

Entre la lumière et l'ombre

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Bente Roed Cochran

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ENTRE LA LUMIÈRE ET L'OMBRE F.H. VARLEY

Bente Roed COCHRAN



Imposante par sa portée et par son ampleur, cette exposition, réalisée sous les auspices des Musées Nationaux du Canada et de la Corporation de Développement du Canada et renfermant plus de cent cinquante œuvres exécutées dans divers matériaux, a été organisée par Christopher Varley, conservateur en chef et conservateur de l'art canadien au Musée d'Edmonton. En 1981 et en 1982, les visiteurs des musées d'Edmonton, de Victoria, de Montréal, d'Ottawa et de Toronto, auront eu, comme le spécifient à juste titre les communiqués de presse, l'occasion de voir «la plus grande collection jamais rassemblée des œuvres de Varley»¹.

L'exposition consacrée à cet artiste doué est de taille; il en est de même du catalogue de Christopher Varley. L'exposition comprend des lettres, des mémorandums, des esquisses au crayon, des dessins, des aquarelles et des huiles sur carton ou

Associé au Groupe des Sept, Frederick Varley s'en est détaché par son interprétation moins conventionnelle et plus personnelle du paysage et par l'analyse psychologique de ses portraits. A l'occasion du centenaire de sa naissance, une importante rétrospective au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, au printemps, regroupant cent cinquante de ses œuvres, permettait de jeter un nouvel éclairage sur ce peintre aux talents multiples.

sur toile; elle permet aux visiteurs de juger de l'œuvre de Varley qui, avec Lawren Harris, était l'un des membres les moins engagés du Groupe des Sept. Les œuvres présentées nous montrent un Varley inégal. Ses premières aquarelles, exécutées entre 1900 et 1909, sont sans conteste plutôt traditionnelles et manquent d'inspiration.

Tout étudiant aura appris à ses cours d'histoire de l'art canadien que, mises à part ses peintures de guerre et la toile *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay*, Varley est considéré comme le portraitiste du Groupe des Sept. L'exposition, quant à elle, rassemble non seulement plusieurs des portraits qu'il a faits sur commande et de ceux qu'il a peints d'après ses familiers mais aussi bon nombre de paysages. D'ailleurs, un des principaux apports de l'exposition aura incontestablement été l'attention accordée aux paysages, étant donné que c'est à travers ce motif, traité selon divers médiums, que l'artiste fait montre de façon éclatante d'une sensibilité et d'un lyrisme remarquables; néanmoins, c'est également dans les scènes de paysage que les œuvres de Varley s'avèrent les moins bonnes: la composition y est fragmentaire, l'espace, non résolu, les couleurs fades, sans vie. Ces faiblesses n'ont été ni dissimulées ni écartées de l'exposition, mais on est vite enclin à les pardonner et à les oublier devant les remarquables aquarelles de l'Arctique ou les œuvres inspirées par les alentours de la vallée de la Lynn.

Bien que je sois moi-même d'Edmonton, je n'en suis pas pour autant un disciple de Clement Greenberg. Je conviens cependant de la justesse de ce qu'il écrivait en 1963: «Il n'est pas tellement étonnant... de découvrir que ce qui rend presque toujours enrichissant la rencontre de l'art canadien contemporain ou passé, ce sont ses peintures de paysage... Exception faite de l'œuvre de Borduas, de Bush et de McKay, je crois que c'est par ce genre de peinture que l'art canadien continue d'apporter sa meilleure contribution. Même les paysages de Varley, qui pourtant consacre plus d'attention à la figure et au portrait, me semblent surpasser de beaucoup le reste de sa production (deux ou trois de ses paysages, que j'ai vus dans la collection permanente du Centre d'Art de Calgary, me sont apparus comme dignes de figurer parmi ce que j'ai vu de mieux de l'art canadien). Il n'y a rien dans la peinture canadienne de paysage qui corresponde exactement au cours actuel de l'art ou qui atteigne au *grand art*. Pourtant ceci ne diminue guère le plaisir que j'éprouve au contact de sa fraîcheur et de son authenticité ni n'enlève quelque chose à sa valeur; encore moins serait-il justifié d'adopter à son égard une attitude condescendante. En faisant son éloge, je ne fais aucune sorte de concession, quelle qu'elle soit»².

