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ARTISTS IN CANADA

by

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One day, just about this time last year, I arrived in Saskatoon to give a lecture. I was met at the airport by Eli Bernstein, a constructivist whose metal tree composed of rectangular aluminium sheets was one of the new monuments of the city. Three days later I was seen off again at the airport by Otto Rogers, an abstract expressionist, painter and sculptor, whose only obvious likeness to Bernstein was that he talked about art all the time. In between, there were parties of artists, visits to see the few works of modern art established in public places to the surprise of the public and horror of the press, with visits half the night through to the studios of painters - so that I too was talking art all the time. Moreover there were five exhibitions on in the place, in galleries, improvised galleries and in the Louis Riel Coffee House and I had the impression of almost exhausting artistic activity in Saskatoon. I remember the city looking charming with the trees sparkling with thick hoarfrost and its many bridges spanning the curve of the icebound river in the wintry stillness, as a frozen place with a fit of fever all the same. I'm afraid this kind of excitement does not come over in the Tate show of Canadian art.

Saskatoon is in the middle of the prairie; I flew back to Edmonton on the far edge of it. That was where I was living for a year. A large new city. From my windows I could see a good deal of it - it covers a hundred square miles and I never got bored looking at it. It didn't fuzz away, losing its edges after the first quarter of a mile - I really could see it. The light through the dry air of the parklands, between the Prairies and the Rockies, made the sight exhilarating, always, and often glorious - a strong, even, undiffused light that hit the objects in its way like a slab. Westwards I saw all the white buildings, long strips, high blocks, equally dazzling from nearest to farthest: it looked like a white-washed desert town in Africa. Winter and summer alike, in the opposite

direction, the commercial buildings downtown were stacked in piles, clear-cut, evenly tinted; fierce pink, liver red, pale orange, every kind of white; crisp, not degraded by effects of distance - I would need to walk out to discover whether such and such a building was four or six blocks away, nearer or further than the one that seemed wedged beside it. And even far off, beyond the city limits, the huge drums of the oil refinery, planted in rows, stood sharp as mugs on a dresser shelf. Above all the clutter of such brilliantly revealed objects, I looked into so many miles of sky and this was tremendously exciting - looking further into the air than ever before. Here, I thought, it should be possible for an artist to make those clear and definitive statements it would be so fine to make, ambiguous only with the inherent ambiguities of art - at least not invaded by the equivocations of our English weather.

The oldest building in Edmonton is the Methodist Church of 1871; yet as I drove back sometimes, halted at the intersection above the High Level Bridge, I could see mid-distance across the river the golden light on the Legislative Building, trees on the steep bank, the downtown skyscrapers above - it could be as beautiful as a Roman painting by Corot. Perhaps it was the Corot I should miss, an unassailable standard of worth in painting - that was not here. The art gallery has a modest collection of Canadian painting, but not one undoubted first rank picture for an artist or the public to see. I wasn't minding myself; it was a relief not to have heard of several exhibitions in Bond Street I ought to see; still, good art rises where good art is available and here it wasn't. The nearest gallery showing major travelling exhibitions was six hundred miles away, the centres of national culture as far as Moscow is from London. And, however mobile the Canadians are, the trip to Toronto costs time and money and I knew plenty of artists who had never made it. There were the magazines, of course, lying on my table with reproductions of de Kooning and of Delacroix. But whatever is said this doesn't do. To young English painters the American show in London in 1956 was a revelation, although

they thought they knew all about it and had been doing the same thing, they supposed, for a couple of years. By reproductions you are informed of what is going on, what matters doesn't seem to come over. Rather pointless simple decorative divisions of a rectangle by Barnett Newman turn out to be something almost sublime. I used to get depressed sometimes, sometimes even angry thinking of my artist friends and what they put up with. My friend, Les Graff, had a job promoting arts and crafts for the government of Alberta. He had worked his way through the art school in Calgary, a very good one - worked his way because there are no public grants for art students. In England he might have been an ex-star of the Young Contemporaries with a couple of shows behind him, and a travelling scholarship. Of course in London, too, he might be as badly off through missing the fashion, but he wouldn't be so lonely.

