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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article livre au public d'importantes observations du peintre canadien Alex Colville sur l'art contemporain et l'histoire de l'art. Ces textes sont suivis par un commentaire critique autour des réflexions de Colville sur les artistes et les interprétations qu'ils donnent de leurs propres oeuvres. Ce commentaire soutient que l'herméneutique sous-jacente de Colville—selon laquelle la signification provient des interactions de l'artiste, de l'oeuvre et de la société en général—nous fournit une nouvelle clef pour comprendre le théâtre de ses récentes peintures ainsi qu'un rectificatif à la tendance de l'histoire de l'art à s'en remettre aveuglément à la biographie et l'intentionnalité.

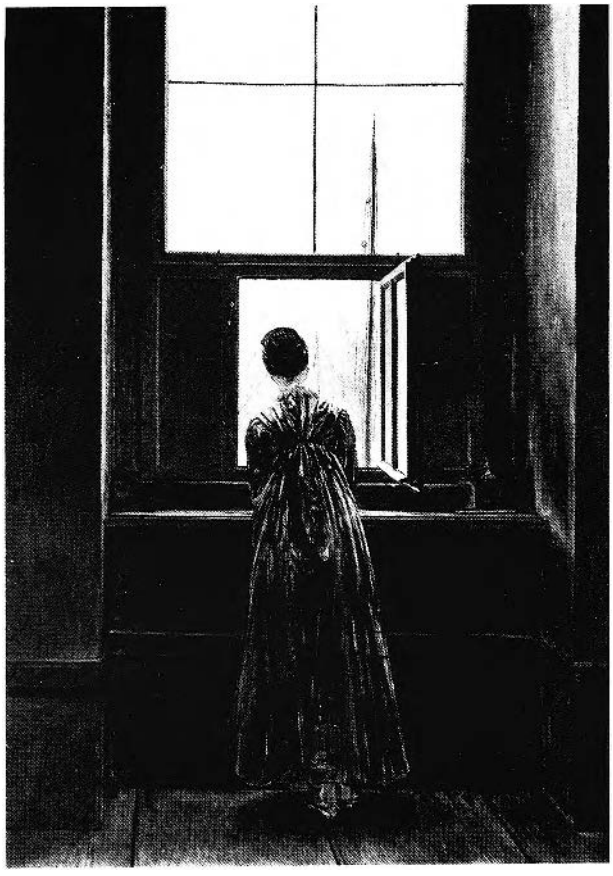

FIGURE 33. Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window*, 1822 (Photo: Nationalgalerie Berlin [West]).

FIGURE 34. Alex Colville, *Hotel Maid*, 1978, Toronto (Photo: Mira Godard Gallery).