La rutilance des couleurs constitue l'une des caractéristiques communes à plusieurs des interprétations de paysage de Varley (*Howe Sound*, v. 1927; *Autumn Haze*, 1940, *Cornfield at Sunset*, v. 1943) ce qui relie ces œuvres à certaines peintures réalistes du 19^e siècle; il faut souligner cependant que celles de Varley sont dans une gamme de couleurs plus étendue et plus novatrice. Dans d'autres tableaux, Varley choisit des teintes qui ressemblent beaucoup à celles que nous associons au verre Favrite de Louis Comfort Tiffany, comme le rose, le turquoise, le bleu vert et l'argent (*Mist over Lynn, B.C.*, v. 1936-1937; *Indians*,

1. Frederick Horsman VARLEY

La Porte de l'atelier, Huile sur toile; 101 cm 9 x 76,5.

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. (Phot. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal)

Rice Lake, 1936; *Lynn Valley – Mist*, 1941, les deux versions de *Kootenay Lake*, exécutées v. 1958 et 1959). On discerne dans ces paysages une exploration de la couleur de même que le désir de créer un sentiment mystique, extraterrestre. Ce surnaturel se retrouve également dans nombre de scènes personnelles, plus intimes, comme le célèbre *Dhârâna* (1932), et dans la charmante série de fenêtres ouvrant sur une composition très étudiée de l'extérieur. On retrouve dans le catalogue une bonne analyse de l'importance que Varley attachait à la couleur, de sa conviction qu'elle traduisait son intérêt pour le bouddhisme et de ses décisions intuitives concernant son choix. On mentionne son opinion que les «couleurs de terre» sont «pleines de vitalité» et que le «violet pâle» est «esthétique»³.



2. *L'Arctique No 1*, 1938.
Esquisse à l'aquarelle;
21 cm 9 x 30,2.
(Phot. John Dean
Musée d'Edmonton)

Quelques-uns de ses paysages de la Colombie-Britannique, comme *Coast Mountain Form* (1929) et *Dawn* (1929), bien que peints à l'huile, s'apparentent plutôt à des pastels en raison de la qualité d'ensemble de leur surface et de leur coloris; ils se caractérisent également par un éclairage doux et par le peu de contraste dans la composition.

Les aquarelles peintes en 1938, y compris les esquisses de l'Arctique, se distinguent par une composition harmonieuse, un mouvement équilibré, seyant au sujet, et enfin par un mariage stimulant des couleurs sombres et des couleurs claires; à ce titre, *Arctic Sketch No. 1*, 1938, représente parfaitement cette série.

Comme plusieurs autres artistes canadiens, Varley a apporté sa contribution aux archives de guerre du Canada. Aussi, le Musée de la Guerre a-t-il pu prêter pour cette exposition des croquis ainsi que des ouvrages finis. Les œuvres bien connues, *For What?* et *Some Day the People will return* (qui ne seront exposées qu'à Ottawa), sont des œuvres puissantes, imprégnées de sa réaction contre l'absurdité de la guerre, sentiment que Varley partageait avec bien d'autres, certes, mais qui n'est pas souvent présent dans les arts visuels, la tradition de la littérature sur ce point étant beaucoup plus ancienne. Dans leur intention et par leur pathétique, ces œuvres s'inscrivent dans la lignée des Daumiers (*Rue Transnonain, Avril 1834*) et figurent parmi les meilleures de nos trésors nationaux. En 1919, la *Nation* de Londres résume ainsi *For What?* : «Il y a un tableau fait par le capitaine F.H. Varley et qui représente un tombereau penché sur le bord d'un trou d'obus presque plein d'eaux d'égout. Dans un ciel d'hiver qui, en Flandres, semble posséder un caractère d'austérité indescriptible, dans un éclairage presque extrinsèque, surnaturel, alignées avec régularité derrière un champ de boue ocreux, s'alignent des rangées de petites croix blanches bien propres. Un terrassier, appuyé sur sa pelle, contemple le tombereau chargé de bras et de jambes. Encore du travail! Le titre de l'œuvre est «For What?... Qui peut le dire? Qui oserait poser cette question, non au monde, mais à soi-même?»⁴

Il est vraiment regrettable que l'on n'ait pas donné à Varley l'occasion de faire la peinture murale de quatorze pieds qu'on lui avait commandée pour le Musée des Archives de Guerre qui devait être construit à Ottawa mais qui n'a jamais été réalisé. Augustus John devait, lui aussi, y faire une peinture murale, et tous deux avaient déjà fait des études et des croquis préliminaires.

