



The Optimism of Colour: William Pehudoff, a Retrospective

KAREN WILKIN, ROALD NASGAARD
AND ROBERT CHRISTIE

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This is an important book from several points of view. The authors have set out to describe and contextualize the career and art production of one of Canada's senior painters, the respected and talented Saskatoon-based William Pehudoff (1919–). The volume is a serious and ambitious publication, with numerous, large, colour plates and excellent historical photographs. It is encouraging to all Canadian artists to think that they too could one day receive similar treatment at the hands of a public

gallery (in this case it is Saskatoon's Mendel Art Gallery), should they just keep on working and exhibiting. At the time of writing, Pehudoff is ninety-three years old and in fairly frail health; he has not been able to work on large paintings for several years. In charting his career, the swath the book cuts through the history of twentieth-century art is remarkable, even breathtaking. It includes, to cite just one example, a discussion of the key/(in)famous years of the Emma Lake workshops, that weird crucible/chapter in Canadian art history that may never be fully or conclusively unravelled and interpreted. What happened there, and to whom, and how good or how bad it all was, will likely always be controversial. Coincidentally, Pehudoff and his artist wife Dorothy Knowles (1927–) had a cabin on Emma Lake, and so, intriguingly, they ended up participating in many of the workshops and yet maintained their independent and unique status by staying at their own place. Nevertheless, Pehudoff's contact with the artists that he met at the workshops was crucial to his own direction.

The initial and larger questions that come to mind in considering Pehudoff's unlikely career are posed and pondered by the writer of the first of the three texts in the book, Karen Wilkin. How does it happen, she muses, that a person who grows up in a rural environment, far from any urban centre of cultural activity and institutions, even conceives of the idea of becoming an artist, let alone pursues this direction with any success? Wilkin cites incidents

and potential influences such as the bright colours of the scarves from the Caucasus that he saw growing up in a Doukhobor community, but basically comes up empty – this question has no tangible answer. Of course, we can continue to wonder and marvel about people who have seemed destined to become great achievers despite their backwoods origins. We might also puzzle over the notion of Perehudoff's career in terms of critical and curatorial reputation and commercial success. How much was all of this hindered by his coming from and staying in the province of Saskatchewan? Was his peer, Toronto-based artist Jack Bush (1909–1977), a better artist, or did he just have more connections, living and working in Toronto? Perehudoff's Warholian fifteen minutes would seem to have taken place in the mid and late 1970s. He was included in the widely circulating Time Canada-sponsored exhibition of 1975 called *The Canadian Canvas*, and in 1977 was one of the artists selected by Andrew Hudson for a group show in Washington D.C. that received a great deal of press, called *14 Canadians: A Critic's Choice*. Once the new image and neo-expressionist movements in painting were in full swing in the 1980s, however, Perehudoff's status reverted to that of an important regional artist, rather than one on the national radar. But he has not gone unnoticed. He continued to exhibit regularly through the 1980s and 90s, and in 1999 he was awarded the Order of Canada. His work has been included in the major texts on modern Canadian art. All this

is remarkable given his recipe for non-success: staying in a small city in a rural province with very little opportunity for sales of art, and working at a day job in commercial art to survive. His first solo show was at the age of twenty-nine, which seems reasonable, but his first solo exhibition outside of Saskatchewan was held when he was forty-eight. So he was ploughing uphill all the way.

