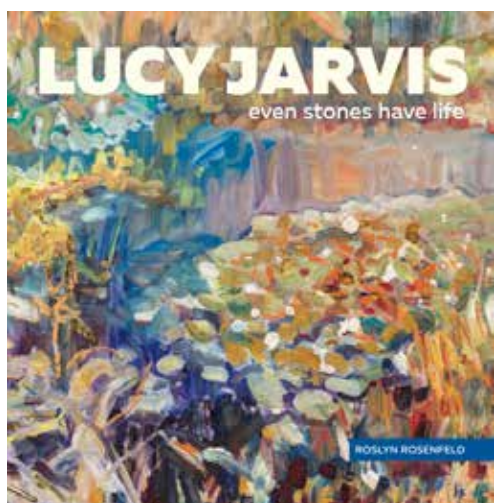




Lucy Jarvis: Even Stones Have Life

ROSLYN ROSENFELD

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Kirk Niergarth

Roslyn Rosenfeld's biography of Lucy Jarvis (1896–1985) opens with a reproduction of the “freshest and most honest self-portrait of her career” and on the verso of this page is a photograph of Jarvis, looking directly into the camera's lens in 1968. Art and life, appropriately two sides of the same page here, are equally inseparable in any consideration of Lucy Jarvis. Rosenfeld has thoroughly explored both in this well-researched biography that reveals Jarvis to be, in Rosenfeld's words, both “an extraordinary artist and individual.”

Jarvis was typical of a woman artist of her generation in several respects: she was born into an upper middle-class family that afforded her artistic training, she never married and, like Florence

Wyle (1881–1968) and Frances Loring (1887–1968), she shared a home for many decades with another woman artist, Helen Weld (1904–1996). These may be the only contexts in which the word “typical” should be attached to Jarvis. “Don't tell me to take care,” she wrote, “tell me to live dangerously!” As a young woman, she successfully integrated her pet monkey into the culture of the conservative Montreal boarding school at which she was (albeit briefly) employed; some fifty years later, at her 80th birthday party, according to one of the guests, “wanting to liven things up a bit more, Lucy fetched her battery operated record player . . . A long-time square dancer, she twirled in our midst like a whirling dervish in her bare feet.” If the pet monkey calls Emily Carr (1871–1945) to mind, there are other reasons for seeing parallels between the two artists: their comfortable origins, their independence of mind, their late-in-life creative experimentation, and their deep connection to the land and people of their respective coasts.

Capturing the spirit of a person as complex and dynamic as Jarvis is no simple task, and Rosenfeld quotes extensively from Jarvis's letters to give the reader a sense of Jarvis's humour, insouciance, and lively intelligence. She was a significant force in the artistic life of the communities in which she spent most of her adult life, Fredericton, NB, and Pembroke Dyke, NS. She did not like to be called a teacher (“I don't teach. People learn,” she said), but she did offer classes that were inspiring and influential to those who learned

within them. With Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904–1949), she founded an art centre on the campus of the University of New Brunswick and ran the centre for more than two decades. During the Second World War, she was a rural film projectionist for the National Film Board of Canada and used this as an avenue to offer child art classes in dozens of small New Brunswick communities. She attended the Kingston Conference of Canadian artists, was one of the Maritime artists who helped launch the magazine *Maritime Art*, and advocated for a more democratic cultural life in Canada.

After retiring from UNB, she lived in a small home and studio in the tiny community of Pembroke Dyke with long-time friend Weld. Jarvis was, however, hardly parochial in her artistic and intellectual interests. She first travelled to Paris in 1955, regularly returned there, and travelled elsewhere in Europe exploring new directions in her painting. She felt a breakthrough occurred in 1961 when she attended Oskar Kokoschka's International School of Seeing. Kokoschka, she wrote in a letter home, was the "first person who gave me the encouragement and courage of my convictions in my work. I learnt to dive at 60 so maybe I will be able to paint soon."