L'esquisse à l'huile sur panneau de Varley, appelée *Night before a Barrage* (1919), est décrite par Christopher Varley

comme étant le premier tableau «où apparaissent le sens de la couleur de sa maturité et sa touche délicate et raffinée. On note aussi sa remarquable imagination quant à la composition: la scène est éclairée par derrière et la lumière tremblante du feu de camp fait se détacher les silhouettes des personnages d'un avant-plan qui, autrement, eut été sombre»⁵. De fait, l'équilibre des lignes et des formes dynamiques présente une image visuellement stimulante.

Au cours de sa carrière, Varley a peint nombre de portraits, et il est très révélateur de comparer l'interprétation de ses portraits officiels de personnages publics, avec celle des portraits plus intimes, faits de son propre chef d'après des personnes qu'il connaissait et qu'il aimait. Bien que ses portraits de personnages publics ne manquent ni d'humanité ni de profondeur de caractère, ils n'en conservent pas moins un aspect officiel; le sentiment d'enregistrer quelque chose pour la postérité y est présent, postérité qui pourrait bien ne pas se soucier de la chaleur humaine du personnage qui est derrière l'image. Les portraits intimes, quant à eux, rayonnent des personnalités conjuguées du modèle et de l'artiste, et il est évident que le peintre est très heureux d'avoir l'occasion de rendre la ressemblance de son modèle. Dans la majorité de ses portraits, Varley adopte une composition décentrée par rapport à l'axe vertical; en général, le modèle est campé dans une pose désinvolte, sur un fond monochrome, où ne figure aucun des supports iconographiques traditionnels destinés à fournir des indications sur le rang social, l'occupation ou sur ce qui intéresse le modèle. Comme d'autres artistes de la fin du 19^e siècle et du 20^e siècle, Varley, plutôt que de s'astreindre au rendu anecdotique du personnage, préférerait s'appliquer à une analyse psychologique: il cherchait à interpréter et pas seulement à faire un portrait. Dans plusieurs portraits, Varley établit un équilibre dynamique entre la lumière et l'ombre, comme on peut le constater dans *Portrait of Margaret Fairley*, 1921. Notons qu'en général Varley dotait ses modèles féminins de longs cous, ce qui donne à la tête un air des plus aristocratiques qui n'est pas nécessairement fidèle à la réalité; sur ce point, il n'est que de comparer, par exemple, les portraits et les photographies de Vera Weatherbie Lamb.

Par leur nature même, la plupart des expositions rétrospectives ont un caractère exhaustif, et celle-ci n'y fait pas exception. Et on n'a pas craint d'exposer les œuvres qui ne sont pas exceptionnelles, afin de permettre une meilleure évaluation de l'œuvre de l'artiste. Certaines peintures montrent que Varley était sans doute inégal, ou, pour être positif, qu'il recherchait le bon moyen d'expression. Le visiteur s'en retourne avec le sentiment que Varley, artiste aux curiosités multiples, n'était pas uniquement le portraitiste qui, suivant l'inspiration du Groupe des Sept, a aussi réalisé *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay*, mais qu'il était surtout un peintre qui, particulièrement après son installation sur la Côte Ouest, s'est inspiré de l'environnement et a donné du paysage des interprétations uniques et personnelles qui dépassent la tradition paysagiste conventionnelle du Groupe des Sept.

Quel genre d'artiste Varley, qui vécut de 1881 à 1969, a-t-il été? Un peintre déterminé et possédant le goût de l'aventure, même s'il ne s'apparente pas à ses contemporains européens comme Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), Fernand Léger (1883-1966), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Georges Braque (1882-1963), Gino Severini (1883-1966), Max Beckmann (1884-1950), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) et Giorgio De Chirico (1883-1978), qui furent des innovateurs et des pionniers.

