

10 Canadian Artists in the 1970s An Exhibition for European Tour

Roald Nasgaard

Art Gallery of Ontario, 1980

112 pages, 57 ill., \$7.50

About five years ago, the late Amy Goldin commented in *Art in America* that "art in Canada is oppressed by the fear of provincialism" and she then went on to suggest that this might help explain why "Canadian artists are eager to compete for international recognition." It must have been with some satisfaction, then, that Roald Nasgaard, Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario learned during the 10th International Sculpture Conference held in Toronto in 1978 of the interest on the part of European curators and critics in an internationally touring exhibition of Canadian art.

The result of this encouragement was *10 Canadian Artists in the 1970s*, which after opening in Toronto, circulated for eight months to three centres in western Europe (although I must admit I had to use an atlas to locate two of the cities). Fortunately the artists are much more familiar: Baxter, Bush, Ewen, Favro, Kennedy, Martin, Molinari, the Rabinowitch twins and Snow. That is to say, three "painter-painters," three multimedia conceptualists, two minimalist sculptors, one conceptual painter and one "process-painter." The exhibition was accompanied by a hefty, well-designed and fully illustrated catalogue where the artists' statements seem to be as important as the works themselves.

The exhibition, and therefore the catalogue, is essentially thematic. Nasgaard's notion was to present:

art which has deliberately undertaken a shift in focus away from the object in order to set up a conscious dialogue between object and viewer... a tendency (which has) been... labelled Minimalism, Process Art, Conceptual Art etc...

Given that this premise is the binding principle for the choice of both the artists and the works, it is rather surprising that Nasgaard has not been more exacting in his definitions. Minimalism, as has been emphasized by other writers, is better described as

literalism because of the hierarchy of the object and the artist's direct relationship with his materials. This is at the opposite pole to conceptualism given its disdain for the act of execution. Process art presents a third and distinct tendency because of its emphasis on the pattern of physical transformation and its insistence on the object's process of production.

Nasgaard's concern for art that exists essentially within itself, alienated from the outside world, demands that the work must have conviction and authority for its essential meaning lies within the power of its presence. Similarly, as the objects are intended to participate in a specific sort of dialogue with the viewer, the integrity of the piece is essential. Furthermore, because Nasgaard has chosen, on the face of it, to emphasize art which does not obey traditional expectations wherein the work is comprehended in a single glance or a series of glances, the object's appeal to the mind must be sustaining. If the work does not follow these precepts, it can end up looking contrived and witless.

But does the selection of the pieces and the choice of artists really live up to Nasgaard's criteria stated in the catalogue? Or are we rather presented with a Procrustian exercise where the hoped-for uniformity of aesthetic is arrived at through arbitrary decisions? Several of the pieces are either too timid or too jokey to illustrate Nasgaard's proposition. In the curator's "Preliminary Explanation" to the catalogue, he comments that this exhibition is "celebrating achievement not testing 'new talent'." Such reasoning presumably justifies the inclusion of Jack Bush in this context. Nasgaard proposes that Bush's reinvention of figure-ground relationships permits a dialectic interaction between object and viewer. But the complex relationships that Bush presents on a purely visual level encourage a direct emotional response precisely because of its appeal to the senses. Unlike the work of Kennedy, for instance, there is in Bush something to look at. The range of visual stimulus ensures that the work will continue to give of itself. Perhaps Bush simply has to be included in any Canadian exhibition for export. In this way, he can be made to

stand for all of Toronto painting in the 1970's.

Paterson Ewen is also a peculiar choice. Although his forthright process and rather primitive drawing is sufficiently awkward to separate him from the modernists, his emotionally charged images do not quite fit into a reductionist pigeon-hole. It is also surprising that in terms of reputation, Baxter and Kennedy should be included in the same context as Snow and Molinari. It seems that the "senior artists" act as a kind of support for those with shorter careers and less evolved histories.

That these artists really do "indicate the variety and richness of artistic production in this country" is slightly misleading. Rather, the exhibition does not accurately reflect the full degree of experimentation and aesthetic enterprise in Canadian art. With the exception of Bush, there is no representation of the renaissance of painterly abstraction. Neither realism nor the various forms of obsessional representationalism are presented. While Nasgaard seemingly did not want to send out a show that took risks, it might have been interesting for him to have chosen only one of the Rabinowitch brothers, especially since no other sculptors are included.

While it is always easy to reinvent a thematic exhibition with a different cast of characters, it does seem that this show has a strongly London, Ontario bias. That most of the artists have some connection with the Carmen Lamana Gallery of Toronto could also reinforce the notion that the show is, in more ways than one, a reflection of an entrenched art establishment. Because the exhibition has so many guidelines and parameters, it runs the risk of denying the fact that Canadian art possesses a greater energy and vitality of ideas than this presentation would suggest.

The catalogue is, ironically, more satisfying than the exhibition. Perhaps this is readily understandable when the theme of the show seems more important than the work included. Even if the arguments are not overly convincing, Nasgaard's twelve page introduction is well-written. The brief "histories" of the artists' work following his opening remarks are arranged chrono-

logically. Except in the case of Molinari, however, the discussion pays little attention to the artist's cultural milieu. Unfortunately, the text is riddled with exaggerated claims for Canadian aesthetic ingenuity; and Nasgaard's short discussion of the artists' approaches is slightly undermined by nationalistic chest-thumping and some twisting of art history. Given that the exhibition was primarily intended for a European audience, that kind of rhetoric can tend to make us look like colonials.

Following Nasgaard's essay, the next eighty-five pages are given over to the artists. Each individual, in alphabetical order, is represented by the inevitable artist's statement (in varying degrees of literacy), then illustrations of the work (including pieces not exhibited), and the entry concludes with a selected *curriculum vitae*. For some curious reason, Royden Rabinowitch's biography has his birthplace and date and the title of only one of his exhibitions. At the end of the book, the catalogue entries for the exhibition are listed, a useful device for discerning exactly what went on tour.

All in all, *10 Canadian Artists in the 1970s* offers an individual point-of-view that seems slightly out-of-date. As an exhibition for European circulation, it does present art that looks like art done elsewhere, and because of that, the show should bring us the validation we seemingly crave so much. That the catalogue essay is insufficiently analytical and somewhat lame is unfortunate. There is a good idea here, but it needs to be explored at greater length and within a larger context. Canadian art should be promoted on the international circuit, but perhaps in a format that shows more openness to the wider range of achievement than is described in this exhibition.

Sandra Paikowsky