

## RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne Canadian Art Review

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Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review

Robert Bringhurst et al., editors, *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Vancouver and Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 1983, 238 pp., 120 illus., \$29.95 (cloth)

David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff, *Contemporary Canadian Art*. Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1983, 300 pp., 332 illus., \$27.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

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several floors of those escalators by an endless throng of fellow visitors—an experience more like terror. The overly abstract and less than satisfactory approach that Levin too often adopts is perhaps best exemplified by his appendix on sculpture gardens. This appendix inventories duly the various solutions of external courtyards, gardens, and parks, without touching on problems attending the installation of contemporary sculpture and the general failure of museums to cope with outside installations. Nor does he pause to reflect on the nature of those instances, such as the garden of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, where, save for shelter from rain for the public, it works magnificently.

Though Levin does worry about the relation of the modern museum to its community—touching on problems of elitism, the composition of boards, the ethics of admission charges, the relevance to artists, the need to get art to the people—it is all a little too upbeat to be a convincing description of today's situation. The challenges to the viability of the museum in the future are stated from an essentially historical perspective. He describes the challenges the museum has already weathered (note how well, for example, the museum is presumed to have accommodated art which has been critical of it), and from there follows the assumption that if the museum has always found ways of accommodating to previous pressures, it can be equally open to new ones. Therefore, he can end the concluding chapter by saying, "the museum will continue to be a vital institution for many years to come."

It no doubt will, but not if it rests on Levin's somewhat optimistic attitude that although there may be future changes in museum programmes "due to financial, conservation and political considerations," all is more or less well. Can we continue to accept unequivocally his proffering of *MOMA* as an ideal model for the modern museum on the basis of its steps towards greater democratization and a more varied and active role in the community? In giving precedence to the commercial showroom model, *MOMA* has expanded and diversified its collections; emphasized education and didactic exhibition presentations with orientation galleries, slide presentations, and detailed explanatory labels; undertaken a programme of publications, especially catalogues and posters (as a partial realization of Malraux's "musée imaginaire"); and stressed an active changing exhibition programme as a way to attract visitors. These innovations have undoubtedly had an irrevocable and beneficial influence on every museum, young or old, in the Western world. We can agree that such programmes are a measure of the museum's vitality as a social institution and add that they are important vehicles for the expression of the professional staff's creative energies. But in the present decade they have taken priority. As a result, they have also become a threat to the modern museum's scholarly and pedagogical integrity and, increasingly, tools of desperate marketing strategies to make the museum competitive in an overloaded entertainment market. While it may be politically correct to applaud the democratization of museums and their striving for broad popular appeal, at the same time it must be recognized that popularity in a time of financial constraint and political conservatism may often have to be achieved at the expense of the museum's original curatorial and scholarly objectives. It is similarly difficult

to concur with Levin's offhand assumption that the Louvre's policy of collecting only dead artists is anachronistic, or the implication that the concept of the modern museum, as he defines it, should be universally applicable. That would blind us to an alternative concept, which prefers a diversity of museum roles and models and posits that we need not advance *en masse* at the same rate in the same direction. This concept would see a healthier museum community as an interdependent network of institutions with different orientations and individual institutions.

In summary, Levin provides a thorough and informed orientation, but he remains somehow distant from the ongoing complexities of building and socially placing the modern museum, even though these are his stated concerns and continue to be troubling issues. To a considerable extent this is perhaps a fault less of the book than of its timing. Its research and compilation were no doubt undertaken in the late 1970s, so that by the time it was published we were into a new and perhaps unanticipated phase of museum building and another economic and political climate. As a consequence Levin's book fails to be timely about issues which today are very timely indeed. That, and the absence of some stronger doses of engaged polemic, are its major deficiencies.

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ROBERT BRINGHURST et al., editors *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Vancouver and Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 1983, 238 pp., 120 illus., \$29.95 (cloth).

DAVID BURNETT and MARILYN SCHIFF *Contemporary Canadian Art*. Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1983, 300 pp., 332 illus., \$27.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Both *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada* and *Contemporary Canadian Art* are wrapped in glossy, black dust-jackets bearing white titles and colour reproductions. Although the cover designs seem similar, a closer examination reveals significant differences, differences which embody the two very dissimilar premises upon which the accounts of art in Canada since World War II contained in these volumes are based.