1. Voici l'itinéraire de cette exposition: Musée d'Edmonton, du 16 octobre au 6 décembre 1981; Musée du Grand Victoria, du 18 décembre 1981 au 24 janvier 1982; Galerie Nationale du Canada, du 12 février au 14 avril 1982; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, du 23 avril au 30 mai 1982; Musée de l'Ontario, à Toronto, du 18 septembre au 13 novembre 1982.
2. Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg's View of Art on the Prairies*, in *Canadian Art*, Vol. 20 No 2 (Mars-Avril 1963), p. 98.
3 et 5. Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*, Musée d'Edmonton, 1981, p. 94 et 52.
4. George Elliott, *F.H. Varley – Fifty Years of His Art*, in *Canadian Art*, Vol. 12, No 1 (Automne 1954), p. 4 et 6.

(Traduction de Diane Petit-Pas)

TEXTS IN ENGLISH

A NEED FOR COLOUR AND PASSION

By Andrée PARADIS

The return to painting by many postconceptual artists can give rise to astonishment, just as does the return to figuration by many abstract painters. Is it photography as art form that causes such a commotion as logical sequence to a multitude of experiences that have put an end to numerous solutions, or else is it the need to do work on the memory with the aid of images and objects that convey a background that concerns all of us? Is it more simply nostalgia for the human form to which we wish to give a new image? We do not yet see this very clearly, but the situation certainly exists and invites our consideration.

At present, evolution is taking place between modernism and postmodernism, producing trends that disturb criticism, but which foretells a revival without denying continuity. There were four big exhibitions in 1982: *Attitudes—Concepts—Images* at Amsterdam from April 9 to July 11; *Avantgardia et Transavantgardia* at Rome from April 25 to July 25; *Venice Biennial* from June 13 to September 12; *Documenta 7* at Kassel from June 19 to September 28. Each in its own way, with much deduction, emphasizes the complex situation of current artistic creation. At the end of September, the Paris Biennial will sum up the whole and will provide another important synthesis of to-day's trends.

The neo-expressionism under consideration in this issue is slowly coming to America and is causing on both sides of the Atlantic a burst of figurative art that must not too quickly be confused with neo-expressionism, a particular phenomenon of art that has surged back again, first in Germany where it had been active during the first two decades of the twentieth century and which also inflamed Italy, where very young painters give it various expressions. In many places it inspired an art of graffiti very close to one of classical perfection that would easily have been called conventional a few years ago.

The discussion that it provokes turns on contents (the need to express an anguish), as well as on changes in pictorial space. *Information—Support, Reflection—Surface*, a new game is being played that gives place to often-delirious proposals. The real, great painters alone will be fortunate enough to come out of this unharmed. But the efforts they make to try to rediscover the universal language must be understood. This is what Rudi Fuchs admirably perceived while producing *Documenta 7*, at Kassel: "We must not abandon the great desire of humanity, which is to build a paradise, although we have only fragments to record and fables to write about this subject."

Shall we soon see one or two painters embody the essence of the new expressionism? Already many of them are following new definitions of pictorial space, with the help of the language of colour, sometimes as violent as that of the Fauves, and in a rhythm as animated as that of the Futurists. A style and a logic are developing under our eyes, but we must wait for the time when postmodernism as historical doctrine will be forgotten, in order that we may better recognize the richness of the dialects being established to-day.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

F.H. VARLEY: BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW

By Bente Roed COCHRAN

A massive exhibition both in depth and breath, which celebrates the centenary of Frederick Horsman Varley's birth, this retrospective exhibition of over 150 works in various media (sponsored by The National Museums of Canada and Canada Development Corporation) was organized by Christopher Varley, head curator and curator of Canadian art at the Edmonton Art Gallery. During 1981 and 1982 gallery spectators in Edmonton, Victoria, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto will have the opportunity of studying "the most extensive collection of the artist's works ever mounted", as the press release correctly states.¹

The exhibition by this gifted artist is important, as is the catalogue written by Christopher Varley. The exhibition, which includes letters, memorabilia along with pencil sketches, drawings, watercolours and oils on board or canvas, allows viewers to assess the oeuvre of F.H. Varley, who, along with Lawren Harris, is an elusive member of the Group of Seven. The exhibited works expose Varley as being the creator of both major and minor images; certainly the early watercolours from 1900 to 1909 are quite traditional and not very inspired.

