifties and early sixties to those artists whose work changed dramatically from participating in the Emma Lake workshops. There is still no consensus on what *did* happen. Were careers paths diverted from where they otherwise would have gone? Unquestionably. Was this a bad thing? It depends on whom you talk to. As Fraser comments, people were polarized in their opinions. One had to either resist the lure of Post-Painterly Abstraction (and stay provincial) or jump on (and be seen as selling out). Individual artists were also split within themselves. John O'Brian quoted a telling passage from Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* in his 1989 *Flat Side of the Landscape* exhibition catalogue, the crucial fragment of which is: "the discrepancy between the part of me which reflects the folk culture and that part which reflects an education imported and often irrelevant." This dichotomy is still the crux of the issue and we seem to keep prodding it like a sore tooth, exploring for some change in condition.

Could there possibly have been a third way for Emma Lake artists? A middle path? Perhaps. One could certainly ponder the case of Saskatoon-based landscape artist Ernest Lindner (with whom Lochhead was good friends, according to Fraser). Lindner attended the Emma Lake workshops for nine years between 1955 and 1966, including the 1962 Clement Greenberg and 1963 Kenneth Noland sessions. After 1966, when he was sixty-nine years old, his name does not appear on the workshop lists. Lindner wrote to Lochhead in the fall of 1955 about how much he had learned from Jack Shadbolt. Lindner's own work, however, did not appear to have changed. It has been suggested that he did adopt the notion of flatness beginning in the 1960s, which Barry Lord credits to Clement Greenberg, but which Terence Heath says was the idea of Jules Olitski. Lindner eliminated the backgrounds in his landscape works, and zeroed in on close-up views of stumps, foliage, etc., so that the surface of the work was reiterated as a flat plane. He did not, as we know, begin staining large areas of acrylic paint into canvas, and become an abstract artist.

Ken Lochhead himself had been painting Surrealist-inspired figures-in-landscape works in the early and mid 1950s – one might think of De Chirico meets Picasso Blue Period – with stylized, upright figures on geometricized, universalized plains landscapes. By 1960, he had taken his painting in a completely different

direction, following on the Emma Lake workshop led by New York painter John Ferren, and was working in enamel on large pieces of masonite to produce black and white gestural abstractions. After Greenberg's famous 1962 workshop these gave way to colour-field stain paintings, beginning with the so-called "stem" series, which involved groupings of coloured, loosely geometric shapes clustered in the middle of each canvas and joined to the bottom or one of the side edges by a bar of colour. An examination of Lochhead's art specifically during the 1962-67 years was made by curators Peter White and Helen Marzolf in 1988 when they worked together on an exhibition and catalogue for the Dunlop Gallery in Regina. Their essays take a careful look at this period of the artist's work with thoughtful and penetrating analysis. Marzolf concludes that ultimately Clement Greenberg's influence on Ken Lochhead was catalytic rather than prescriptive.

What is Ted Fraser's take and position on this? To summarize and paraphrase, Fraser tries to accept Greenberg's brand of modernism, but wants to skew our lens a little so that we look with a different emphasis. To me, this comes across as more non-modernist, than anti-modernist – a democratic embracing of the artist's production as a whole, along with his aesthetic meanderings. Fraser's position seems to be a-critical as well, promoting a holistic integration of the artist as human being with his work. Fraser emphasizes at several turns the importance of the artist's connection with nature. This is unfortunately presented at face value, with no overt recognition of the layers of (sometimes controversial) meaning with which the term "nature" is now freighted. Because of such exercises as post-modern "re-scripting" of the sublime, the notion of "nature" can be a catchall and I have seen too many amateur artists extolling their love of nature in artist statements to be able to swallow it whole in a scholarly text such as this one. But Fraser wishes us to consider Lochhead's work as a continuous entity with even the abstractions being rooted in nature in some way. He feels the work was "sparked for a moment [by Clement Greenberg] but never derailed or taken over," but this opinion is not convincingly substantiated.

Once Lochhead moved from Regina to Winnipeg to take up a teaching position at the University of Manitoba in 1964, he did not attend any subsequent Emma Lake workshops. It was in Winnipeg that Lochhead began his impressive "L" paintings, large-scale acrylic stained works that repeated the shape of the letter from one corner of the canvas toward the centre. Fraser postulates/implies that the artist flippantly chose the first letter of his surname to form the image in these works. Who knows? Maybe he was also thinking of "L for landscape" to further the whimsy of it all. Once Lochhead had left Winnipeg and was teaching at York University in Toronto for two years (1973-75), he pursued his own brand of spray painting, using various spray guns to create lyrical and lovely huge canvases, with linear arabesques on top of layers of atmospheric, bright colours.

