

The Currency of Alex Colville

Alex Colville, AGO, 23 August 2014 to 4 January 2015, National Gallery of Canada 23 April to 7 September 2015, curated by Andrew Hunter; and Andrew Hunter, ed., *Colville*, exhibition catalogue Art Gallery of Ontario and National Gallery, Goose Lane Editions, 2014, hardcover, 168 pp., \$45.00. ISBN: 9780864920171

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On 14 November 2013, four months after the passing of Alex Colville, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) announced that it would mount a “major retrospective” of the artist’s work, the largest show to date featuring “iconic works” from both public institutions and private collections.¹ AGO Fredrik S. Eaton Curator of Canadian Art

Andrew Hunter set out to emphasize—rather than memorialize—the currency of Colville’s artwork, eschewing the conventional solo exhibition, and situating the artist among painters, filmmakers, and writers. Ultimately, this placement engages Colville’s production as, in Hunter’s words, “a living, breathing practice” in the twenty-first century global economy.”²

Colville’s working methods, goals, and career contributed to institutional valuations and exhibitions of his art undertaken by institutions such as the AGO and the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). Accordingly, over the past fifty years, the (re)positioning of Colville as the quintessential and foremost “Canadian” artist has been strategically naturalized. Moreover, the fact that the Colville show is the first Canadian-subject exhibition to break into the AGO “Top 10” in attendance ranking (a ranking not even achieved by the 1995–96 touring survey of the *Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* exhibition) has definitively bolstered this characterization. In this exhibition, however, Hunter expands this categorization through an innovative curatorial approach that (re)assesses Colville’s sway. His thematic approach to the artist’s work is combined with the pairing of specific images with “contemporary responses,” including artwork and film clips that showcase the way artists and filmmakers across North America either emulated Colville’s work or included it in their own.

Organized by the AGO with the collaboration of the NGC, *Alex Colville* comprises more than 110 artworks spanning the artist’s career. The works are arranged chronologically and grouped under six themes: “Everyday Colville,” “War Artist,” “Home from Away,” “Animals,” “Inherent Danger,” and

“Love, Life and Loss.” The six groupings showcase the intense focus in Colville’s art on his life and locale and the way in which this specificity somehow also evokes the universality of life and art. Significantly, the introductory text panel locates the content within a decisively nationalistic framework, stating, “Alex Colville’s iconic paintings present scenes of everyday Canadian life.” The panel goes on to explain that his “meticulously realized” works often provoke profound ruminations regarding the “ordinary and the extraordinary.” This sense of depth and profundity is echoed by the incorporation of “responses” to Colville’s work by other artists. These include a 2013 colour-pencil drawing by late Cape Dorset artist Itee Pootoogook; a sound installation piece by Tim Hecker; photographs by William Eakin; an eight-page comic book, *Colville Comics*, written and illustrated by cartoonist David Collier; looped clips of film scenes from Joel and Ethan Coen’s *No Country for Old Men* (2007); Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2013); and a movie poster from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), alongside text panels documenting the precise timed moments in the film at which four of Colville’s paintings were featured in the background.³

The introductory room showcases three works—only one by Colville—and sets the curatorial stage with a “contemporary response” to Colville’s work by William Eakin and a film clip from American director Wes Anderson’s feature-length film *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). This grouping demonstrates from the outset the ongoing relevance of Colville’s iconic paintings to North America and, more broadly, the world. The wall text labelled “A Brief Biography” asserts that while some critics have hailed Colville as “the best Canadian artist of his time”...others dismissed his work as ‘regional’ and ‘mediocre.’ Setting up a dichotomy between nationalism and regionalism, the tenor of this part of the exhibition falls squarely in line with art historian Dennis Reid’s (among others) characterization of Colville as “the most prominent painter of the [Atlantic] region,” and one who achieved “national prominence.”⁴

At the entrance to the main exhibition space, Eakin’s contribution is represented by six monumental photographic prints of the set of coins designed by Colville and issued by the Royal Canadian Mint to commemorate Canada’s hundredth birthday. The 1967 Centennial celebrations marked, as Eva Mackey notes, a climax in state-sponsored national sentimentality.⁵ For this series Eakin searched through coin dealers’ storage rooms to procure six used coins and took exquisitely detailed photographs of each. Viewers can appreciate the skilled draughtsmanship that defines the dove on the penny, the rabbit on the nickel, the mackerel on the dime, the wildcat (bobcat) on the quarter, the wolf on the fifty-cent piece, and the Canada goose on the dollar coin. The nod to nature reflects Colville’s determination to commemorate universal values in a Canadian context. As Colville himself claimed, it was

a question of finding images which are worthy and appropriate for use in celebrating our country's Centennial, images which will express not merely some particular time, place, or event, but a whole century of Canada, and even more; natural creatures provide this enduring and meaningful continuum.⁶

In the wall panel text, Hunter recalls almost word-for-word an image first put forward by journalist Cassandra Szklarski in her article on Colville's death:⁷ blurring the lines between what Benedict Anderson calls print-capitalism and the gallery milieu, Hunter states that Colville "liked the idea of his art being a part of everyday life in Canada...yet very few Canadians knew they were carrying around Colvilles in their pockets." The quotidian is here decisively couched in a nationalistic framework.