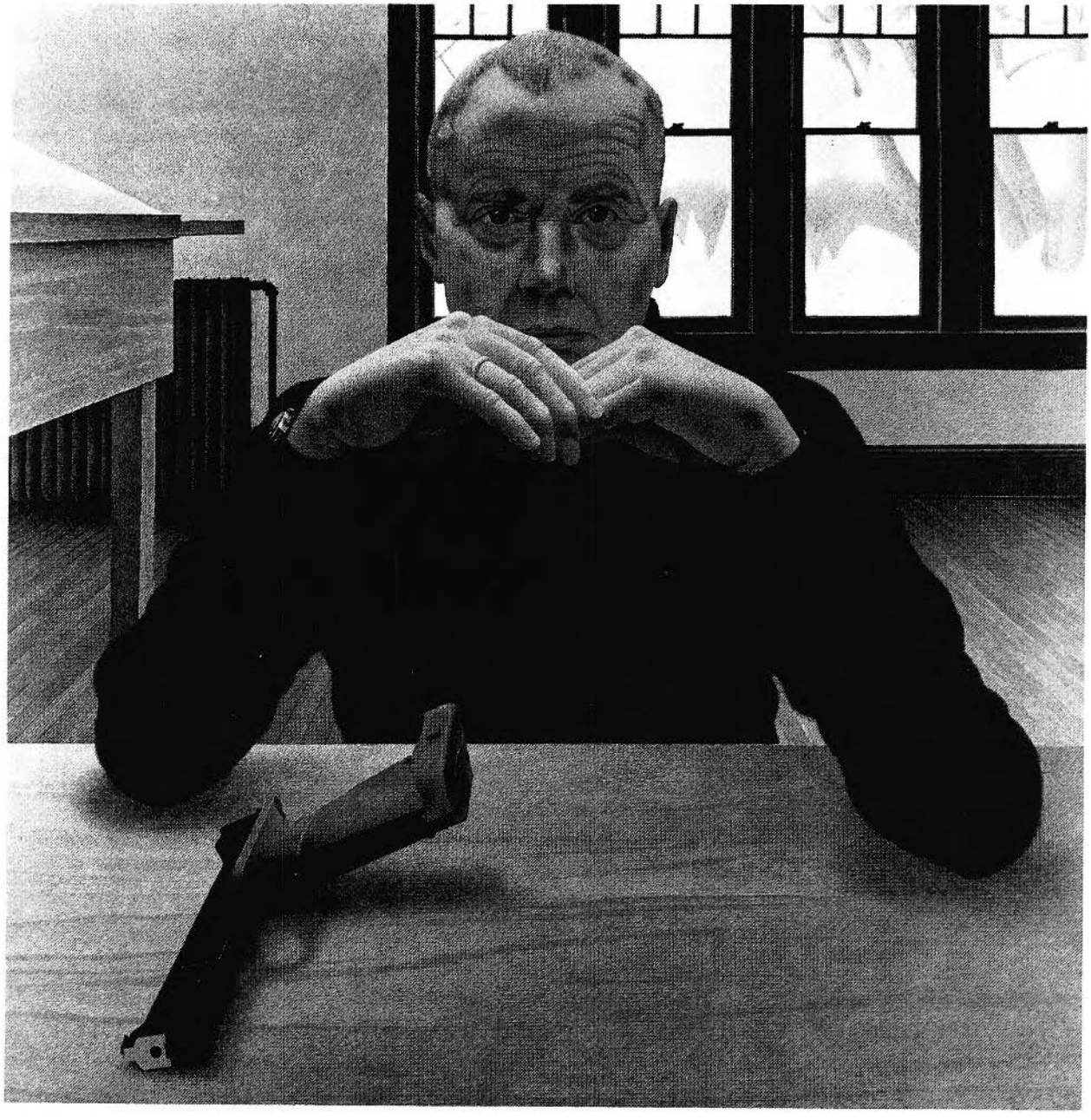

FIGURE 35. Alex Colville, *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980 (Photo: Private Coll.).

FIGURE 36. Caspar David Friedrich, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1810, Berlin (East) (Photo: Nationalgalerie: Kupferstichkabinett und Sammlung der Zeichnung).

FIGURE 37. Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait in Black*, 1944, Munich (Photo: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum).

The World, the Work, and the Artist: Colville and the Communality of Vision

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article livre au public d'importantes observations du peintre canadien Alex Colville sur l'art contemporain et l'histoire de l'art. Ces textes sont suivis par un commentaire critique autour des réflexions de Colville sur les artistes et les interprétations qu'ils donnent de leurs propres oeuvres. Ce commentaire soutient que l'herméneutique sous-jacente de Colville—selon laquelle la signification provient des interactions de l'artiste, de l'oeuvre et de la société en général—nous fournit une nouvelle clef pour comprendre le théâtre de ses récentes peintures ainsi qu'un rectificatif à la tendance de l'histoire de l'art à s'en remettre aveuglément à la biographie et l'intentionnalité.