The front cover design of *Contemporary Canadian Art* with Alex Colville's *Dog and Priest* (1978) above and Guido Molinari's *Serie bleu orange* (1968) below, separated from each other by the title and the names of the authors, becomes an icon of the book's contents: for Burnett and Schiff, contemporary Canadian art is restricted to painting alone. A more extended analysis reveals that, for them, contemporary painting is limited to a linear mode in the Wölfflinian sense, and that although abstract and figurative painting seem to coexist, figuration "comes out on top." Relegating the reproduction of Harold Klunder's abstract-expressionist-inspired *Torque* to the back cover reinforces both aspects of the frontal statement.

The cover of *Visions* includes Don Proch's *Rainbow Mask* (1976) which evokes primitive ritual art yet is obvi-

ously contemporary in that it is a mixed-media construction made of fibreglass, neon and steel, silverpoint, and graphite. The caption below the mask is not the title of the work itself but *Contemporary Art in Canada*. A thin white framing line encloses the photograph of the mask and its caption/subtitle. Above the framed section, in bold type, is the main title, *Visions*; below it, in the smallest lettering on the cover, are the words "edited by Robert Bringham, Geoffrey James, Russell Keziere and Doris Shadbolt." When the units which compose the cover are combined in different ways, dissimilar, but related, readings result. If the main title and the framed section are taken together, they become an emblem of the author's concept of contemporary art in Canada: art which has connections to the past but differs fundamentally from it. If the framed section is isolated, contemporary art in Canada is presented as visionary in nature. Proch's mask is photographed hovering against the dark ground, all of which connotes, for the authors, the enigmatic strangeness of the less traditional forms of contemporary art in Canada. By omitting the framed section, the implication of the main title and the editors' names taken together is that the editors themselves have a particular and non-traditional vision of contemporary Canadian art.

In the foreword, the editors of *Visions* state that the book is neither a survey nor a history, nor is it "based on the conventional classifications by region or medium." Instead, it is a collection of six essays written by critics, painters, poets, and anthropologists intended to encourage dialogue through a "pluralistic view" of "the diversity and vigour of contemporary art in Canada." The choice of *Visions* as the main title corresponds to a desire to reflect "fresh configurations" and "the complexity, liveliness and perseverance of ideas" while the subtitle, *Contemporary Art in Canada*, suggests that Canadian visions are situated in an international context, an aspect explored more fully by Greg Curnoe in his review, "A Bias of Communication: Visions Reviewed" (*Vanguard* [December-January 1983-84], 19-21). In contrast, the title of *Contemporary Canadian Art* suggests a nationalistic approach. Its singular, unqualified phrasing echoes the one-voice style chosen by its authors, both of whom are art historians. Unlike the writers in *Visions*, Burnett and Schiff present the subject, "creative art in Canada," in terms of conventional chronology, traditional media ("The book is a survey of painting and sculpture..."), and geographic regions.

Like *Visions*, *Contemporary Canadian Art* begins with Borduas and ends with recent painting. However, *Contemporary Canadian Art* presents a wider range of work by a greater number of artists than *Visions*, a selection that is, on the whole, more representative of what was being made in the country during the period under discussion. By concentrating on work that is radically different in content, style, or medium from past art and discussing this art primarily within themes and international art trends, *Visions* does not always provide enough of a Canadian context to permit adequate comprehension of such developments in Canada, particularly given the serious omission of a bibliography of contemporary Canadian art.

The treatment of Maritime Realism serves as an example of how the structure and bias of *Visions* impedes discussion of certain phenomena. Protestations to

the contrary, *Visions* begins with an introductory chronological survey ("The Triumph of the Egg" by Alvin Balkind), followed by essays on art and place ("A Sense of Place" by Terrence Heath), abstract painting ("The Alternate Eden: A Primer of Canadian Abstraction" by Gary Michael Dault), art and social issues ("Redefining the Role" by Charlotte Townsend-Gault), counterculture ("The Snakes in the Garden: The Self and the City in Contemporary Canadian Art" by John Bentley Mays), and art as idea ("Rethinking the Art Object" by Diana Nemiroff). As one might expect, the discussion of Maritime Realism is found in Heath's "A Sense of Place"; it is focused, however, on a single artist, Alex Colville, the only Maritime Realist with an international reputation. Only one other Maritime Realist, Tom Forrestall, is mentioned, and then only briefly as a foil for Colville.