Every undergraduate will recall from Canadian art history courses that, apart from Varley's war paintings and his *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay*, he was hailed as the portrait artist of the Group of Seven. This exhibition incorporates many of his formal and informal portraits but also a significant percentage of pure landscapes. In time to come one of the show's main contributions undoubtedly will be this focus on Varley's landscapes as it is through this subject matter depicted in various media that he convincingly demonstrates his sensitivity and remarkable lyricism. Yet, it is also in the landscape scenes that Varley displays his least satisfying works, where the composition is fragmented, space unresolved, and colours mushy or lifeless. Such flaws in the artist's production have not been glossed over or left out of this exhibition, but one is apt to forgive and forget when viewing the remarkable Arctic watercolours or works inspired by the Lynn Valley environment.

Although I, an Edmontonian, am not a disciple of Clement Greenberg, I do agree with his 1963 assessment that

It is not so surprising... to find that what makes a visit to Canadian art in the present as well as the past, most generally rewarding is its landscape painting... Landscape painting is, where Canadian art continues, I feel

(allowing for Borduas, Bush, McKay), to make its most distinctive contribution. Even the landscapes of Varley, who devotes more attention to the figure and portrait, seem to me to surpass by far the rest of his work (two or three landscapes of his that I came on in the permanent collection of the Calgary Art Centre struck me as being among the very best things I have ever seen in Canadian art). Nothing in Canadian landscape painting contributes to the 'main stream' exactly; nothing in it amounts, that is, to major art. But this hardly dilutes my pleasure in its freshness and authenticity, or makes it less valuable. Least of all does it justify condescension. In praising it I make no allowance whatsoever.²



1. F.H. VARLEY
For What, 1919.
Oil on canvas; 147 cm x 182,8.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Several of Varley's landscape interpretations may be characterized as having 'glowing' colors (*Howe Sound*, c. 1927, *Autumn Haze*, 1940, *Cornfield at Sunset*, c. 1943) which link them to some nineteenth century realist painting but Varley's have a wider and more innovative range of colours. In other works Varley has selected hues much akin to those that we associate with Louis Comfort Tiffany's 'Favrile' glass such as rose, turquoise, blue-green, and silver (*Mist over Lynn, B.C.*, c. 1936-37, *Indians, Rice Lake*, 1936, *Lynn Valley—Mist*, c. 1941, and the two *Kootenay Lake* works from c. 1958 and c. 1959). These landscapes disclose Varley's colour explorations and his interest in creating a sense of the mystical, of something beyond the surface of mundaneness. This 'other-worldliness' is also carried into several more intimate and personal scenes such as the well known *Dhârâna*, 1932 and the charming window series with its sophisticatedly cropped composition. The catalogue includes a good description of Varley's emphasis on and belief in colour, acknowledging his Buddhist interests and his intuitive decisions for use of colour. He is quoted as believing that the "colours of the earth" are "lusty" and that "pale violet" is "aesthetic".³

Some of the British Columbia landscapes, although painted in the oil medium, appear more akin to pastels because of the overall quality of surface and hues, such as *Coast Mountain Forms*, 1929 and *Dawn*, 1929 which are also characterized by soft lighting and little contrast in their formal definition.

The watercolours painted in 1938, including sketches from the Arctic, stand out because of their unified composition, their correct amount of movement appropriate to the subject matter, and their stimulating combination of sombre and fresh colours; *Arctic Sketch No. 1*, 1938 is an excellent exponent of this group.