But when he relocated again in 1975 to his home town of Ottawa where he taught at Carleton University until his retirement in 1990, Lochhead turned away permanently from abstraction and worked instead on various series of representational subjects such as gardens, portraits and hockey games. Was this an attempt to move backwards through the wormhole through which he had journeyed, to take up again from the point where he had departed from his Surrealist, figurative works of the early 1950s? Fraser does not comment on this, but democratically discusses these works with the same excitement and respect that he showed for those from the preceding groups. One senses Lochhead struggling to bring together in his Ottawa paintings of the 1980s the disparate aspects and interests he has held over the years. For example, throughout the catalogue Fraser reminds us of Lochhead's respect for and inspiration drawn from works by various old master artists. Lochhead has apparently felt free to pick and choose his influences, as the years have gone by. At one point he mentioned to Fraser that he had been enjoying mixing up a cocktail "with a little bit of Dufy, Fragonard, and Klee" in his representational paintings. While one can discern aspects of these artists in Lochhead's 1980s works, the choice of his influences might be questioned.

In his artist's statement published in the 1961 *Five Painters from Regina* catalogue Lochhead states that while he recognizes Matisse as a twentieth-century master, he prefers Paul Klee. Thinking about this brought to my mind an encounter I once had with the painter Otto Rogers years ago in Saskatoon: he said he worried if young artists told him they admired Paul Klee because he did not consider Klee to be a good influence. He said "Do you know what I mean by a good influence?" I thought that I did: one that would open doors and allow artists to develop their vision, not one that would limit options with emulations that were too specifically contained within a given idiom.

One fact I learned from Fraser's essay that I had not known before was that Ken Lochhead became close friends with Clement Greenberg. The two stayed in touch by correspondence until Greenberg's death in 1994 and Lochhead would send the New York critic slides of his work for comment from time to time. Greenberg visited him in Ottawa in the 1980s, but did not have a positive response to his work from that period.

In 1988 the artist built himself a studio (designed by one of his sons) in the woods in the Gatineau region, a short drive from his home in Ottawa. The paintings from the 1990s are all investigations of the dense forest seen from the large windows of the studio. Lochhead told Fraser that this return to his childhood landscape gave him the sense that it formed the underpinning of all of his work throughout his long career. Fraser writes: "[Lochhead] holds that the Gatineau forest is the ultimate source upon which all other influences are based, for the iconography of the surrealistic landscapes of the 1950s, the near-geometric

abstractions of the 1960s, and the sprays of the 1970s.” Does Fraser himself agree with this notion? He is silent on this point. This brings us to wonder, ultimately, whether Ken Lochhead’s work has been well served by Fraser’s treatment? While Fraser’s text is written with enthusiasm, a reader gets the feeling that he shied away from asking the tough questions about Lochhead as an artist: which are his best works? How and where does he “stack up?” At one point Fraser attempts to sum up the kernel within all of Lochhead’s varied production, stating: “He believes in a transcendental romantic art that recognizes the spiritual.” I have trouble garnering specific meaning from this statement.

Fraser decries the lack of curatorial and critical attention given to Lochhead. He is not wrong in this, and we can take note as a case in point that the *Garden of Light* exhibition is not travelling beyond its Regina installation. But sadly it seems to me that Lochhead’s case is not atypical in a country that tends to ignore its senior artists and focus on the constantly refreshed ranks of emerging ones. I am not valorizing this syndrome, just making the point that I do not think that Ken Lochhead has been singled out for neglect. The questions and concerns that arose in reading Fraser’s text led me to think about the issues in Lochhead’s career and work as they might arise and apply to all artists. What, after all, is art-making all about fundamentally – personal expression? a journey of discovery? social or political commentary or action?

Of course there are no easy answers, but I was struck by the personal and emotional tenor of a passage that Fraser quotes from a letter written by Clement Greenberg to Ken Lochhead in 1963: “What you in particular have to impress on yourself most is that you’re not a virtuoso and that painting is not an instrument like a piano on which one performs, but the means by which a vision is established and explored. What you see and who you are, are far more important than any number of successfully executed pictures.” I would never have attributed such a point of view to Greenberg, and found it moving to consider his advice to a mid-career artist. I think he was saying, in other words, that your inner life matters more than your specific art production. These are wise words for any artist, no matter the details of their particular circumstances.

LIZ WYLIE
Curator, Kelowna Art Gallery
Kelowna, B.C.