

Robert J. Belton, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture*. Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2001, 398 pp.; 36 colour illus., 112 black-and-white illus. and a glossary on CD-ROM, \$59.95 Cdn

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more outrageous as Helland ignores generations of modernist standing imperatives to demonstrate that artists hitherto regarded as unimportant can deliver significant cultural meanings. Helland persuasively rethinks the function and value of art that has been relegated to a position of cultural obscurity without distorting or romanticizing the original meaning and context of the artworks themselves. Nor does she resort to strategies such as a camp appreciation of flaw and irony or validating the aesthetics of the abject to mediate an appreciation of the marginalized.

If the “death” of empirical art history has often been proclaimed by art writers and theorists over the past two decades, Helland provides cogent proof that such obituaries are indeed premature, by demonstrating the value of solid research and its

possibility to complement and underpin contemporary theory. *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* indicates that far from women’s art being over-exposed, or thoroughly documented, three decades after the emergence of feminist art history significant fields of achievement in women’s art remain barely known. A rich corpus of unfamiliar material can still await the enterprising historian who closely and alertly reads the primary sources at a “micro” level, as Helland does, and resists populist feminist art history’s urges towards the expressionistic and gestural above informed analysis.

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Robert J. Belton’s ambitious new textbook, *Sights of Resistance*, seeks to sample the range, diversity and historical context of Canadian visual culture from pre-Confederation to present. With the stated objective of shifting the reader’s real centre of attention away from the artist as the central agent for shaping meaning, he focuses on the critical strategies and processes that might reasonably be employed in the interpretation of examples of visual culture. Consequently, Professor Belton purports to have no interest in establishing a stable historical canon for Canadian art but, rather, seeks to challenge readers to recognize “conventions of meaning that ... [they] ... can then forge into substantial interpretations for themselves” (p. 3). As, perhaps, the first comprehensive yet general guide to Canadian visual culture, I found much to admire. Mostly written in clear, unadorned prose that conveys a wealth of stimulating ideas and useful information, this weighty volume is intended for the undergraduate university student, as well as the more advanced reader. With a tone that ranges from the informal and the generous to the authoritarian and absolute, this innovative undertaking provides its intended audience with compressed examinations of various aesthetic and political theories and definitions, and versions of visual literacy and visual poetics. Professor Belton also proposes his point of view about the elements of visual culture and the reasons for its study while offering didactic exercises for critical analysis. Moreover, despite his disclaimers, he has, indeed, supplied a concise survey of visual culture in Canada, as well as a reference list of important moments in Canadian history and visual culture. Approximately two-thirds of the book is devoted to case studies which

include illustrations of various works of Canadian art and design accompanied by brief texts that interpret the images from particular critical positions. Intended to stimulate further interpretations by the reader of both the images and the ideas inherent in the essay fragments, these case studies insist on interpretation as a dynamic process with little promise of permanent closure. Moreover, if the reader had any doubt that Dr Belton’s primary goal for this book was that it be used as a learning tool, it may be noted that throughout the text, various key words are printed in bold type. The CD-ROM that accompanies the book contains a glossary that can be searched at random for definitions of the terms. For these valuable inclusions, and more, I am very grateful to Dr Belton for his groundbreaking effort. That said, there are other, perhaps more subtle aspects of the book that are, indeed, troubling to me which I will consider at a later point in this review.

Claiming to have “no ideological agenda”, Belton declares that he intends to “break open as many approaches to meaning” (p. 4) and to interpretation as possible. He suggests that he has intentionally avoided writing a conventional survey of Canadian visual culture because he believes that such approaches usually reinforce a singular version of historical significance without making transparent the ideology of the author who shaped the narrative and the choices of illustrated works. Acknowledging the influence of a post-modern trend, as he perceives it, that favours “the audience over the traditionally sanctified artist” (p. 2), Professor Belton intended to construct a book that would encourage readers to be active participants in the critical interpretation of the art and ideas which they may encounter in his book or elsewhere.