By linking Colville's work to that of other Maritime Realists such as Christopher and Mary Pratt, Tom Forrestall, D. P. Brown, and Hugh MacKenzie as well as to contemporaneous realist painting elsewhere in Canada, Burnett and Schiff provide a regional and national context for Colville's work. The specificity of their geographic and stylistic structure allows them to examine Colville and Maritime Realism more fully than the contributors to *Visions*. On the other hand, it also tends to preclude an analysis of content affinities with painting, regardless of style, elsewhere in Canada. Moreover, neither book explains the existence of Colville-type realism as a predominant response to place in a particular region of the country.

One problem posed by the structure of *Visions* is the unevenness of contributions by six authors: those by Balkind, Townsend-Gault, and Nemiroff are decidedly better than the others. Although at times floridly written (the essay concludes with a section from Ecclesiastes) and without full citations for direct quotations, Balkind's text does what few brief surveys do: by including the implications and effects of regional, national and international history, geography, social and sexual politics, art theory, and art institutions, it permits the reader to consider the multivalent references required to discuss art as anything other than "art for art's sake."

Townsend-Gault's essay is the best written, most tightly organized, and most fully developed treatment of a given theme. True, she does not include all the artists one might expect to find in this section. However, unlike Burnett and Schiff—who attempt to be comprehensive yet omit important artists such as Vera Frenkel—Townsend-Gault presents a thesis that can be applied to artists she does not discuss. Moreover, Townsend-Gault's ability to include a discussion of the contemporary art of native peoples when redefining the role makes some sense; Burnett and Schiff's exclusion of the subject is questionable.

Diana Nemiroff's thoughts on the changed nature of the art object constitute one of the best discussions of the subject I have found. Her analysis detailing why conceptual, process, performance, video and installation work can be seen as a manifestation of the desire to effect "meaningful contact with the world" provides a plausible theoretical framework for connecting seemingly unrelated forms from different time periods. Her remarks, though, could apply to art of this type anywhere; Curnoe observes correctly that what is missing in Nemi-

roff's assessment is an examination of the "authentic voice" in Canadian artists' approaches to the issue of "meaningful contact with the world" (p. 21).

The three remaining essays by Mays, Heath, and Dault lack a sufficiently rigorous, theoretical basis. For example, despite the valuable anecdotal information and perceptive observations Mays provides on the Vancouver and Toronto alternative art scenes, he fails to relate this material convincingly to his announced subject, the self and the city. Similarly, Heath is unable to link his sketches of individual artists to his topic, "A Sense of Place," and his definition of exactly what a sense of place entails is weak and incomplete. As a result, his attempt to explain the fascinating notion of how a sense of place—once defined primarily in terms of landscape subject matter—has been transformed is disappointing. If Heath's theorizing is insufficient, Dault's is simplistic and abundant. Basing his "primer of Canadian abstraction" on an analysis of the "alphabet" used by abstract artists, Dault reduces his discussion to a formalist investigation of "directions" (vertical, horizontal, oblique), "painted hooks" (loops), and "heraldic central presences." Occasionally, Dault is capable of successfully integrating theory and form, as in the discussions of Paul-Emile Borduas and Guido Molinari, but for the most part—the best example being his discussion of William Ronald's *J'accuse*—he simply fails to analyze content. My criticism of Dault's overly formalist orientation, one which neglects content, applies equally to Burnett and Schiff.

The treatment of events that cannot be fitted into the Burnett/Schiff structure is also problematic. For example, they minimize the importance of the emergence of artist assertiveness in Canada, be it in the form of organizations such as Canadian Artists Rights or in the parallel gallery network, and they refuse to acknowledge the issue of sexuality in works by General Idea and Sorel Cohen. They do not mention the effects of gay liberation or feminism on art and bypass the issue of contemporary native people's art by stating in the foreword that it will not be included because of the author's inability to assess it in terms of indigenous cultural roots and traditions. Somewhat unexpectedly, Burnett and Schiff are able to discuss artists working in more than one medium quite well. They address the difficulty the public encounters when confronted by an artist's *oeuvre* executed in different media and present a coherent exposition of the underlying conceptual similarities of the work of Charles Gagnon, Michael Snow, and Joyce Wieland, regardless of medium.