Like several other Canadian artists, Varley participated in the Canadian War Records from which sketches and finished works are included in this exhibition. The well known *For What?* and *Some Day The People Will Return* (exhibited in Ottawa only) are potent works imbued with reaction to the senselessness of war that Varley shared with many others but which is perhaps not often portrayed in the visual arts, having had a much longer tradition in the literary arts. In intent and pathos these works are akin to Daumier's *Rue Transnonain, Avril 15, 1834* and are among the finest of our national treasures. The London *Nation* in 1919 summed up Varley's *For What?* as follows: "There is one picture by Capt. F.H. Varley, of a tip-cart. It is canted on the side of a shell-crater which is nearly full of drainage. Beyond it, in that winter light which in Flanders seemed to have a quality of indescribable austerity, to be quite alien and other-world, and disciplined with exactitude across a stretch of ochreous muck, is a parade of neat little white crosses. One of a labor battalion leans on his spade and contemplates the cart. More work! It is loaded with a tangle of legs and arms. The title of the picture is "For What...?" Who can say? Who dares to put that question, not to the world, but to himself?"⁴

It is regrettable indeed that Varley was not given the opportunity of painting the 14-foot mural on a wall of the proposed, through never materialized, War Memorials museum in Ottawa. Augustus John was also to have painted a mural and both he and Varley had done planning and preliminary sketches for the project. Varley's oil sketch on wood panel called *Night Before a Barrage*, 1919 is described by C. Varley as "the first painting that revealed his mature colour and refined delicacy of touch. It is also a remarkable pictorial invention, a back-lit scene against which the silhouettes of a few figures emerge in the glimmering firelight of the otherwise darkened foreground".⁵ Indeed, the equilibrium of thrusting lines and shapes presents a visually stimulating image.

During his artistic career Varley painted numerous portraits and it is most revealing to compare and contrast his execution of what one may call commissioned formal portraits of public figures with his self-selected and more intimate portraits of individuals whom he knew and liked. While the former are not lacking in humaneness and character study they very much bear out the aspect of officialdom; the sense of recording something for posterity is present, a posterity that might not care about the warmth of the person behind the image. But the intimate portraits sparkle with the combined personalities of the sitter and the artist, and it is obvious that the artist treasured the opportunity of rendering the sitter's likeness. In the majority of the portraits Varley favoured an off-centre vertical axis composition of the sitter who was usually casually positioned and shown against a uniformly monochromatic rendered background without any of the traditional iconographic props that would give clues to the status, position, or interests of the sitter. Varley, like other late nineteenth and twentieth century artists, was not interested in anecdotal rendering but was involved in psychological character analysis, seeking to interpret, not simply to portray. In several portraits Varley created a fine dynamic balance of light and dark, as may be seen in *Portrait of Margaret Fairley*, 1921. Note that Varley's convention for depicting his female sitters is to show them with long necks that set off the heads in a most aristocratic manner—not necessarily true to life, as may be seen when comparing the portraits and photographs of Vera Weatherbie Lamb.

Most retrospective exhibitions by their very nature are extensive and this one is no exception. Works that are not outstanding are included to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the artist's oeuvre. Some works definitely support that Varley was uneven, or, to put it positively, was searching to find the right manner of expression. The viewer does leave with an awareness of the multifarious nature of this artist and the acknowledgement that Varley was not just a portrait painter who also created the Group-inspired, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*. Rather he was an artist who, especially after relocating to the West Coast, was inspired by the environment and created unique and personal landscape interpretations, interpretations that extend beyond the conventional Group landscape tradition.

What sort of artist was Varley, who lived from 1881 to 1969? Solid—with a sense of adventure, although not the type of innovator or trail blazer that his European contemporaries were. Just recall the contributions of Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), Fernand Léger (1883-1966), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Georges Braque (1882-1963), Gino Severini (1883-1966), Max Beckmann (1884-1950), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978).

1. Itinerary: Edmonton Art Gallery, October 16th to December 6th 1981; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, December 18th, 1981 to January 24th, 1982; National Gallery of Art, February 12th to April 4th, 1982; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, April 23 to May 30, 1982; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, September 18th to November 13th, 1982.

2. Clement Greenberg, "Clement Greenberg's View of Art on the Prairies", *Canadian Art*, Vol. 20, No. 2, March-April 1963, p. 98.

3. Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*, The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981, p. 94.

4. George Elliott, "F.H. Varley—Fifty Years of His Art", *Canadian Art*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Autumn 1954, pp. 4, 6.