This book sets out to celebrate and honour Perehudoff's achievement and it does so with a fair amount of success. The volume's three authors and their topics are: New York-based Karen Wilkin, who seems to have set out to talk about Perehudoff's mature, abstract paintings; art historian Roald Nasgaard, who focuses on the artist's mural works, and lastly, Robert Christie (1946–), who was one of the Saskatoon-based artists for whom Perehudoff fulfilled the role of a mentor, gives a personal tribute as a younger artist. For reasons that are not apparent, Wilkin spends a large portion of her text on the earlier years of Perehudoff's life and work, covering the same ground as Nasgaard does. Wilkin was the guest curator of the travelling exhibition for which this book forms the catalogue. She also curated a ten-year solo survey show on Perehudoff at the Mendel Gallery in 1981. Now, thirty years later, it is not hugely evident that Wilkin had anything new to bring to the topic, in fact, she sometimes repeats herself almost verbatim from her 1981 catalogue text. For example in the 1981 Mendel catalogue, *William Perehudoff: Ten Years 1970–1980*, she writes of "Perehudoff's interest in Adolph

Gottlieb, Jack Bush and possibly even Joan Miro” (7). In the current book she says: “Perehudoff has been frank about the art that interests and stimulates him, declaring in his paintings of the 1960s, his admiration for Adolph Gottlieb, Jack Bush, and possibly Joan Miro, with a nod at [surely she means “to”] Jules Olitski’s sharply stamped-out *Core* paintings” (23). One cannot help wonder why Miro is only a possible interest – is it Wilkin who thinks this, or Perehudoff? And why not have nailed this down possibility after thirty years? Another example of Wilkin’s verbatim repetition is again on the topic of the artist’s influences. In 1981 she wrote: “But the complexity of Perehudoff’s background is significant. He is a painter who draws upon many sources” (5). In the current book she says: “He is a complex man and a complex painter who draws upon many sources” (26). A reader is not told anything more; no detail about the artist’s complexities, or in what ways he drew upon his sources.

There are other weaknesses in Wilkin’s essay; she attempts to link Perehudoff with other Canadian artists who supported themselves as graphic designers or commercial artists (Tom Thomson, David Milne [1882–1953], some members of the Group of Seven, and Jack Bush). How much relevance does this have? Surely no more than grouping together contemporary artists who all happen to have day jobs as baristas. Wilkin attempts to cover all the bases, but there is no convincing picture of Perehudoff’s period context or the traditions he drew from, and

she makes no distinction between his murals and his mature, abstract paintings. Her attempt to argue for the importance of *place* for Perehudoff as an artist, and his relationship with the prairie environment, is not convincing and seems almost half-hearted. Many of the ideas she introduces are passed off with generalizing phrases, nothing being clarified or exact. Her use of the oppositional Apollonian/Dionysian is a stretch and seems to have very little to do with Perehudoff’s own thinking about or approach to his work. To read a text that truly gives a real and convincing flavour of William Perehudoff we must turn to the writer Nancy Tousley and her essay in the 1993 Mendel Art Gallery’s catalogue for a show called simply *William Perehudoff*. In Tousley’s text we learn, for example, about the early Saskatoon landscape artist Robert Hurley (1894–1980) and his Sunday painting expeditions with the young Perehudoff and that Hurley introduced him to the weekly salon evenings at the home of the so-called *Weinerschnitzel* guru of Saskatoon, the realist landscape artist Ernest Lindner (1897–1988). In addition, Tousley charts Perehudoff’s avid reading. She also relates that, after travelling to Regina to see works by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski in Clement Greenberg’s 1963 *Three American Painters* exhibition, Perehudoff began trying acrylic paint rather than oil, and exploring staining as a technique.

Roald Nasgaard’s essay is titled “The Early Work of William Perehudoff: The murals, a preliminary report.”

