

INVENTION & REVIVAL

The Colour Drypoints of

David Milne & John Hartman

Anne-Marie NINACS and Rosemarie
TOVELL

Carleton University Art Gallery,
Ottawa, 2008

143 p., 52 colour plates, 1 b/w illus., \$



Given the well-deserved followings that the Canadian artists David Milne (1882-1953) and John Hartman (b. 1950) have both enjoyed and the wonderful qualities in their respective works of art, this book on their colour drypoints should have been a gem. As well, there are the fine reputations of the writers on board; for example, Rosemarie Tovell, who wrote the catalogue's main essay, produced the National Gallery of Canada's monograph on David Milne's *Painting Place* in 1976 as well as the landmark NGC exhibition catalogue, *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne* in 1980. How unfortunate then, that the Carleton publication falls short of its mark in several ways. The project seemed off to a promising start: a few years ago Diana Nemiroff, director of the Carleton University Art Gallery, invited Rosemarie Tovell, then newly retired as the curator of prints and drawings at the National Gallery, to look through Carleton's extensive print holdings with an eye to curating an exhibition. Tovell was drawn to the body of intriguing colour drypoints produced by Ontario-based artist John Hartman from 1985 to 1994, which he acknowledges were directly inspired by the colour drypoints that Milne had created from 1927 to 1947. Anne-Marie Ninacs, curator at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, was invited to contribute an essay, following on her lecture about Milne that was part of her recent research fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada. Sandra Dyck, curator of the Carleton Gallery, was pressed into service as the book's copy editor (given double billing with Nemiroff). A conversation among Nemiroff, Tovell, David Milne Jr. and John Hartman taken from a recording made when they looked through the prints for the exhibition, is also included in the catalogue.

Physically and aesthetically, the volume is not very pleasing although a well-respected and award-winning designer, Barr Gilmore, was in charge of the book. The basic landscape format and two-column arrangement of the texts work well enough. Perhaps to echo the idea of colour drypoints, red is used throughout the texts as a kind of accent, but not to any positive or logical effect. For example, the titles and subtitles of the essays appear in red, as do the folios. But the decision to have the footnotes to each essay printed in red only makes them extremely difficult to read and gives them exaggerated attention, as though they are urgent material. Expense does not seem to have been an issue as each of the prints in the exhibition is reproduced in full colour. Twenty drypoints by Milne and about half of the twenty-one by Hartman in the show have been carefully reproduced in the catalogue at the exact size of the originals. The remaining prints by Hartman are actually a fair amount larger in scale than they appear in the publication, something not obvious to the casual reader. The plates all appear on right-hand-side pages while the titles and dates of the works are in a large font on the opposite page. Because of their central positioning and large type size, they vie for our visual attention as we page through the images in the book. A more fitting decision might have been to leave the left-hand pages blank, acting as foils (rather like David Milne's dazzle spots) for the images on the right.

In the first essay in the book, Rosemarie Tovell sets out to describe the artists' investigations with colour drypoint and to give some sense of the place of colour drypoint within their overall output, since it constitutes only a small portion of their total production. For both Milne and Hartman, the foray into printmaking provided a respite from painting and a way to explore other technical and aesthetic challenges. Tovell also tries to convey a feeling of the relationship Hartman has to the work of David Milne. She suggests that Hartman's "empathy" for Milne's art, as well as what she terms as his "feeling an identity" with Milne's vision grew out of their commonalities, such as both having lived near Georgian Bay. But certainly Hartman's attraction to Milne is due to the characteristics of the work (as he himself states in the conversation printed in the book) and not because he lives near both the place where Milne grew up and also close to Six Mile Lake, where Milne spent the period of 1933 to 1939.

Tovell refers awkwardly to Milne as having been "influenced by the Modernist philosophical aesthetics" and of both artists' "deep-seated regard for the natural world and a need to express its supremacy in art." In approaching the work of an artist as intelligent and complex as David Milne, one must come armed with clear and precise thought at the very least. If these are difficult to muster, other writers have discussed Milne with insightful expression and accurate language. But Tovell makes only one quick reference to other texts on the artist – Lora Carney's article on Milne's subject pictures in *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, vol.10, 1987. Oddly, there is no bibliography in the book. A reader can pick through the

red footnotes to look for the titles of publications, but many texts on David Milne particularly are not cited.

Of Milne's first technically successful drypoint, *Lake Placid, Winter Sunset* (1929), Tovell says: "The brilliant, sunny Lake Placid winter landscape was Milne's inspiration." Other writers on Milne might differ regarding such emphasis on the subject. For example, John O'Brian in his landmark text, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting* (Toronto: Coach House, 1983), emphatically states that Milne rejected the relevance of subject matter (p.13) and that the subject rarely held intrinsic significance because formal devices were his prime interest (p.37-38). Whether Milne was working with the figure, still life, city views or landscapes, he set things up and got into positions where a motif came alive; and then he tried to give it aesthetic kick, using the subject only as an initial stimulus. Exceptions could be some of his war works and his so-called subject paintings or fantasy pictures of his later years. But Tovell differs and implies that reflections were Milne's favourite subject. Perhaps if the word "subject" were replaced with the term "motif" (which Milne himself used), this idea would be more accurate. Of course Milne was not alone in this modernist enterprise; the shift in emphasis away from the subject and toward formal means had begun in the mid-nineteenth century and caught the imaginations of artists around the world.