Rosenfeld maintains in this biography that Jarvis *was* able to paint, both in 1961 and earlier, and is deserving of a much larger reputation than she has heretofore been afforded in Canadian art history. It was particularly in the last decades of her life that Jarvis was

able to "liberate herself from academic training acquired at the School of the Museum of Fine Art, Boston." This was a school that Jarvis's sensibilities rebelled against even while she was attending it, yet she graduated a highly-trained draughtsperson and capable portraitist, a skill that would help her make a living as an artist at several junctures in later years. It was only by pushing against this training for decades, experimenting with media and techniques, that Jarvis was able to unlock what Rosenfeld calls her "distinctive and powerfully expressive artistic voice."

Rosenfeld supports her judgement with close and sensitive readings of dozens of Jarvis's works, the vast majority of which are reproduced in colour in this nicely produced volume from Goose Lane Press. It is particularly Jarvis's use of colour and her ability to convey her feelings about a particular space or place that demarcates the best of her work. "Not for her the emblems of nationalism forged by the Group of Seven," Rosenfeld writes when considering the summery *Morning at Pembroke Beach*, which, in colour and sensibility, would make for a "very different type of Canadian icon." This is landscape as home, not a landscape "discovered," explored, or claimed. "I'm becoming more indigenous all the time," Jarvis wrote in 1965 of her place in the community of Pembroke Dyke. This was one of those places Jarvis called a "fountain of reality," meaning it was relatively free of the pretense and materialism she abhorred elsewhere. Jarvis was not a tourist documenting the

quaint life of the folk for the benefit of other urban antimodernists: she lived there authentically. “I get more pleasure from having my works bought for homes around here than I would for having it in the National Gallery. Far more,” she wrote. After reading this biography, it is very difficult to doubt her sincerity.

What Rosenfeld has done here is to allow us to see not just Jarvis’s paintings, but the philosophy of art that underpinned them, one that was simultaneously a philosophy of life since, as Jarvis said, “if it isn’t life, it isn’t art, somewhere it’ll prove it’s not.” At times, I wish Rosenfeld had pushed further into the intellectual roots of this philosophy, exploring the annotations of Jarvis’s astonishingly eclectic personal library or the occasional allusions in her letters, but I suspect that this kind of pedantry would have been anathema to Jarvis herself: “I will always find it impossible to keep rational in a discussion,” she said, “One needs poetry to tell the truth, not statistics.” At the end of the most explicit written expression of her ideas, which Rosenfeld reproduces in its entirety, Jarvis explains: “The word ‘culture’ seems to signify an artificial manipulation of something good. It is here that *value* finally comes in. Art is valuable to people in arid soil. Outside of that it is like participating in a dance – a communication of what all the dancers know already.” Jarvis preferred to show rather than tell, and with Rosenfeld’s guidance we are able to see what Jarvis called the “natural vision” manifested in her paintings.

“There is no great or small art,” Jarvis wrote when she was 84. “There is only the striving to make tangible some visual experience that one feels could be thirst quenching to humanity and to oneself.” Jarvis spent a long lifetime slaking her considerable creative thirst. Revisiting her journey in this thoughtful biography is a quenching experience. Jarvis said she did not teach, but Rosenfeld shows us that we have much left to learn from her.

Communal Spaces: *Emerging Through the Fog* into a New Place for Northwest Coast Arts

India R. Young

Not a First Thursday, not even a Friday, 30 March 2016 was not your typical art opening. The exhibition had quietly been open for nearly a month. Today, however, was the thirteenth anniversary of Art Thompson’s (Tsa-qwa-supp, 1948–2003) passing. Hjalmer Wenstob (Tlehpik, b. 1993), a young Nuučaan’ ul (Nuu-chah-nulth) artist, had brought us all together to celebrate Thompson on this day at his exhibition, *Emerging Through the Fog: Tsa-qwa-supp and Tlehpik – Together*, at the University of Victoria’s Legacy Art Gallery. The exhibition featured a selection of prints by Thompson intermixed with several of Wenstob’s carvings. By the time I arrived a large crowd had already gathered,