Alex Colville is a supremely thoughtful and articulate artist. His published reflections on his work[1] are fundamental to an understanding of his art, and it is the first task of this essay to make available a recent and particularly suggestive body of Colville's comments that help us to understand dramatic developments in his recent work.[2] I follow these texts (an edited version of a seminar Colville gave in the Art History Department at McGill University on 3 February 1984) with critical remarks focusing on a set of issues Colville raises: the hermeneutical status of artists' commentaries and the attendant notion of intention in general. The status of artists' statements has traditionally been a privileged one and is rarely questioned in contemporary scholarship. Documents from living artists about their own work and ideas are usually considered particularly significant. In the texts presented here, however, Colville himself addresses the questions of his—and by implication all artists'—control over the interpretation of their works, and of the role of biographical information and stated intentions. He makes the assertion—a surprising and paradoxical one in the context of the supposed authority of an artist's words—that the artist should not dictate the meaning of his productions. It is my second aim to elaborate this model of understanding with reference to Colville's own ideas and works. I will suggest that in place of intentionality, Colville adumbrates a theory of communal understanding in which the artist's *and* viewer's experiences meet in the individual art object. Like his pictures, then, Colville's words provide an entrance into—but not a map of—issues that are at once too personal and too universal to be delimited by any one individual.[3]

COLVILLE'S TEXT

1. THE COMMUNALITY OF VISION: "THE ABILITY OF THE VIEWER TO IDENTIFY"

An important thing in a work of art, I think, is the ability of the viewer to identify, to get into the thing. We were just talking about Caspar David Friedrich a few minutes ago: there are a great many Friedrichs in which you see a figure or figures with their backs turned to you. You know the famous beautiful little Friedrich of the *Woman at the Window* with the masts outside [West Berlin, Fig. 33] and the one with the couple looking at the

1 For a complete bibliography of Colville's statements and criticism on his work, see David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto, 1983), 255-59.

2 I wish to thank Mr. Colville for his generous permission to edit and publish his comments and also Ms. Anita Utas for her transcription of the seminar.

3 In order to present Colville's ideas and to give them a critical context, I will present the new Colville text first, followed by a commentary.

moon.[4] If those people were turning around and looking at you, it would actually be offputting.

Friedrich has had [an influence on my art] although I didn't know his work at all until about 1970 because of the domination of French thought in the visual arts, which I think is still going on. My dealer, Wolfgang Fischer, who is from Vienna, came to Toronto for my opening in July [1983]. He had never seen such a big collection of my work and said to me the day of the opening, "You know, when I come in and see this great assemblage of your work, I realize why the Germans so like your work." Because, he said, "This is German Romanticism!" He made it as a serious remark.

2. INTENTIONALITY AND UNDERSTANDING: "THE WORK IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYBODY"

Every person brings to the reception or the examination of a painting his or her own experience, and therefore I would say that I disapprove of the idea of saying to someone, "When you look at Matisse you must think about flat patterns, or about luscious or stimulating colour or something like that." I am a great believer in thinking that—and this is something so obviously true—every individual brings to the examination of any given work of art a different experience, so that the work is different for everybody who looks at it. [As an example] I have mentioned that I was in Vancouver some months ago appearing on radio shows. [The interviewer] said to me: "You know of all the things you have done the one I really like the best is a serigraph called *Hotel Maid*," [Private coll., Fig. 34], which is not a terribly well known thing of mine. And I said, "Why do you particularly like that?" She replied, "Because I worked as a hotel maid." It is so obvious: the woman brings her own experience of this business of cleaning rooms—the telephone, the lamp beside the bed, the steel window and the kind of standard hotel stuff—and so she really tuned in on this. We can never discount the experience of the viewer.