In writing on John Hartman, Tovell claims that Hartman's ideas on nature and spirituality are parallel to those of Milne. For example, she quotes Hartman as saying, "I am aware of a spiritual dimension to the physical world and any sense I have of divinity is experienced mostly when I am in Nature..." (p.11). Tovell remarks that such attitudes are similar to those held by David Milne, but without making reference to any passages from Milne's writings to better prove her point. This is a delicate, tricky theme for exploration and needs a steady hand and a rigorous approach.

Next up in the book is Anne-Marie Ninacs' essay, entitled *Child's Play*, again attempting to crack the nut of the essential quality of the drypoints and the artists' individual objectives. She leads the reader logically and with focus toward her conclusion that is disappointingly vague because she suggests that each artist was/is about "love," which seems a rather *jejeune* notion. Ninacs prefers to avoid making the link between Milne's "aesthetic emotion" or "aesthetic kick" with that of Clive Bell's "significant form" (with which Milne was very familiar) and does not convey that his notion of intransitive love in painting was truly that and not about a love engaged with everyday attachments. Hartman's brand of love, in contrast, seems much more linked to his surroundings and their histories, much to the benefit of his art. A few other small points about Ninacs' essay: she quotes from her interviews with John Hartman but doesn't give the dates when these took place. She also mentions that scholars view Milne's *Painting Place* as a self-portrait, but

her footnote credits only Rosemarie Tovell with this interpretation. Ninacs senses that Milne has an intense emotional response to landscape and she tidily pigeonholes Milne as a formalist and Hartman as an expressionist. These characterizations are true to an extent, but they establish a polarity that makes it hard to compare their work and to find any aspects in common. Ninacs' strange reference to Milne as a Zen artist has no further explanation; perhaps she means it as a slang term for his habit of working very quickly in one sitting.

Both Tovell and Ninacs perplexingly ignore previous writers on Milne. David Silcox's biography and catalogue *raisonne* of Milne's paintings is not cited nor is Ian Thom's important book for the 1991 touring exhibition that he edited and to which he contributed two texts. Megan Bice's essay, "Creative Courage," in that same publication is an excellent study of what made Milne tick as an artist and how he integrated the principles of his art into his life. Also ignored is the most recent work of scholarship, the multi-authored catalogue, *David Milne Watercolours: Painting toward the light* (Art Gallery of Ontario and Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), edited and contributed to by Katharine Lochnan for the exhibition that traveled to the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario. This absence is somewhat surprising since Tovell herself wrote an essay on Milne's World War I watercolours for that book. Most interestingly for our purposes is that in *Invention & Revival*, Tovell does not engage herself with Lochnan's position that Milne's "invention" of the colour drypoint was in fact inspired by the method invented earlier by a pupil of Whistler, Theodore Roussel.

Appearing last is the dialogue section of the book, where the taped conversation mentioned above is published. Some of the topics the participants mull over are questions comparing their work. Why did Milne and Hartman turn to printmaking at all? Could Milne have handled a larger scale in his work if it had been possible in practical terms? What is the significance of any movement up or down of the horizon line within a composition by either artist? What were the different kinds of plastic plates for colour drypoint used by Milne and Hartman? A stricter editorial hand might have improved the conversation as it has been printed here, with the speakers often searching for words and using phrases like "sort of" that mar their sentences. Diana Nemiroff is credited in one place with saying subject matter as one word and she also implies that subject matter and content are one and the same, using the terms interchangeably.

When the group discusses the topic of the religious and the spiritual, the conversation bogs down because each speaker uses his or her own notion of those words. David Milne Jr. seems wary of baldly attributing these concepts to his father's thinking and artmaking. He cautions the others that Milne "didn't jump up and start to paint because he was having some huge spiritual feeling about

something.” At this juncture one might again recall John O’Brian’s position that Milne was not inclined to pathetic fallacy. John Hartman, in contrast, seems to take it as a given that these notions are keenly and most powerfully present in Milne’s work, especially in his late fantasy pictures with religious themes such as the *Ascension* series, which along with the work of Paterson Ewen, have evidently been so permission-giving to Harman. In the end, however, no consensus is reached on the topic of David Milne’s spirituality.

In conclusion, neither artist has been well served by his treatment in this book. The handling of John Hartman’s drypoints is less than what his work deserves, especially given his fine achievement of positioning landscape painting back on the playing field of serious avant-garde art, and not being bound or coloured by conservatism or any extrinsic agendas. With Hartman’s moving and powerful combination of observed and gorgeously painted topography along with imagined narrative elements, he merits a more impassioned yet also more intellectually refined analysis than has been provided here. Ultimately, the work of David Milne and John Hartman, even in colour drypoint and even in invented, somewhat religious subjects, is vastly different in aesthetics as well as in content.

Looking at their individual pictorial approaches one might consider, for example, the essential element of line. Hartman has a self-conscious relationship with line; it is purposefully naïve in feeling but also expressionist as he explores the surface of the plate. In contrast, Milne produced a line that is more descriptive, tied to mimesis and it sits in implied depth. Milne’s work is far more pictorial; Hartman’s more about process as his line is often freed from representation. The sensibility of each artist is vastly different. The rich layering in Hartman’s work of the history of a place, both real and imagined, is not at all present in Milne’s work. Even in his subject pictures, Milne worked purposely at a remove while Hartman is always emotionally present. He is an embedded artist, viscerally connected to his subjects. The topic of the relationship between these two artists, with the younger consciously emulating the technique of colour drypoint “invented” by the older, needs greater consideration and contemplation before we would have a cogent sense of the various interwoven, complex strands that make up those connections, especially between invention and revival.

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