Fundamentally suspicious of regarding the artist’s intention as a significant factor in the interpretation of the work of art, Professor Belton seems to privilege the persuasions of intellectually fashionable theories over the perceptual, physical and

psychological experiences of the actual work of art. Although he claims that “the point of art is the art, not the ‘words of art’”, he also emphasizes that in the current art world, “the experience of an object is always mediated” (p. 6). Professor Belton appears to have an almost unshakable belief in the capacity of verbal language to condition or even control the audience’s actual sensory experiences and intellectual engagements with visual and material objects. From this vantage point, dominant critical positions have the power at a given historical moment to determine absolutely the audience’s capacities for informed judgment. Unfortunately, Dr Belton’s position apparently places little trust in the audience’s inherent sensitivity to actual lived experience and its capacity for personal discernment. He evidently has little faith in the potential of individuals to be more or less conscious of their own perceptions and intellectual capacities as they develop the courage to assess meaning and quality in their own experiences. Despite his various claims otherwise, Dr Belton apparently finds greater comfort and, consequently, a more legitimate rationalization of the value and meaning of art in “the discussion about the discussion of art” (p. 7), rather than in the actual aesthetic experience. From my point of view, he is badly misguided in his assumptions that the inherent value of art and a basic understanding of art can be predicated primarily on a parallel discourse, the criticism of art, rather than on the experience of art itself. As the late novelist John Gardner wrote:

The critic’s proper business is ... to translate the concrete to the abstract. He [she] knows art loses in the translation but also gains: people who couldn’t respond to the work can now go back to it with some idea of what to look for and even if all they see is what the critic has told them to see, at least they’ve seen something. To understand a critic, one needs a clear head and a sensitive heart but not great powers of imagination. To understand a complex work of art, one must be something of an artist oneself.¹

As admirable as Dr Belton’s goals may be in assisting with the development of a reasonable approach and criteria for the interpretation of art, it will remain the personal task of the reader/viewer to be brave enough to have confidence in their own senses and intellect to embrace the experience of art with an attitude of openness and empathy.

Given the seductive authority of much current theoretical discourse, it remains crucial for the reader and viewer (including the artist and scholar) to remember that sensory perceptions and even emotional responses have been fundamental to the experience and, thus, the meaning of much art, past and present. Furthermore, I suggest that any approach itself is profoundly

flawed. Although Professor Belton certainly acknowledges throughout the text that there are multiple interrelationships embodied in the work of art, he seems, basically, much more preoccupied with “the inevitable layer of theory and/or conceptualization stretching between object and audience” (p. 3) than he is with the inherent particularities and properties of the object as conceived and fabricated by the practitioner. On the other hand, my query about Professor Belton’s apparent tendency to value discursive mediation over aesthetic experience may simply be an index of our different priorities and temperaments. Such differences have certainly, in my experience, caused great rifts in academic departments in universities and colleges, as well as in the art world as a whole. To his great credit, Dr Belton’s book affirms that “visual culture is alive and changing” (p. 3) and that, therefore, it may yet be possible to reconcile what I perceive as differences of emphasis and interpretation between studio practitioner and the scholar.

From my position as a practicing artist, studio educator and administrator in a major art and design college, I question Dr Belton’s romanticized reluctance to recognize artists (and designers for that matter) as conscious professionals whose intentions may be realized through disciplined investigation. Proof of such embodied intentions may, indeed, be evident to the viewers following the trajectory of a serious artist’s work over a period of time. The accomplished practitioners will, I believe, communicate their achievements to the receptive viewer through the objects which they have fabricated. Unrealized intentions, or a wrong-headed critique will, obviously, fail to change the literal characteristics of the actual work of art. Misguided interpretation that has lost its connection with the human reality of aesthetic experience may do much to indoctrinate critical opinion for a generation. Fortunately, the ensuing generation is unlikely to be satisfied with received notions and will probably return to the experience of the art to judge for themselves. Over the course of my own professional life, I have observed, with great interest, many significant critical revisions, from an earlier recuperation of Caravaggio and a questioning of the authenticity of certain Rembrandts, to the banishing of many modernisms, to recent anxieties about Thomas Eakins’ use of photographic sources in his paintings. These observations certainly reinforce the validity of Professor Belton’s investigation of the nature and the influence of the critical context on the reception of particular works of art in a given period. However, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt has wisely observed,

Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living

creatures [to actualize their own inherent purpose]. ... It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen ...²

With Hannah Arendt, I would suggest that such aesthetic achievements are the products of the intersection of a number of complex factors, not the least of which are the roles, talents and intentions of the artist, or other cultural producers, in the realization of their goals. Therefore, from my point of view, it would certainly be misguided to undervalue the input of artists and their purposeful actions in the interpretive process. It should be obvious that artists and designers are as aware, or as unaware, of the implications of their behaviour as other human beings. The best artists and designers understand how to integrate perceptual and physical means into modes of expression and communication. In fact, the curriculum of most professional art and design schools is predicated on the basic assumption that it is possible to learn to communicate effectively through visual and physical means. I do not suggest that the individual or cultural unconscious does not make its way into the work of art or design, but I do assert that it is possible to exercise a high degree of control in the communication of meaning. Similarly, I judge that it is possible for the capable writer to employ language to convey relatively precise meaning to the reader. Misunderstandings are certainly possible, but without the belief in communication, social interaction would be impossible. Clearly, Dr Belton believes in the capacity of language to communicate his ideas about art and interpretation, or else he would not have written this book as a guide to purposeful analysis. Likewise, if I were not convinced that a substantial degree of relatively stable meaning could be conveyed through visual and material means, I would probably discontinue my practice as an artist and studio educator. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the careless or insensitive viewer may easily overlook the expressive structure or content of a work, or may reject the effort to communicate altogether for any number of reasons beyond the control of the artist.

On the other hand, I hope I have not belaboured the point concerning what I perceive to be inattentiveness to perceptual experience and to the artist's conscious role in the construction of meaning in Professor Belton's suggested critical processes. I should finally return my consideration to other matters which I judge as infinitely more satisfactory. As I have indicated elsewhere, this book would be best suited for use in a university course that focuses on the conventions and strategies of criticism and interpretation of exemplary achievements of Cana-

dian visual culture. I suggest that this text would ideally be employed following a more conventional course in which the students would gain a more coherent understanding of the major historical achievements of Canadian art and design, as well as receiving a thorough grounding in the general geography and history of the country. Recognizing the ideological traps that Belton suggests are inherent in such survey courses, I am convinced, as I have advanced elsewhere, that a meaningful understanding of visual art and its cultural context is unlikely to be achieved without the direct perceptual and physical engagement with the aesthetic objects. The broad theoretical generalizations, the accumulations of terms, definitions and categories, and the well-organized exercises for interpretation would serve curious students well in developing their awareness of current critical methods and references. With the additional experience of engaging with the case studies that examine both predictable samples of well-known Canadian art and perplexing examples of visual culture that often challenge the canon in terms of geography, genre and even quality, students should be well-equipped with the reasoned strategies and flexibility of judgment for sound critiques of visual culture. The evolving glossary and the relatively exhaustive bibliography should serve as useful references for further study as long as readers are prepared to revise their own understandings according to their unfolding experience and insights.

In closing, it is important to reiterate my overall judgment that Robert Belton has made an important contribution to the study and teaching of Canadian visual culture. Whatever qualms I may have about many of his particular assertions in relation to certain critical theories, specific definitions, even the idiosyncrasies of his choices of individual art and artists, I do not doubt that I would use Dr Belton's book as a component in any introductory course on art theory and criticism in the Canadian context that I might teach. I hope that he will continue to rethink many of his views, as his book stimulates further critical comment among our colleagues across the country. I also urge him to return regularly to the perceptual and sensory experiences of the actual works of art in order that his own settled understandings of the discourses about the discourse of art may be challenged and refreshed.

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Notes

1. John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York, 1978), 8.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), 168.