Another aspect of the structure of each book that can reinforce or subvert arguments presented in the text is the number, type, and disposition of illustrations. Almost all of the approximately 120 illustrations in *Visions* are in colour whereas more than two-thirds of the 332 illustrations in *Contemporary Canadian Art* are in black and white. With the exception of one mixed media work, Michael Snow's *Midnight Blue*, all of Burnett and Schiff's colour illustrations are of paintings, reflecting once again their tendency to give primacy to this medium. Slightly over half the works illustrated in *Visions* are also of paintings. While this may correspond to the fact that, despite the emergence of other forms, painting has been, and is once again, the dominant medium in Canadian contemporary art, the bias to-

wards experimental art and new forms found throughout the texts in *Visions* is not reflected in the reproductions. Only two videos, four performances and eight photographs are illustrated. Installation art fares better with 17 illustrations. The dual system of placing illustrations of this kind of work—they are concentrated in Nemiroff's chapter, "Rethinking the Art Object," and also dispersed throughout the book—implies both opposition to the more traditional forms of art and coexistence with them. To some degree, both perceptions are true. But the greater number of reproductions of non-traditional media work grouped together in the "Alternative Modes" chapter in *Contemporary Canadian Art* permits more varied comparisons among works in like non-traditional media and within the genre as a whole.

Similar remarks can be made in reference to the presentation of sculpture, both a neglected and a problematic area in contemporary art. By including 63 illustrations in separate chapters on sculpture ("Sculpture in the Sixties" and "Recent Sculpture"), Burnett and Schiff focus attention on the issues raised by contemporary sculpture. With only 10 illustrations of more traditional sculpture, *Visions* visually abdicates the task of confronting the possibility of a separate history of the medium, the radical changes in the concept and form of sculpture, and the relationship among sculpture, installation, and performance art.

The glossy, full-page reproductions in *Visions* are often arranged in groups of four, five, six, or eight, suggesting that the book need not be read at all. Although this arrangement, along with the volume's larger format, is reminiscent of coffee-table art books, it does give art works—and, by extension, the reproductions—the status of independent objects susceptible to multiple and varying interpretations; this is emphasized when the works are indexed by title as well as by artist. While there is some attempt at synchronizing text with illustrations in *Visions*, the reading process is often interrupted, particularly when an author discusses work by artists illustrated in another section. *Contemporary Canadian Art* is more successful at integrating word and image by including one or more reproductions on the same page as related text or on the facing page. Here the reproductions clearly function as illustrations of the text, a feature all the more evident given the absence of titles of individual works in the index.

As far as I know, no book has solved the problem of conveying adequately the actual size or proportional scale of art work through reproductions. The books in question are no more successful than most. *Visions* follows the standard but misleading practice of using illustrations of uniform sizes, while *Contemporary Canadian Art* uses illustrations that conform to a printer's grid rather than the works themselves.

In the case of two-dimensional works, the problem of approximating true scale is compounded by the omission of frames designed or executed by the artist, as for example in the illustrations of Kurelek's paintings in *Visions* (pp. 134, 135) and Tom Forrestall's in *Contemporary Canadian Art* (p. 170). Moreover, the deletion of any visual indication of the framing edge in the reproduction of *Untitled* by Art McKay (p. 132) in *Contemporary Canadian Art* leads to the erroneous conclusion that the painting is a tondo rather than a square with a centrally placed image. Although dimensions are given in cap-

tions, neither book indicates whether the measurements it cites include or exclude the artist's frame. Despite the presence of framing devices on the covers of both books, *Visions* for the most part is more conscientious about including frames within reproductions for a wide range of the work represented. This is surprising, for Burnett has been especially sensitive to the issue when writing elsewhere on Serge Tournant (*Artscanada* [July-August 1976]) and Michael Snow (*Artscanada* [May 1980]).

