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1991

Review of The Art of Tom Lea.

Brian W. Dippie

University of Victoria, B.C.

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Dippie, Brian W., "Review of The Art of Tom Lea." (1991). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 563.

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ments span seven decades and a critical assessment would seem in order, this book is best considered a handsome homage. Indeed, the textual matter is limited to a brief foreword by Kathleen Hjerter, the book's compiler, and an introduction by William Weber Johnson. The rest—219 pages—consists of plates, many in color, arranged in five chronological divisions but entirely lacking in commentary. The pioneer painter George Catlin in 1870 rejected an offer to publish a complete edition of his Indian outlines because no text was contemplated and he feared the critics would dismiss it with a sarcastic, "What a splendid illustrated catalogue—price 100 dols." The price of *The Art of Tom Lea* is less than half that, but the rest of Catlin's description applies. At a time when western art scholarship is coming of age, it is deflating to find a figure as interesting as Lea encased in what aspires to be nothing more than a coffee-table book.

Johnson's introduction implies that Lea's own reticence and modesty about his work created constraints. Though a much-traveled writer and artist, the worldly Lea has retained a suspicion of artiness worthy of a down-home folk hero like Charlie Russell. He has gone his own way, resisting (or ignoring) artistic trends, unconcerned that his work may be considered anecdotal and old-fashioned. This puts him in the company of Thomas Hart Benton and William Robinson Leigh who noisily rejected modernism in defending representational art, though perhaps a better comparison would be with the masterly New Mexico painter Peter Hurd, whose work suggests a serene indifference to the clamor of competing aesthetics. At the least, it would be interesting to have Lea positioned in Western American art, if only on the basis of an ornery individualism. *The Art of Tom Lea* attempts nothing of the sort; we are left to make our own judgments from the reproductions.

Born in El Paso in 1907, Lea is in some respects the quintessential regional artist, almost mystically devoted to a land and its traditions. His disarming confession after serving as a World War II artist-correspondent for *Life*

The Art of Tom Lea. Compiled by Kathleen G. Hjerter. Introduction by William Weber Johnson. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989. Photographs, introduction, index. xv + 255 pp. \$39.95.

It is difficult to write objectively about a living artist, and though Tom Lea's accomplish-

magazine that he knew more about flying off the deck of an aircraft carrier than roping a cow would single him out as a true maverick among western painters were his post-war work not so obviously unburdened with the details—and contraptions—of modern life. Most of his paintings, like those of other western artists, are set in a timeless past. We see pioneers framed against azure skies, or lost in the immensity of a space that would seem to mock their pretensions to dominion over the land were they not cut from such a square-jawed, heroic mold. Perhaps Lea shook the memories of combat out of his head by seizing onto yesterday. His wartime studies of death and devastation—*The Price* and *That 2,000 Yard Stare*—are in such striking contrast to the glowing, peacetime works he was painting just a few years later—*The Hills of Mexico*, *The Shining Plain*—that one detects a conscious decision to return to his roots after 1945. Even his recent shift to a more painterly style—from a concern with form and structure to the play of light on surfaces—has not altered the basic content of his work. *The Art of Tom Lea* says too little about too many things, but the reproductions establish a consistent vision distinctively Lea's own. We know his heartland through him.

BRIAN W. DIPP
Department of History
University of Victoria, B.C.