

Stanley Brunst: Radical Painter

Terrence HEATH

Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, 1982

24 pp., 4 colour, 55 b&w ills., \$3.00

This landmark exhibition catalogue accompanied a show of fifty-two works by Stanley Brunst at the Mendel Art Gallery (30 September — 14 November, 1982). The artist worked for eighteen years in Saskatoon, from 1923-1941, but has almost been forgotten since his move to Vancouver in 1941. Recently a nephew of the late artist came forward with some three hundred previously unknown works, several of which were donated to the Mendel Art Gallery. This exhibition, then, marked the first time these paintings had been exhibited publicly and the catalogue presents an opportunity to set Brunst in an artistic context.

Terrence Heath, author of the catalogue, is to be commended on establishing the basic "tombstone" data on Brunst. To ascertain even rudimentary facts took a great deal of research on his part. None of this material has appeared in published form before; so at the very least, the catalogue is a valuable research tool for students in Canadian art history working on twentieth-century art in western Canada. Unfortunately, there is a large gap in the catalogue due to a regrettable decision by Heath to concentrate on Brunst the man rather than Brunst the painter. It is Brunst's work which is intriguing, not his life, and one is piqued to know more about his artistic sources and his ideas.

Generally, Brunst worked in watercolour on cheap paper; he used bright, pure colours. His paintings are small in scale and the artist appears to have been fond of patterning and organic forms. As is evident in his paintings, he seems to have been familiar with the Cubist breaking up of form and shallow space and with Futurist dynamic movement. His works are not even in quality. Some are cluttered and, at times, flat areas of colour

are too thin and brittle-looking. One of Brunst's best works is an untitled watercolour from c. 1935-40 in which trees form a screen on the picture plane, behind which a brightly coloured fence and houses are rendered in a simplified way. Later, Brunst moved away from such naturalistic subject matter and began to work with more fanciful subjects and compositions. Although Heath does not suggest what any of Brunst's sources may have been, one clue exists in one of the artist's paintings — an untitled still life from 1936. One of the books depicted on a table is Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art*.

In his biographical work on the artist, Heath estimates Brunst's birthdate as c. 1894 and surmises that he arrived in Canada from England in c. 1912. There is some possibility that he was a Quaker. He came to Saskatoon from Borden, Saskatchewan in 1923, first working as a construction labourer, then as a drycleaner. He received no art training. Brunst lived in Saskatoon throughout the Depression and associated with other artists working in the city. He was a member of Ernest Lindner's Art Association of Saskatchewan, formed in 1939, for example, and exhibited with them (something Heath does not mention).¹ He also attended Lindner's Saturday Nights which were gatherings of artists for discussion. In 1941 Brunst inexplicably moved to Vancouver. Perhaps he moved for artistic reasons — he had begun abstract paintings in 1936 and was possibly seeking a more receptive audience for his new work. (A parallel exists here with Fritz Brandtner, who moved to Montréal in 1934 after six years in Winnipeg in order to find a more accepting milieu for his work.) Certainly Brunst seems to have found a niche for himself in Vancouver. Heath mentions that once there he knew Lawren Harris, Joe Plaskett, Emily Carr and B.C. Binning. He was given an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1941. (There

are no details on this supplied by Heath — the research on Brunst's Vancouver years remains to be done.) Brunst attended lectures at the Vancouver Art Gallery including one delivered in 1944 by the English surrealist painter, Grace Pailthorpe, who had such an influence on Jock Macdonald. One fact not touched on by Heath is that Lawren Harris bought one of Brunst's works from the 1941 exhibition for his own collection² and so it would appear that his work was greeted with some approval on the West Coast. Brunst died in Vancouver in 1962 at the approximate age of sixty-eight.

Charles Hill first revealed what a fascinating and richly varied period the 1930's was for Canadian painting in his 1975 *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*. But, Saskatchewan and Alberta were virtually excluded from that work, and now, almost ten years later, much of the necessary research for a broad overview of this period of art in the prairie provinces remains to be done. In this respect, Heath's catalogue is a welcome contribution to published research in this area. It is fairly well-written and is handsome in design. But while it forms an adequate introduction to the artist, it is by no means the last word on his work. Brunst left an intriguing body of modernist abstract paintings which have only recently come to public knowledge. At this point, what is needed is intensive research into Brunst as an *artist* in order that a full and proper interpretation of his work be made. Then he can take a well-deserved place in the written history of Canadian art.

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Notes

¹ Lindner papers, file on the Art Association of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Archives, Saskatoon office.

² Letter from Ernest Lindner to Illingworth Kerr, April 29, 1941 discusses this sale. Lindner papers, Saskatchewan Archives, Saskatoon office.