

Art of This Place . . .

where golden prairie spreads out under a translucent blue dome as far as the eye can see.

BY ELIZABETH BEAUCHAMP

Grazing through art history with distinctly contemporary eyes, Chris Carson singles out Tom Thomson's well-loved *The Jack Pine* — and lightheartedly tweaks the nose of an icon that has characterized us as a nation of intrepid strugglers scattered across a rocky and beautiful wilderness. In *Great Canadian Hero* (1994), Ontario's legendary cottage country is still rocky, but hardly wild. Instead it reels from both over-development and advertising top spin.

The maple leaf, a symbol long since commandeered by the commercial world, is forced back into the service of fine art. Oscar, an emblem of cultural imperialism, stages a guest appearance, while the word 'hero' blasts into view. Carson, who admits to being "totally involved with pop culture," says the painting is about "recycling culture from my perspective."

The Edmonton artist's cheeky remake of Thomson's masterpiece is as much homage as lampoon and suggests that three-quarters of a century after *The Jack Pine* was painted, it continues to cast long shadows. For years, the images made famous by Thomson and the Group of



Great Canadian Hero, (1994), Chris Carson

Seven decorated school hallways and bank lobbies across the country. They are stuck in our collective memory because they came to represent "Canadian" art, even though the terrain they depict doesn't necessarily speak to the hearts of those of us raised on the prairies.

The challenge, then, for the intrepid, struggling Alberta artist has been to create a fresh art of this place. Maintaining a shifting balance somewhere between embracing

and discarding the various international influences that have periodically swept through the province has been central to the unfolding dream.

Illingworth Kerr (1905-86) never forgot that the first oil painting he ever saw was a Group of Seven landscape. Leaving his home in Lumsden, Saskatchewan in 1924, he headed to the Ontario College of Art. At that time and continuing into the 1950s, it was the most prestigious art school in Canada and inextricably linked with the Group of Seven. Kerr went on to enjoy a rich career as an artist and teacher. When he eventually settled permanently in Calgary, he recognized the relentless, unreachable prairie horizon for what it was — a challenge. He called it "that domineering tyrant."

Capturing the prairie on canvas had eluded those who came before Kerr, the European-trained painters who saw the vast prairie through European eyes. Their roots in English watercolour or Scandinavian romanticism usually misled them when it came to capturing the essence of the west. They liked to organize a picture into a foreground grove of trees, a midground lake or river

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Hayland and Distant Mountains, (1985), *Illingworth Kerr*

and a background of forest or mountains. That formula had never failed to reproduce the gentle English countryside. It also worked, with a more rugged flair, for the cottage country north of Toronto. But it failed to speak to the hearts of those raised where golden prairie spreads out under a translucent blue dome as far as the eye can see.

Though racked with doubts about his own ability to interpret “the great flat land” he so respected, Kerr’s discoveries opened a generation of artists to a novel way of looking at the west. His great breakthrough came in the summer of 1954, when he took a leave from his duties as head of art at Calgary’s Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (the Tech) to study in Provincetown, Massachusetts with the great European-trained colour theorist, Hans Hofmann. A legend in the modernist world of American abstract expressionism, Hofmann had devised an approach to creating a sense of space and depth across a canvas often referred to as the “push and pull of colour.” Now it is a widespread and accepted part of art theory, but then, to an

Alberta painter, it was radically new. Simply put, when two identical shapes are painted different colours, they react to each other, with the darker of the two receding and the lighter appearing to come out towards the viewer. Hofmann advised setting up complexes of colour to create a three-dimensionality that ignored linear perspective. However, he cautioned his awestruck students to resist treating his theory as if it were a dry formula. Instead, he was in line with the Group of Seven’s insistence on finding the spirit of a subject.

Hofmann’s approach can be seen in Kerr’s *Hayland and Distant Mountains* (1985), the kind of painting we have come to think of as Albertan. He removes details that don’t ring true, while he touches on our love of spaciousness. Strips and blocks of colour hues set up harmonious vibrations of depth and surface illusion carried out in an abstract way. The glorias cascading across the distant mountain tops not only describe how the sky near Calgary actually behaves, they communicate a sense of wonder. Finally, the high viewpoint evokes a feeling of lighter-than-air freedom for the viewer

who must be floating in the sky, looking out across the vast expanse.

Like Kerr, Marion Nicoll (1909-85) had a conventional training in art, first at the Ontario College of Art and then at the Tech, where she taught part time. This education left her “looking for more.” When J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald breezed through Calgary, staying as head of art at the Tech for only one year, he brought with him what Nicoll sought, a deeper understanding of modernism. Macdonald was exploring the subconscious through what was then called automatic drawing. In the early 1920s, the Parisian surrealists used the technique to fashion what they argued was a more truthful reality than that offered by the visible world. The idea was to close your eyes and let your hand alone create the drawing. By the time it came to Alberta, however, it was as an exercise to free the mind of restrictive, conventional drawing methods. Nicoll knew that Montreal artists were pursuing this strategy, but the personal connection with Macdonald kindled her interest. Automatic drawing set her on a journey towards some of the earliest abstract paintings in Alberta, the landscape “totemics” and figurative “icons” for which she is so well known. Along different paths,

Nicoll and Kerr were both moving towards a depiction of the spacious west through simplification and abstraction.