3. TRANSCENDENTAL REGIONALISM: "I WOULD NOT WANT TO LIVE ANYWHERE ELSE"

I object to [the notion of Regionalism] and think it is foolish. One of the things that I like about [David] Burnett's analysis of my work[5] is that it pretty well destroys this idea. [Nonetheless], I think we are all regionalists in a certain sense; it is one of the ways we keep from going crazy. There is a very interesting article in a recent *Saturday Night* by Robert Fulford on a psychiatrist named Vivian Rakoff.[6] One of Rakoff's special interests is that he thinks—to put it in a grossly oversimple way—that if you move too much you go crazy. He has made a study of the problem of immigration, of the trauma that the immigrant experiences. My father was an immigrant and I know that he had in many ways a very difficult life and that he experienced terrible uprootedness. Every time you move, you lose your friends, you lose your known environment, you undergo what is in a certain sense a real trauma. All your connections are broken; you have to rebuild your life. So I don't think of myself as a regionalist in a silly, sentimental way, you know, the idea people have of the Maritimes as a quaint place with fishing boats bobbing around and simple people who wouldn't steal your car, or something like that. But I am a person who would not want to live anywhere else. This is not because the area that I live in is beautiful in any sense—I don't think that any place is beautiful or any place is any more beautiful than any other. But I like being where I know what is going on. I think it is important that one like where one lives, otherwise why live there? If you don't like Detroit, get out of Detroit, I would say. People should exercise their wills in these terms more fully perhaps than they do.

I think Canadians are unique in a way, and I have this sense of being a citizen of a country and of a culture . . . there is nothing else just like it. My wife and I lived in California for a year and I was at a university with a man, somewhat older than I was, who was a biologist born in England.[7] He had done his graduate work at the University of London and he had then emigrated with his wife in his late twenties to California Tech. He was there for a while, then he had gone to Harvard. He spent most of his academic career at Harvard, then he had come out to Santa Cruz. I labour this because I am trying to illustrate a point. At the end of the year, although I liked the place and needed the money, we decided to go home. I wanted to go home. So I said, "I want to go home," like a child in a way. And he said, "I wish you'd stay. What is it you don't like?" I said, "I like it here. I like you but we are going to go." He responded, "I don't understand why you are so anxious to go back home." So I said, "Now look, you are a citizen of the world—I am a provincial. You are English-born but have lived just about half your life in the United States—also in the natural sciences, which

4 Colville is most likely referring to Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* of 1819 in Dresden.

5 Burnett, *Colville*, passim.

6 Robert Fulford, "A Psychiatrist's Odyssey," *Saturday Night*, XCIX (February 1984), 34-37, 40-43.

7 Colville was a visiting artist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1967-68.

is a kind of international world to be in. It's different for you: you and your wife are both world citizens. My wife and I are both kind of rubes. We are provincials." And that is part of being Canadian, I think. An American—oddly enough, I think—can leave in the sense that he takes the United States with him. But a Canadian—it's a different kind of thing. I feel as an Israeli would feel, or a Swede. I belong to a kind of culture.

4. RECEPTION AND INTERVENTION: "THE LOCOMOTIVE OF ART HISTORY"

I see myself—this is an immodest remark to make—but I see myself as belonging to history.[8] I once said to a dealer I had in New York twenty years ago, "I am the locomotive of art history," punning on the remark that Khrushchev made in one of his crazy speeches. I do see myself as belonging in a sense in art history. I know this sounds pretentious, but I don't believe in false modesty. I have always taken myself seriously, even as a kid. I always thought, "I'm going to try to do really great things." Really! I always felt that way and I don't see why everybody doesn't feel this way. I think we should go all out. So if someone were to compare me with A. Y. Jackson, I would be offended. If someome compared me to Giorgione I would think, "Now you're talking!" But I think that is the way we should be. If you are going to be an art historian, compare yourself to Gombrich and Panofsky and all the great figures instead of some kind of hack.