Hunter also chose a provocative quotation by Eakin to contextualize his work, one that alludes to Colville's interest in not only his public reception but also art history. "Colville," Eakin states, "was my first idea of what a living artist was and what I might be. I had seen a travelling Vincent van Gogh exhibition in Winnipeg as a child but I didn't 'get it.' I 'got' Colville instantly." While this quotation suggests that Colville might represent Canada's version of the quintessential white male artist genius, it also hints at how Colville viewed his cultural production. "I do see myself," Colville stated, "as belonging in a sense in art history.... If someone were to compare me with A. Y. Jackson, I would be offended. If someone compared me to Giorgione I would think, 'Now you're talking!'"⁸ He firmly believed that his art merited inclusion within a broader spectrum, a conviction definitively endorsed by the show. Positioning Colville's works from the 1940s onward alongside those by painters, filmmakers, and writers active in the twenty-first century not only highlights his connection to contemporary cultural production across North America, it also infuses Colville's accomplishments with a seemingly timeless quality.

There are numerous filmic tropes in this exhibition, operating as what Hunter calls a "pop culture pairing," including the exploration of memory, intimacy, and relationships in the partnering of Colville's *Couple on the Beach* (1957) with Canadian filmmaker Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012). Colville's *Man and Pistol* (1980) is juxtaposed with Joel and Ethan Coen's contemporary Western thriller *No Country for Old Men* (2007), based on Cormac McCarthy's novel of the same title, highlighting the potentiality for action stemming from psychological turmoil and an impending sense of danger. One of Colville's "most iconic" paintings, *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), hangs alongside the projection of a ten-second looped clip from Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). Set in a fictionalized New England town in 1965, *Moonrise Kingdom* relays the story of a young girl and boy who fall in love while overcoming

outlandish obstacles along the way. The looped clip shows the young girl, Suzy, standing atop a lighthouse, holding up a pair of binoculars and looking out at the viewer in a manner that, the text panel states, "reverberates with visual references" to Colville's work. This pairing seemingly casts a decisively nostalgic pall over rural life on the Atlantic coast—an ideological longing for a simpler time and place that never existed, a yearning that transcends national boundaries.

Former NGC curator of Canadian Art Charles Hill speculates that the notoriety of *To Prince Edward Island* stems from the sheer number of times and places it has been reproduced, such as—in the case of this exhibition—on the cover of the catalogue and across the home page of the AGO's companion website. According to Hill, "paintings become famous often because they're often reproduced. And why do people often reproduce them? Because they're in public collections."⁹ Painted by Colville in 1965, it was first exhibited at the 1966 Venice Biennale and purchased shortly thereafter by the NGC; it went on to be reproduced countless times in different contexts. As Mark Cheetham explains, Colville saw himself as a businessperson who endorsed the photographic reproduction of his "best-known images," such as *To Prince Edward Island*. These prints "sold for relatively low prices (around \$300 each, a fraction of the going price for one of his drawings, let alone a serigraph or painting)."¹⁰ Colville's paintings resulted from the production of countless sketches, analytical geometric studies, and extensive formatting so that the production of one painting often took months to complete.¹¹ While some critics and dealers decried the "commercialization of his art," the expeditious production process of these reproductions, along with the significantly lower price point, helped secure his family's financial wellbeing. As Colville noted in a letter to Cheetham, "I do not live off government grants...and so I like to *earn* money.... I consider myself a self-appointed member of the upper class."¹²

The exhibition prioritizes concepts of "home," "place," and the seemingly universal appeal of Colville's art to such an extent that it requires broader critical consideration. Colville's art focuses on *his* life, lifestyle, family, and immediate surroundings grounded primarily in Sackville, New Brunswick, and later in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. His magnification—the intense visual concentration and attention to detail in a particular setting or incident—is so precise that one place could in fact be *any* place, which, the exhibition suggests, translates into the international appeal of Colville's art. Should the artist's work then be labelled as emblematic of everyday Canadian life? Might such concerns with the visual evocation of supposedly universal values, those unabashedly infused with a Western cultural sensibility informed by dimensions of class, gender, and race, not prove problematic? Hunter seems to side-step this issue by upholding the primacy of the ideological construction of "home"—

one's sense of belonging—as that which negates cultural specificity and drives toward a genteel universalism. For example, he characterizes Colville's works produced during his time as a war artist as those that promoted his desire to return home to Canada where he ultimately found solace. In the panel for the "Home from Away" section, Hunter argues,

Home and place were critical to Colville. After the war, he craved a quiet and ordered life centred on his art and his family.... With clarity and precision, he reinvents the reality of specific locations, transforming Maritime locales into familiar scenes that resonate with viewers across Canada and throughout the world.