5. Varley, p. 52.

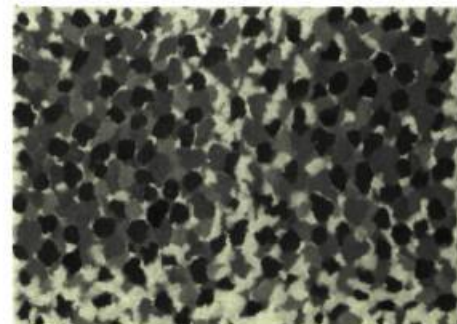
ISKOWITZ: LANDSCAPES AND MEMORY—ESCAPES

By Tom GORDON

To the admirers of his imaginary landscapes over the past fifteen years, the Gershon Iskowitz retrospective¹ offers a joyous affirmation of the artist's brilliant palette. Since the later sixties Iskowitz has received national and international attention as a map-maker of exuberant fantasy. But the forty year purview of the exhibition traces the artist's work back to a cartography of a different sort, when his canvases recorded the tortured contours of memory.

Born in 1921 in Kielce, Poland, Iskowitz's entry into the Warsaw Academy of Art in September, 1939 was thwarted by the outbreak of the War. During the ensuing five and a half years he was assigned to forced labour and subsequently the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The liberation of Buchenwald in April, 1945 found him starved, wounded and near death. A two year convalescence ended when Iskowitz enrolled at the Munich Academy of Art in January, 1947. His formal studies were soon abandoned in favour of private sessions with Oscar Kokoschka. The loss of his entire family at the hands of the Nazis precipitated his emigration from Europe and in September, 1949 he joined an uncle in Canada, settling in Toronto. He has lived in Toronto since, with occasional excursions to the near and distant north, where, in the later sixties he came to recognize in its monumental and fluid topography, "all those things that were happening in my paintings".

The earliest works in the exhibition date from the period of Iskowitz's internment at Kielce (1941) and Buchenwald (1944-45). Created with makeshift watercolour and ink, drawings like *Buchenwald* (1945) are a testament to what was to be Iskowitz's life-long obsession with making art from life—his life. Far more compellingly, however, they are a first-person witness to the most unspeakable atrocity of humankind, in which the artist matched the barbarousness of the acts recorded with a coarse and pathetic distortion. The entire ensemble of works from 1947 to 1952 comprises a ritualistic exorcism of the memory of that atrocity. In *Selection Auschwitz* (1947), a pallid battalion of corpses stands at listless attention, feet planted in furrows of blood, while one of their number is ordered to the execution their souls have already endured. *Ghetto* (1947) describes a barbed-wire madonna as a sculpturesque mass whose clumsy, numbed hands offer futile warmth to her dead child. One of the earliest oils in the exhibition, *The Artist's Mother* (1947), has the pathos of a memory in merciful dissolve. Iskowitz's atonement to memory for having survived builds up a haunting gallery of surreal icons. Throughout this period his technique is astonishingly varied: from the brutal cross-hatching in drawn pieces like *Hunger* (1951), to the tumultuous opaque gouaches, like *Explosion* (1952); from the accomplished Kokoschka-like *Self-Portrait* (1947) to the Chagallian fables like *Market* (1953-54). The sophistication of accumulating technique is counterpointed by the directness of intentional naïveté. A work like *Side Street* (1952) effects a synthesis in a searingly expressive blaze of colour.



2. Gershon ISKOWITZ
Newscape, 1976.
Oil on canvas; 152 cm x 208.
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Not until 1952 did Iskowitz begin to find ab-solution from the terrain of his memory. Three years after his arrival in Canada he sketched a series of felt pen landscapes. Menacing in their calligraphic profusion, they seem nonetheless studied and unconvincing. Even when translated to oil (*Apple Orchard*, 1952), the orthodox Canadian landscape was an unresponsive subject to Iskowitz's highly introspective, self-filtered world. But a group of watercolour sketches (*Parry Sound*, 1955) intimates an alteration of perspective as light coloured forms float about against the ambivalent gravity of a suggested horizon line.

The pivotal works in the exhibition date from the early sixties when Iskowitz, working on a much larger scale than before, abandoned conventional landscape for an imaginary topography. A pair of telling self-portraits (*Self-portrait*, 1963 and *Seated Figure*, 1964) documents the merger of the artist's memory with the sensual and mottled patchwork of