There are quite a few artists' works that I don't like. For instance I don't like Danby's work. I'm not knocking Danby, but I guess it just doesn't appeal to me. I find it a bit annoying that some people think that because I'm a realist I automatically like the things that other realist painters do. I don't. I like Mary Pratt's work. I find it very interesting, things like the fish on the aluminum foil, that kind of thing. Lemoine Fitzgerald, I like his stuff. A person who I think is enormously undervalued is Goodrich Roberts. I can see that Jack Bush's stuff is good but it doesn't interest me. Someplace I used to go to meetings there was a big Bush—and a good one—on the wall and I would look at it for hours listening to people talk and it just didn't register on me. I think one of the things to acknowledge about the arts is that everybody doesn't like everything. For instance, I don't like El Greco. I know El Greco was a good painter, but I just don't like it. It seems too theatrical and phony. I tend not to like the Counter-Reformation stuff. Now I can admire Bernini, for instance, but I don't really go for it. I like Donatello; I think Donatello is terrific. I don't particularly like Rembrandt even though I know that he is great and his things are remarkable. But I just don't respond very much to it. And I don't think one should be ashamed of this. It's just the limitation that any individual has. An artist whom I am very much interested in is Beckmann. One of the things I have always been interested in in Beckmann are the self-portraits, which he did a great many of.

8 Colville is not alone in this assessment: the German critic Heinz Ohff has deemed him "the most important realist painter in the Western world." Significantly, Ohff also connects Colville and Friedrich. See Ohff, "Provinziell wie Caspar David Friedrich," *Der Tagesspiegel/Feuilleton* (Berlin), 25 August 1971, 4.

1. COMMENTARY ON COLVILLE'S TEXT

In the first text, Colville defines and exemplifies the importance of the viewer's identification with the work by referring to two art-historical coordinates—an artist (Friedrich) and a national style (German Romanticism)—with which he shares much. Friedrich's *Woman at the Window* of 1822 (Fig. 33) presents a woman in a sparse interior who faces away from us as we look at the canvas; she gazes out a window, through boats' masts, at trees on the far bank of a river. We know that the site is Friedrich's own studio in Dresden and that he used his wife as the model.[9] The back-turned figure is common in Friedrich's work and is designed, as Colville notes, to bring the viewer into the picture both corporeally—facing the canvas, we adopt the same physical attitude as the figure—and emotionally, since we can identify psychologically with the activity shown. For Friedrich and Colville alike, it is crucial that the action seem quotidian and that it be rendered with sufficient detail to be easily recognizable, since only then can a range of viewers readily identify with what is pictured. With this identification secured by the device of the back-turned figure (that Colville used independently in pieces like *Visitors Are Invited to Register*, 1954, and *Dog, Boy and St. John River*, 1958, before he knew Friedrich's work), the viewer can participate in the transcendent meaning that is, for both artists, the goal of their "realist" styles.[10] What might at first seem like a mere formal device, the back-turned figure, is ac-

9 *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840: Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden* (London, 1972), 77.

10 The contrast in Friedrich's works between the particular, material world he so painstakingly presented and the universal realm he nonetheless pointed towards was appreciated by contemporaries as metaphysical "irony," a notion that is, I believe, useful in interpreting Colville's paintings. See William Vaughan, "Landscape and the 'Irony of Nature,'" *Art History*, 11, 4 (1979), 457-73.

tually integral to Colville's philosophy of communication and dialogue in art.

The expanded context that these affinities with Friedrich provide help us to understand Wolfgang Fischer's contention that Colville's work "is German Romanticism." The high finish and perceptual detail characteristic of Colville's pictures gives them the look of typical German Romantic images. More important still, this look is allied with the metaphysical outlook—held in common by Friedrich and Colville—that these details are only a way to transcendental meaning. For example, both artists use their wives as models, but in most cases the women are universalized (by being turned away from us or having their faces hidden) in order to allow the viewer's identification by carrying the import of the image beyond a particular domestic situation. Like Friedrich, then, Colville *facilitates* communication with the viewer by making his images detailed enough for ready (though not unambiguous) recognition and identification but at the same time excluding strictly personal details that would restrict access to a picture's broader import. As the next part of Colville's text shows, he develops this notion of access and participation into a practical theory of "viewer response," a theory that partially controls the structure of his images and that radically revises the usual art-historical dependence on artists' intentions by placing the emphasis on the reception of the image.[11]

2.

