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Virgil Hammock


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TOM FORRESTALL
PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, WRITINGS

By Virgil Hammock

THIS EXHIBITION IS A MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF MARITIME ARTIST TOM FORRESTALL. IT WAS CURATED BY TOM SMART, DIRECTOR OF THE MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION IN KLEINBURG, ONTARIO, WHO ALSO AUTHORED A BOOK ON THE ARTIST’S LIFE, WHICH ACCOMPANIES THE EXHIBITION. THERE ARE WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION FROM FORRESTALL’S STUDENT DAYS AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY IN THE MID 1950’S TO AS RECENTLY AS 2007. THERE ARE OVER FIFTY PLUS YEARS OF AN ARTIST WORK IN VARIOUS MEDIA COVERED IN THIS VERY COMPLETE EXHIBITION.

A HALF-CENTURY IS A LONG TIME AND FORRESTALL WORKS VERY HARD AT HIS ART, WHICH MEANS THAT THERE IS A LOT TO LOOK AT.

What is interesting to me is that the very last completed work in the exhibition, The House at River Bend, December 2006-February 2007, is the finest painting in the show. This speaks volumes of the artist as he continues to get better with each passing year. No small feat in such a long career. That is not to say that there are not ups and downs in Tom’s works as there are with all artists; only that he refuses to stand still, but sees each thing that he does as a challenge. Smart states in his book that Tom regards every painting a failure and that is why he does the next one. I would not agree with Forrestall that all his paintings fail; many are outright successes, but he is a hard judge of his own work and if this idea keeps him working, all the more power to him.

Tom can be broadly categorized as either a Maritime realist or a magic realist with the former being the more Canadian title, but there is more to it than that. He was certainly formed by his education at Mount Allison University, which at the time he attended was a centre for a rigorous, and traditional, art education. The three people teaching studio courses during that period were Alex Colville, Lawren P. Harris and Ted Pulford. Colville was at the time well on his way to becoming Canada’s best known realist artist. Harris, the son of Group of Seven artist Lawren S. Harris, was an outstanding portrait artist and Pulford, in addition to being a gifted teacher, was a fine watercolourist. It would be too simple to say that Tom’s work while he was at Mount Allison, and indeed for the first years after he graduated, was much more broadly and freely painted than that of Colville. Harris’s own work at the time was non-objective geometric painting. He did, however, learn how to master watercolour painting from Pulford. Tom continues to paint beautiful watercolours to this day and there are many examples in the current exhibition.

What did result from his education was a wariness of mainstream modern art. The late 1950’s was a time of Abstract Expressionism and even the beginnings of the Pop movement. The type of realism that Tom was drawn to was considered at the time to be, at best, old hat or even downright reactionary. Even in the late 1950’s, Atlantic Canada was artistically isolated from the rest of the country. In the long term this was a good thing as it gave him an independence that likely would have been lacking had he been raised and educated in another place, more attuned to contemporary art. The very early paintings in the exhibition, such as The Exhibition Grounds, 1962, which are mainly in oil, already demonstrate a quiet stillness that is a quality that typifies Forrestall’s art.

Tom is well known for his work in egg tempera; a technique he first learned at Mount Allison in a painting class taught by Colville, during his third year in the programme. However, he did not start using tempera as his primary medium until the mid 1960’s, after a short-lived bout with acrylic which he found to be too ‘plastic’. This is interesting, because at the same time Forrestall was switching to egg tempera Colville was switching from tempera to acrylic. Colville used acrylic like he used egg tempera and that is to build up the paintings using very fine cross hatching, and building colour by a visual mix rather than a physical mix, (for example, by using a fine cross
would crack.) It might be that I am more tempera paintings need to be painted on a word 'support' rather than 'canvas' because I think that they work as well as the more examples in the exhibition. I just do not think in Forrestall's work, it is with his solid surface or support, otherwise they would crack. (I use the word 'support' rather than 'canvas' because tempera paintings need to be painted on a solid surface or support, otherwise they would crack.) It might be that I am more

The major point in favour of egg tempera, and that is certainly known to Tom, is its permanence. If used correctly, egg tempera will last forever, which cannot be said for oil paint and it is beginning to look like acrylic paint might prove to be fugitive (tends to fade) as well. Egg tempera paintings done many hundred years ago look like they were painted yesterday. Actually in the short-term, egg tempera paintings get better as they age. Their colour gets richer and you can even polish them with a soft cloth. Forrestall over the past forty years or so has become a master in the medium. Many think that tempera is a fussy medium that requires slow tedious work. That may be true for some who have used the medium, but Tom has learned how to use tempera both quickly and boldly, otherwise he could have never completed the body of work that he has done. In contrast, Coville has completed far fewer paintings over the same period of time using acrylic. The real first masterpiece in tempera is Forrestall's painting The Kitchen, 1967, which is very Andrew Wyeth like in both its subject matter and execution. (Wyeth is another user of tempera and a lone wolf out of the mainstream American art.)

If there is one area that I have a problem with in Forrestall's work, it is with his shaped paintings. This where he breaks away from the traditional rectangular and square format, using differently shaped supports for his painting, and there are several examples in the exhibition. I just do not think that they work as well as the more traditionally shaped supports. (I use the word 'support' rather than 'canvas' because tempera paintings need to be painted on a solid surface or support, otherwise they would crack.) It might be that I am more.