He is one of a group of youngish painters. They have one regular place to show their pictures in - two small rooms, run by the artists as a co-operative gallery, in a maze of second floor corridors in a small office building. They can keep it open only for a few afternoons and evenings each week. The shows change each month, the sales had been three works in eighteen months. There was no art critic on the daily paper to write them up. They must hope to get in to the eye-catching biennial at Winnipeg or attract the notice of the traveller from the National Gallery. This is Edmonton, a city of a third of a million. I guess I am annoying my friends there. For they are going to build a new art gallery; there is a critic now on the daily paper, a dealer has opened a gallery in the centre of the city, there is enthusiasm, there is money, all things shall in due course be added to it. The trouble really is in the newness.

I am indeed viewing the Canadian artist's lot from the newest large city, in the newest province, the most remote from the historical centres of Canadian life. But it would be wrong to miss out such cities from any picture of Canadian art today.

The artists whose work we now see at the Tate don't seem to come

out of a wilderness; they are part of the international art situation. They are perhaps comparable historically with the English artists who came forward between the wars and made England a part of modern art. In Canada the historic events and the artistic coups d'état that have won the place in the sun have occurred a generation later. Borduas and Pellan (perhaps like Wyndham Lewis here) toppled the artistic establishment in Montreal; a few years later my dear dead friend Jock Macdonald and others, more gently undermined the establishment in Toronto. If they live in Montreal or Toronto young artists can now make their way in their own time, even if with plenty of argument, can get about and soon be part of the international set-up.

In Toronto in an afternoon's walk you can visit a dozen dealers' galleries; they will show you Canadian, British, French art - they are selling it to a big buying public. There is the Tintoretto and plenty more in the art gallery; there is a stupendous collection of Chinese art. The conditions are there for an artist with energy and courage like Harold Town to find his style and make it known and win support and épater le bourgeois. Even more in Montreal which is one of those great complicated, long-established cities you can never come to the end of. Art is a built-in part of it. There are art supplements in the week-end papers. It has glamour. The artists can find their way to New York and Paris, the pictures from Paris and New York come in.

Edmonton looked at from Montreal must seem the capital of another country and, of the support the artist needs from society, Edmonton offers only the self-sacrificing efforts of a few and the interest and enthusiasm of an amateur kind which is one of the remarkable facts of the Canadian scene. I'm all for it - the proliferation of art groups, evening classes, sketch clubs. They make sure that people think of art as something that is done, that goes on as part of a community. The professional may not get much

more out of it than this, but without it he could easily be a mandarin. Almost all the painters I met were, one way or another, involved with this tremendous elementary enthusiasm for art, and the amateur effort is much more exhilarating than it is in England. For one thing lots of people who, here, would go to art schools, don't and can't, and the amateur field contains much more of the talent. I myself had some lively weekends hemmed in by housewives with oil paint in their hair.

This kind of first enthusiasm springs up everywhere in Canada like gophers on the prairie and from it begins to grow the informed and critical opinion, which is what the Canadian artist is missing most. You see it starting with the art-rental societies run by enthusiastic ladies. As likely as not the artist finds his first market there and gets his work circulating from city to city. An art rental soiree, when the new stock of art has arrived and is to be distributed or sold by these ladies is an event not to be missed - heart-warming alike in Edmonton or Ottawa.

From these and other centres of promotion, by due process, as we know, the leaders emerge. The National Gallery of Canada now shows some of them at the Tate. They are all professional modern artists at home here as there. The first ecstatic look at their own landscape was the excitement of an earlier generation, now the scenery is the total available imagery of modern art. But what this exhibition does not show, is that in its art Canada is more like four or five modern art countries strung in a row than one centred in its capital. Perhaps it isn't popular to proclaim this because it may not be desirable policy that geography should preserve or impose regional differences in culture. But in Canada the geographical differences are immense. The distances are great, the relative accessibility of artistic influences is a factor that would not easily and will not be overcome. What happens and matters in art depends on actual works of art and live contacts of live artists, not just on the news. So there is regional variation and independence, the good side of a certain unavoidable disconnection.