Given the popularity of Kerr’s vision, it’s possible to imagine a visitor from another planet touring an exhibition of prairie paintings and leaving with the impression that no one actually lives here. This place is often portrayed as an idyllic landscape unsullied by civilization, a paradise where the hay magically stacks itself into neat rows. So early attempts to integrate the viewer into a non-idealized view was a challenge for British-trained Henry George Glyde (1906-98).

He was one of the earliest Alberta painters to offer a less picturesque panorama than those who preceded him. Glyde ran the art department at the Tech for more than a decade before starting the art division at the University of Alberta in 1947. His 1941 painting, *The Exodus*, describes a post-Depression, prairie migration and reveals his strong ties to British social realism. Even though the grey city in the distance hardly seems more hopeful than the flooding village with its swaying church and houses, the distraught people have no choice but to line up for the exit queue. Here the stormy, Alberta sky serves as a stock-art, historical metaphor for impending doom and suggests that Glyde



The Exodus, (1941), Henry George Glyde



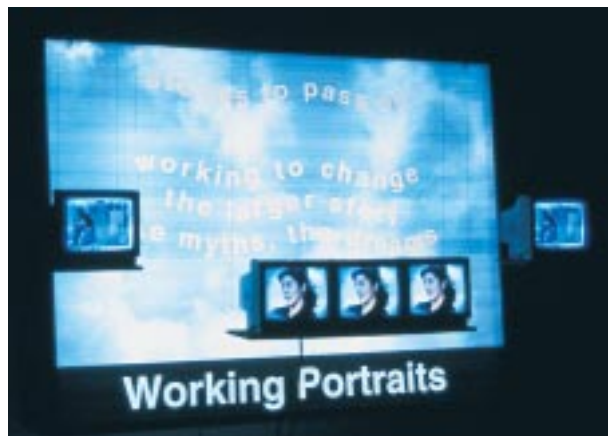
Portable Canadian Hero II, (1972), Norman Yates

never really freed himself of a European viewpoint. Although his descriptive, English watercolour technique, combined with Group of Seven visual rhythms, never added up to stylistic individuality, his commitment to the notion that a troubled Alberta society was a worthy artistic subject represented a radical shift in what was considered appropriate at the time.

One of the young painters Glyde attracted to his fledgling art department at the University of Alberta in the early 50s was Saskatchewan-born Norman Yates. His *Portable Canadian Hero II* (1972) is an enormous drawing based on a mugshot of a jailed, unemployed trekker who had been caught up in the Regina Riot of July 1, 1935. Portrait painting in Alberta is fairly rare, because our post-colonial history follows the invention of photography. But when the image of ourselves does come into view, it is often linked with social commentary without straying too far from the scale and spaciousness of our environment.

With small, textured, pencil strokes across 18 large pieces of paper, Yates gently replaces an imposed, jail-house photograph with the detailed caress of a drawing. The grid formed by the sheets of paper refers to the practice of enlarging and so suggests the scale of history painting. However, instead of the formal rigor of VIP portraiture in the grand manner, we are presented with the immediacy of a sketch. The grid further acts as a logical, geometric foil to the humanity of the face, while an undescribed spaciousness, starkly constructed by the plain, white paper surrounds the unsung hero. Yates, who is best known as a landscape painter, talked about the drawing this way: "Maybe that's how we all envision the whole world. It always comes to us partially by way of details that we put together in our memory, giving us a feeling of the whole. I made a direct physical contact between the surface of the paper and the notion that I was also manipulating a kind of limitless space."

Well, we've come a long way since Tom Thomson romanced the landscape. And even further still since



Working Portraits, (1992), Leila Sujir

Norman Yates reduced it to an abstract whiteness arranged with impeccable, never-ending logic. The latest generation of Alberta artists are immersed in international influences. Still, if only because they are occupying the same striking physical space, subtle echoes of the first generation of Alberta artists still reverberate today.

Although more related to international video art than to *Portable Canadian Hero*, Leila Sujir's *Working Portraits* seems haunted by the spirit of Yates' 1972 drawing. Her six-channel video installation from 1992 offers 20 "portraits of night cleaners talking about their work, their hopes, dreams and disappointments." Although the subjects and compositions are similar, Yates' direct, hand-drawn approach contrasts sharply to Sujir's kinetic, technology-informed, post-modern re-creation. The sky framing the monitors, however, remains a central element, reaching out across a generation. Clouds and text waft across a picture-postcard, light-filled blue. Here the fair-weather sky is an Alberta stereotype which frames the real drama. But its use also alludes to a continuing role as a defining physical and emotional presence in our lives.