Far from discounting what the viewer brings to the understanding of a work, Colville suggests that this experience is the basis of any meaning whatsoever. He explicitly relinquishes authorial control, what one "must think about," and even states that "the work is different" for everyone, that what Colville intended does not define the work of art.[12] At the same time, the viewer is not at liberty to make a piece like *Hotel Maid* mean anything: shared experience between artist and respondent determines the range of possibilities. Thus the accoutrements of a typical hotel room represented by Colville in this serigraph (and described above) are the occasions for a collaboration between the artist and a viewer who has identified with the scene. As Friedrich so often did, Colville includes a woman in this image. She is the potential receptor for a viewer's identification precisely because her identity is generalized. As the incarnation of "a maid," the woman performs her tasks as if unobserved. She is particularized only to the point of generic identification; her eyes do not meet ours, since she is absorbed in her work. By employing a technique that he specifically allies with Friedrich and German Romanticism, Colville uses his images to provide the occasion for shared experience between artist and audience.

3.

For Colville, a strong sense of place, of belonging and rootedness, is central to creative work, and it is characteristic of the man that he would speak on these topics at length. Both examples he gives here define his special sense of regional identification somewhat negatively. He is moved by Rakoff's description of the psychology of displacement and seeks to guard his own life from these traumas. Thus, in wanting to return home after a stimulating year in California, Colville describes himself as a "rube" but also recognizes the positive side of his attachment to the familiar. He must paint only what he intimately knows in order to achieve the specificity that underlies the communality of vision. At the same time, what Colville depicts must not be simply parochial, since he is always striving (like Friedrich) for transcendental meaning through the mediation of the particular. While much of Colville's imagery is "regional" in the sense of being inspired by his own life and surroundings, his concerns are universal. We have seen the same dialectic of particular and universal in his kinship with Friedrich, and indeed Colville's aesthetic aspirations are measured by the significant relationships he claims to have with the art and artists of the past and present.

4.

When Colville asserts that he belongs to history, he means to art history. His remarks on this topic—like those on the artist's intentions with which we began—again encapsulate Colville's philosophy of art, and again we are faced with an unexpected conclusion. Colville's close relation to Friedrich turns on the balance of particular and genreal. Recognizable details in works by both artists are, ironically, vehicles for simultaneously attracting viewers with the familiar and *distancing* them from

11 Colville's ideas are paralleled in recent discussions of "reader response" criticism and "reception theory" in literature. See Jane P. Tomkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980) and Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984).

12 This view is both more radical and more fully articulated than Colville's ideas on the same issue in 1951, when he claimed that "it seems reasonable to say that a painter should have a certain insight into his work, and even into art generally, which is not available to the non-painter." Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto, 1972), 203-8, 203.

what is depicted in order to point towards a universal or transcendental meaning. In borrowing the technique of employing imagery that is at once familiar and anonymous (in part) from Friedrich—as he does in some of his best known paintings, like *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965 (National Gallery of Canada)—Colville is very much a part of art history. It is in this sort of work that Colville asserts the least authorial control over a viewer's interpretation. Vision itself is thematized here by the woman's binoculars, the partially obscured man behind her, who must also be looking in the direction she identifies, and more generally by the immaculate detail of the painting itself, which invites our gaze. But vision in all these senses is *invited* on a general level, not directed. As viewers of this picture, we cannot see what its protagonists see. Neither can we in any psychological sense "see" the two figures represented, since Colville has made them anonymous. Even though they look in our direction, we are tacitly encouraged to identify with their generalized activity of looking, not to interact with them.

More recently, however, many of Colville's pictures have become "theatrical" in precisely the ways he claims in this passage to dislike. Like the art of the Counter Reformation, pieces such as *Woman in Bathtub*, 1973, *In the Woods*, 1976, and especially *Target Pistol and Man*, 1980 (Private coll., Fig. 35), seem calculated for a forceful, potentially troubling, effect on the viewer. This represents a surprising change in Colville's enterprise of equal sharing with his audience, since he is now intruding into "our" world instead of manipulating our identification with a scene from a cool distance, like Friedrich. Yet the greater intensity of these recent images is still inscribed with and in art history.