Both books do better at conveying the scale and shape of three-dimensional, installation, performance, and occasionally large-scale serial works by including numerous views that include the settings. Neither book, however, manages to impart the sense of time inherent in video, film, and performance art because often only a single reproduction is used. Burnett and Schiff avoid the issue by not including illustrations of video tapes alone; instead, they choose to illustrate only video installations. *Visions* does include more than one illustration of Lisa Steele's *The Gloria Tapes* but the two television-framed images from the Steele video placed one above the other could be taken for out-of-focus photographs. If the video illustrations had been shot from a distance and arranged horizontally and contained more sequences with more action or variation, the reader/viewer would have a better sense of the time component in video art. There is a greater sense of time, both depicted and actual, in the illustrations of Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot*, where two vertical film strips, each containing eight more or less similar images, are placed side by side and run off the page, top and bottom. However, the wide separation of the strips on a large white ground and the almost unchanging, out-of-focus image suggests that this illustration could be a conceptual still photo work. The choice and arrangement of the twelve reproductions of Al Neil's *Untitled* performance (*Visions*, p. 36) and the two photographed excerpts from the *Mr. Peanut* mayoralty campaign performance (*Visions*, p. 167) are far more suc-

cessful than the video tape and film illustrations because they suggest related or sequential action and are positioned contiguously, and thus read as parts of a whole.

The two single illustrations of performance art in *Contemporary Canadian Art* are inadequate but they do address another important component of performance and installation art: the viewer/audience. Although this element is stressed in the text of *Visions*, it is curiously absent in the illustrations. Only one of the four performance illustrations, *Mr. Peanut*, includes the spectator: none of the installation illustrations does. In addition to the two performance illustrations in *Contemporary Canadian Art* that include the viewer/audience, there are two installation illustrations with spectators. These are located close to Burnett and Schiff's discussion of a different spectator responsibility in and for this art. Even when the spectator is not included in their illustrations, the greater number of wide-angle and long-distance shots suggests that there is room for the spectator to "enter" the work.

In the same way that an important relationship is forged between much contemporary art and its audience/viewer, a similar relationship is created between these books and their readers. Both *Visions* and *Contemporary Canadian Art* are directed to the general public. Each is written in a clear, non-technical style, contains numerous illustrations, and is reasonably priced. *Visions* also exists in the form of a television series produced for TVOntario and as such addresses a larger audience.

The difference in their distribution forms reiterates their respective approaches to the subject: *Contemporary Canadian Art* is more traditional and academic; *Visions* is more willing to explore new forms. Those interested in contemporary Canadian art should read both, bearing in mind that the existence of two such different interpretations is representative of both the nature and the state of commentary on that art.

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#### LIVRES REÇUS / BOOKS RECEIVED

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ALLEN, BRIAN *Francis Hayman*. Published in association with the English Heritage (the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood) and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987. xii + 196 pp., 145 black-and-white illus., 8 colour plates, \$49.00 (cloth), \$21.00 (paper).

ALTSHULER, DAVID, editor *The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections*. (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, Washington) New York: Summit Books, 1983. 288 pp., many illus. (cloth).

ANTAL, FREDERICK *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, (1948) 1986. xxvi + 388 pp., 160 illus., \$26.00 (paper).

BELAND, MARIO *Louis Jobin: Master-Sculptor*. Québec: Musée du Québec, 1986. xv + 199 pp., illus. (cloth).

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*Louis Jobin: Maître-Sculpteur*. Québec, Musée du Québec, 1986. xv + 199 p., illus. (relié).

DUBE, PHILIPPE *Deux cents ans de villégiature dans Charlevoix: l'histoire du pays visité*. Québec, Les Presses de l'université Laval, 1986. xiv + 336 p., 29,00 \$ (relié).

GAGE, JOHN *J. M. W. Turner: A Wonderful Range of Mind*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987. viii + 262 pp., 180 black-and-white illus., 130 colour illus., \$56.00 (cloth).

HASKELL, FRANCIS *Past and Present in Art and Taste: Selected Essays*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987. xv + 256 pp., 215 black-and-white illus., \$49.00 (cloth).

HEILMAN, SAMUEL *A Walker in Jerusalem*. New York: Summit Books, 1986. 366 pp. (cloth).