A little surprisingly, Sujir says she was "deeply influenced" by Marion Nicoll's automatic drawings. Describing



Marion Nicoll's automatic drawings



The Dark Pool, (1996),
Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

those direct pen-and-ink sketches as “dream sequences,” Sujir recalls that the legendary artist explained that “the drawings built a ground for her to stand on so she wouldn’t be swayed by every little breeze that came along. She said you had to take risks that sometimes put you in opposition to what is going on around you.”

Born in Hyderabad, India and raised in Alberta, Sujir’s own personal history is the ground that sustains her explorations into issues of class, race, gender, displacement and immigration. When a character in one of Sujir’s videos, *The Dreams of the Night Cleaners*, sums up

a generation of disappointment by saying, “this country at a distance is a wonderful dream,” she challenges our assumptions about what it really means to be Albertan.

A more indirect, Alberta narrative is experienced through a visit into *The Dark Pool* (1996), a collaborative, interactive installation by Lethbridge artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. It was the crowd-pleaser at the first Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art in 1996. As much related to the everyday aesthetic of the Alberta garage sale as to a pop-culture obsession with unexplained phenomena, this exploratory sound piece pushes at the edges of what an audience can expect from an art gallery. Moving through a plain doorway, expecting little more than a broom closet, the visitor is hurtled like Alice through the Looking Glass into a mysterious, dimly lit interior space. At first glance, the room seems full of junk. But slowly it becomes apparent that every object has been carefully placed, as if the occupants of this lab/living quarters had been interrupted suddenly and disappeared.

As visitors browse through annotated books, old photographs, a rack of clothing, a typewriter holding an unfinished letter, or tea leaves in cups set out and labelled like scientific specimens, they either trigger or stop snippets of sound — footsteps, conversations, music and gurgling water. A severed bird’s wing flaps unexpectedly, while two huge, trumpet-shaped speakers whisper to anyone brave enough to sit in between them. An old suitcase lights up to reveal a miniature scene of the mysterious Dark Pool, a local curiosity surrounded by people and old-fashioned cars. If *The Dark Pool* is our collective memory, it’s a strange and murky place. It constantly slips out of our logical grasp while it tugs at our need to find meaning. At the same time, the installation seems to mirror our collective position, as we perch on the edge of a scientific/materialistic black hole of our own making.

The oily depths of *The Dark Pool* are the complete visual and metaphorical opposite to the Alberta symbol that has always sustained us — the spacious sky. The modernist abstractions of Kerr, Nicoll and Yates, who simplified Alberta to get at its essence, have shifted to the darker, more complex post-modern musings of a contemporary generation which draws from our image-based society as much as from the history of the visual arts. While the older generation felt isolated from the great art centres, the new generation is artistic proof that the notion of a geographic hub has shattered into a galaxy of particles that exist in a virtual reality.

Paradoxically, at least one contemporary Alberta artist has designed his life around an ideal of periodic, artistic isolation. Because of that, Peter von Tiesenhuisen is able to combine an attachment to the land and sky as strongly romantic as that of Tom Thomson,

with an internationalist outlook. Using branches, earth, fire, ice and the wooded fields where he lives near Demmitt in northern Alberta, he draws three-dimensional symbols on the landscape. However, not long ago the 38-year-old artist would have described himself as “a typical rural Albertan, very conservative at art school in Calgary. I had a great difficulty becoming engaged with contemporary art; then my isolation allowed me to make a lot of mistakes.” Over the past eight years he has managed what he calls “an honest change” from painting to sculpture.

He credits his maturation to an understanding that his artistic practice comes out of real life. “I love building or hewing fallen trees; it feels the same as making art. Building the willow fence around the house, I had the same sense as painting a picture. I realized it probably was art. It broadened my sense of what art is. The way you live with your family in a house, the way you cross-country ski in the woods, the way you garden is art.

“Now, only recently, I understand abstraction. But in a very conservative way. I’m just responding to what I’ve seen in life as a child poking around in mud puddles in the middle of the road or visiting New York art shows. I’m very conscious that I don’t want to be elitist.

I want to bring my experience of land to art. I’m responding from my gut. It’s not intellectual. I’m thinking with my hands.”

His woven willow branch, *Ship* (1993-98), refers to the experiences of historical exploration and immigration so central to being Albertan. It also flirts with folly. But mostly, the act of placing the great vessel on the northern Alberta field is one of reverence. Its unfinished nature alludes to the process of its creation, which the artist controlled, and its inevitable decay with which he refuses to interfere.

Using sculpting materials found on the land and rendering a shape against the sky is a small part of a larger art movement which has been in the air since the 1960s under various names — earth art, land art or environmental art. It is often carried out on a grand public scale and linked to minimalism. Von Tiesenhausen, however, sees his sculpture as more personal, built for private reasons. Recently, with the help of supporters within the art world, von Tiesenhausen successfully persuaded an oil company to divert a proposed pipeline around his land. He was able to show the oil executives what Illingworth Kerr and other early Alberta artists understood intuitively — that this province’s landscape, in and of itself, is a work of art. 🐾



Ship, (1993-98), Peter von Tiesenhausen