The link is Colville's allusion to Max Beckmann's numerous self-portraits, which are also part of the legacy of German Romanticism, but of its passionate introspection rather than its transcendent aloofness. This self-examination can also be found in Friedrich's work—witness his famous self-portrait drawing (East Berlin, Fig. 36)—and Colville has been exploring this pole of German Romanticism and the history of art in general more and more boldly. Though Colville, like Friedrich and Beckmann before him, habitually uses himself as a model, *Target Pistol and Man* (Fig. 35) "is the only painted self-portrait, properly speaking, in his mature work."[13] Colville has stated that he deliberately avoided the label "self-portrait" for this painting because he "wished it to have a more generalized reference," yet he has also agreed that he is here confronting himself as a man and artist who had just turned sixty.[14] The similarities with the self-analysis characteristic of Beckmann's self-portraits are striking, and we can hypothesize that these connections are at the base of Colville's avowed interest in Beckmann.[15] Nor is it only introspective intensity that links these artists' images of themselves: Colville's features actually resemble Beckmann's, especially as they appear in *Self-Portrait in Black* (Munich, Fig. 37), painted in 1944 when Beckmann too was sixty. Colville literally identifies himself with an art-historical monument and moment in order to make a personal point about self-analysis, both psychological and artistic. In both cases, although the artists are looking inward by picturing themselves, the images' assertiveness and immediacy also challenge the viewer. In Colville's *Target Pistol and Man*, any simple identification with the image, characteristic of the viewer's response to his earlier compositions like *Hotel Maid*, is subsumed by the personal machinations of the artist. Unlike *Hotel Maid* and *To Prince Edward Island*, Colville here has the figure engage our gaze directly: he looks *at* us and we see on the canvas what he sees in a mirror. Instead of inviting our identification with the scene by effacing such direct contacts, Colville quite theatrically closes off these entrances into the picture and asserts himself. This radical change in perspective even affects the composition of the work; attention to Colville's rigorous geometrical construction of this image[16] shows that he is very much controlling the viewer's relation to the painting. He has always used these devices, but he now marshals them to make sure that a confrontation takes place.

By focusing, via Beckmann, on the quintessentially familiar—his own visage and studio—Colville assures the connection to art history that he has claimed. His affinities with Friedrich guarantee the same reference to tradition. But in addition to allowing us to identify these "sources," Colville's text suggests a way to understand his relationship with art history. In *Target Pistol and Man* and other recent, theatrical images, we can see that the emphasis in Colville's communal project of vision has shifted towards his own view of the place of the work and the artist in the world, towards what we might call a conscious dialogue with the artist's concerns rather than a more general iden-

13 Burnett, 24. See also Monique Brunet-Weinmann, "Alex Colville: Reading the Self-portrait," *Vanguard*, XIII, 8 (1984), 20-23.

14 Brunet-Weinmann, "Alex Colville," 21.

15 On Beckmann's self-portraits, see Hildegard Zenser, *Max Beckmann: Selbstbildnisse* (Munich, 1984).

16 See Burnett, *Colville*, 23-28.

tification with a situation he has represented. This change is signalled by specific references to art history, by Colville's attention to Beckmann rather than Friedrich. In the same way, the salutary frankness of Colville's remarks in the text presented here reflects his new focus on his share in the process of visual understanding and communication. Colville's art and texts work together to articulate his evolving philosophy of communal vision, a philosophy that, along with his paintings, assures his place in the history of art. I suggested at the outset that the Colville text—like his pictures—offers an entrance into issues that concern the artist and viewer communally. Colville's comments offer us a portrait of his art; with *Target Pistol and Man*, we see a self-portrait *in* art. It is again the central theme of vision that unites these aspects of self-depiction, since for Colville it is a philosophical vision that is expressed in pictures.

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