This wording is odd, are we to expect a final report coming later? Nasgaard acquits himself with workmanlike dedication to presenting the details of Perehudoff's mural commissions, which spanned the mid 1940s to the early 1960s. In 1949 the artist travelled some 1,500 kilometres to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to attend a fresco workshop given by artist Jean Charlot. This gave him the technical knowledge to begin mural commissions once he was back in Saskatoon. Nasgaard describes these commissions individually and the works are all illustrated with historical photographs that are excellent in quality and redolent of their period. Nasgaard's text is serviceable, marred by only a few aspects. For some reason, he quotes statements directly when it would have been better to simply paraphrase them without quotation marks. Two examples of this are one of Perehudoff's daughters, as saying "Music was really important to Dad" (63), and Dorothy Knowles as recalling that Perehudoff and the American artist Hermann Cherry, who led the 1961 Emma Lake workshop, "got along like a house on fire" (67). Nasgaard's text has a few unfortunate spelling errors that a good editor would surely have caught: in footnote 17 Hans Hofmann is spelled Hoffman. In footnote 45 a woman is quoted as saying curtain road (instead of rod), with no *sic*. Pierro della Francesca is spelled Piero (60) and the artist Will Barnet's name is spelled Barnett (67). And, although the Montreal political activist and artist, architect, and writer Harry Mayerovitch (1910–2004) is cited as the author of an

article on Mexican art in the inaugural issue of *Canadian Art* magazine in 1943 (51), he is not identified, even just in passing, in Nasgaard's text.

But generally we learn what we want to know from Nasgaard's essay and are left contemplating the social and political complexities of the mural movement in general, and how Perehudoff was able to wrangle his own patronage for the art form in Saskatoon in the middle of the last century. His main patron was the meat-packer magnate Fred Mendel (founder of the Mendel Art Gallery), who had an art collection of some interest. Nasgaard mentions a Camille Pissarro, a Maurice de Vlaminck, a Franz Marc, and a Lyonel Feininger, with which Perehudoff was familiar.

Finally Saskatoon-based artist Bob Christie has written a frank and down-to-earth text on the helpful and supportive role that William Perehudoff played in the community of Saskatoon artists over the decades. This essay is a good touch; descriptions and anecdotes by someone who has known the artist well provide important information and there is warmth, admiration, and humour in Christie's approach.

William Perehudoff had two distinct careers: one as a representational muralist, and a second, subsequent one, as an abstract painter. The seeds for his second career were sown during his 1950–51 studies in New York with the Purist artist Amédée Ozenfant and they blossomed forth into pure expressive expanses of colour. Perehudoff's emotions and intellect were channeled into the rarified language

of abstract form with great success. Following his studies in New York, Perehudoff travelled to Europe in 1951 to ask Dorothy Knowles, then studying painting in London, to marry him. They spent some time travelling and seeing museums, then came home to Saskatoon. Perehudoff began his twenty-five year stint as a commercial artist, and also maintained his family's farm near Langham, Saskatchewan. Knowles and he had three daughters, all of whom have gone on to become painters; this is not mentioned in this book.

A brief mention must be made of the French translations of the texts, which follow each English version through the book. For the most part the translation is acceptable, but one trips up on the odd rough patch. In the French version of Bob Christie's essay the final three paragraphs are printed twice. In his text he mentions that "Bill's character simply didn't fit the charismatic" (95) which has unfortunately been translated as "Le caractère simple de Bill" (103). When translating Christie's description of Agnes Martin's fullness of colours, the word "plénitude" is used (106). And the "pulse" that Wilkin says Perehudoff liked to feel in a painting is translated as "impulsion," which means impulse (31).

The design of the book is excellent and serves the topic and images well. Unfortunately, the bibliography and chronology are virtually unusable. The bibliography should have been split into major texts and small reviews, and the chronology is a thicket of entries. If the reader wanted to identify

Perehudoff's most important shows or the major critics and curators who have written about him, it would be a huge chore to weed through the chronology and bibliography to gain any sense of this. The title of the book remains puzzling, and is not credited to anyone, nor explained in the texts. How can colour be optimistic? Why is the noun "exhibition" not added after the adjective "retrospective?" In sum, however, this book is a valiant and commendable effort. It just would have benefited from the hand of a skilled editor to massage the texts and eliminate overlap among them, and to achieve an intelligent organization and format for the bibliography and chronology. The vintage photographs and colour plates of the artist's work are the best parts of the book. Perhaps this is just as it should be.