So you couldn't miss out Regina in the middle of the prairies. A group of artists there has brought in some of the American hard-edge painters and

their work - unfamiliar in other parts of Canada; artists who are now being seen for the first time in London. Clement Greenberg and Kenneth Noland have directed summer workshops where the professional painters could work together. I arrived in Regina one day when the newspapers published a photograph of a picture by the American painter Jules Olitski, bought by the local art gallery. It was not being gently received. I was hauled before the TV cameras and got involved. This picture looked so natural here, not in the least an example of a smart kind of art object. Outside were the huge areas of prairie, the mile-long patches of yellow grass clear cut through the snow, the blank radiant spring sky. The clean, sparse shapes of Olitski's picture seemed to float up into space with serene quietness, the painting glowed with generosity and optimism. It was precise yet full of tenderness. The artists at Regina had wanted this picture. It suited their country and their work.

It wouldn't belong in this way in Vancouver. Beyond the mountains, a thousand miles away, Vancouver looks up and down the coast to Seattle and San Francisco and across the ocean to Japan. It has its Canadian Japanese artists, a climate of islands and ocean inlets, a landscape of Hiroshige, houses with that element of Japan that Frank Lloyd Wright insisted on. Looking down on all this, after dinner, Jack Shadbolt decides that after all he has some paintings to show me. We go in and he starts. After an hour he pours another drink and hauls down another rackful. And goes on talking of the roots in the ground and things growing up and branching every way, and spreads out his arms and strains his fists apart; then brings out pictures that look like documents with seals and signatures in invented languages or patterns for poems in imaginary oriental calligraphies. These seemed the right thing, tying up with other things in Vancouver, but without much connection with Regina.

Then at the other end of the continent, at St. John's in Newfoundland, Christopher Pratt has perhaps three or four pictures - they are all on the walls to be seen, with the drawings in which he got the intervals and tones right. They are very small, have been worked on for months - everything worked away except the few shapes and lines that make a small piece of the world large, classical, lonely and sad - the wire fence drawn taut across the

snow and the picture; the painted window with its folded curtain framing the loneliest part of the night outside. Round Newfoundland the fishing villages are clamped like swallows' nests to the rocky coast; you feel there are only a few footholds yet after centuries of storm and disaster. The artist is still like a hermit monk, outside the stream of progress and rackets of promotion, as though in Lindisfarne in the dark ages. Yet he links up with a few other artists scattered about the Maritime Provinces, for this is where American magic realism gets a foothold, represented at the Tate by the work of Alec Colville. A far cry from Montreal.

This is what I would try to stress in Canadian art - its variety and the adventurous excitement of lonely artists or of small groups of artists, hardly in contact from east to west with each other, but all making contacts somewhere. I would not attempt to define, still less emphasise its special Canadianism. Canadians did not always agree with or approve this feeling, but it was enthusiastically supported by a visiting artist from the U.S.A. who knows Canada and many of its painters. Will Barnett had dropped in to Calgary for a couple of days and we were a party of artists gathered in the garden of Jim and Marion Nicoll - the doyen and the doyenne of modern art in Alberta - to celebrate his visit and the completion of Marion's new studio, a high wooden tent, gleaming new in the long grass on the wild side of the garden. The day was hot and it was the ideal kind of tea party, tables out in the shadow of the trees with beer straight from the freezer offered as an alternative to the tea. We talked all around this very subject - the panorama of Canadian art; how to piece it together, how to try. Anyhow, how insufficiently it was in general presented, and how it might be presented in its promise and enthusiasm in some quite different way from any official showing of its recognized achievement. It would perhaps have to be done by outsiders - no Canadian authorities could possibly be so unfair. Will Barnett and I agreed that we were among the few people we knew who would dare to be speculative and idiosyncratic enough to make the proper showing. In fact we agreed to do it if we were asked. Perhaps we wouldn't return to the country if we did.