This resonance is reinforced in the curator's connection of Colville's art with the literary production of Ann-Marie MacDonald and Alice Munro, the latter using Colville's *Elm Tree at Horton* as the cover image for her book *The Progress of Love* (1986). The portrait of the tree, for Colville, captured the visual progress of life, aging, isolation, and survival, themes also explored in Munro's work.

While the catalogue might have provided the ideal venue to further explore the critical tensions between Canadian nationalism and the seemingly universal appeal of home and belonging, Hunter avoids doing so, ostensibly in order to maintain the exhibition's popular—rather than critical—appeal. Notably, Hunter includes his own photographs taken of the settings of Colville's works, such as the turn in the rails just outside Aulac, New Brunswick, showcased in *Horse and Train* (1954), as well as a host of private family photographs of Alex and Rhoda Colville together. The curatorial essay reads more as the curator's personal reflections spent studying Colville's haunts. Despite the essay's creativity and its lyrical and well-written prose, it lacks critical teeth and therefore signals a lost opportunity for a more in-depth and evocative consideration of Colville's work, such as the artist's formulation of a highly and deliberately individualized style, his strategic management of his creative output and choice of commissions, and the trajectory of his career.

Despite the time restraints in developing and curating an exhibition of this size, following so closely after the artist's death, Hunter does offer a unique approach to Colville's art, setting the oeuvre alongside examples of mass and popular culture so as to open up and maintain a steady dialogue between the present and past. It seems the quest paid off: the attendance-ranking numbers and impressive statistics confirm Colville's bankability or, more precisely, the ongoing currency of his appeal. One can only wonder if this approach might open up opportunities for similar exhibitions of the artist's work to be mounted abroad. After all, if the Group of Seven can be showcased in London's

Dulwich Picture Gallery (2011–12), what opportunities might be afforded to Colville? There can be little doubt that this exhibition demonstrates a plethora of possibilities to break free from the constraints of Canadian nationhood embedded in regionally specific and culturally constructed landscapes. This liberation encourages visitors to look beyond the frame(s) of Colville's oeuvre and ponder the magnitude of his sway that transcends the paradigmatic limitations of nationalism, fine art, and high culture.

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Notes

- ¹ Murray Whyte, "AGO to Celebrate Works of Toronto-Born Painter," *Toronto Star* (14 November 2013), E4. Alex Colville died on 16 July 2013.
- ² Andrew Hunter, quoted in Murray Whyte, "Alex Colville at the AGO: A Complicated Man," *Toronto Star* (15 August 2014), http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2014/08/15/alex_colville_at_the_ago_a_complicated_man.html.
- ³ The text panel noted that the film's distribution company Warner Bros. did not grant the AGO permission to show the film clips in the exhibition, which led to the reason for the identification of the times.
- ⁴ Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 3rd ed. (Don Mills, ON, 2013), 338.
- ⁵ Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto, 1999), 58.
- ⁶ Colville, "Statement on Centennial Coins," Press Release, Department of Finance, Government of Canada, 20 April 1966, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto, 1972), 208.
- ⁷ Cassandra Szklarski, "Canadian Artist Alex Colville Dies at 92," *The Canadian Press*, 16 July 2013.
- ⁸ Cited in Mark Cheetham, "The World, the Work, and the Artist: Colville and the Communality of Vision," *RACAR* 15.1 (Spring 1988), 60.
- ⁹ Quoted in Jill Mahoney, "An Appreciation: What Made Alex Colville's Work So Unique?" *The Globe and Mail*, 17 July 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/an-appreciation-what-made-alex-colvilles-work-so-unique/article13274928/>.
- ¹⁰ Mark Cheetham, "Colville and Patton: Two Paradigms of Value," *Capital Culture: A Reader on Modernist Legacies, State Institutions, and the Value(s) of Art*, ed. Jody Berland and Shelley Hornstein (Montreal, 2000), 117.
- ¹¹ Ingo Walther, ed., *Art of the 20th Century* (London, 2000) 117–18.
- ¹² Cheetham, "Colville and Patton," 117.