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Spring 2011

Review of *Spirit Matters: Ron [Gyo-zo] Spickett, Artist, Poet, Lay-Priest* by Geoffrey Simmins

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Dawn, Leslie, "Review of *Spirit Matters: Ron [Gyo-zo] Spickett, Artist, Poet, Lay-Priest* by Geoffrey Simmins" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2677.

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*Spirit Matters: Ron [Gyo-zo] Spickett, Artist, Poet, Lay-Priest.* By Geoffrey Simmins. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2009. xxi + 274 pp. Photographs, illustrations, color plates, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 paper.

Most surveys of modernist art in the Canadian prairie provinces in the 1960s focus on the annual Emma Lake Workshops. These gatherings brought prominent avant-garde artists such as Barnett Newman and Kenneth Noland to Saskatchewan and introduced the controversial American critic Clement Greenberg and his ideas on the development of purity, abstraction, and flatness in painting. Yet not all prairie artists who thought of themselves as modernist followed this path. Many of them have been excluded from published histories.

One such artist is Ron Spickett, the subject of a recent retrospective exhibition curated by Geoffrey Simmins. Simmins's complementary book covers Spickett's early period in Regina, his work as a commercial artist, his study in Mexico, his adoption of other media after 1980, and his study of Buddhism, which led him to become a lay priest and adopt the name Gyo-zo.

Spickett's major period of painting was in Calgary during the 1960s. After experimenting with a variety of approaches, he pursued a *juste milieu* style, a middle ground that combined both abstraction and figuration. Rejecting the reduction to essentials prescribed by Greenberg, Spickett maintained that art and life should be joined. He chose his range of imagery from archetypal Western themes and images, such as cowboys, horses, and dance hall girls, from which he forged modern metaphors for the human condition. Simmins has attempted to unravel these images' layers of meanings, images that were popular with corporate patrons.

But Spickett had ambitions beyond filling boardrooms with art. He dreamed of a public art form. Although such commissions were rare in Calgary, his ambitions were realized in a mural for the lobby of a new court house. It was large in scale and joined modernist abstraction with populist, recognizable, and local imagery.

The two seemingly opposing elements were harmonized through his deft use of exquisite calligraphic outlines placed over an animated abstract ground of colored shapes.

Simmins's analysis of the mural demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the book. The illustrations are of poor quality and not linked to the text. His close collaboration with the artist produced an intimate and sympathetic reading, yet also resulted in many retrospective rather than contextual interpretations of the works. Showing how Spickett synthesized East and West in his art and life, Simmins makes the spiritual content of the works overshadow their obvious Dionysian and corporeal aspects. Such quibbles aside, *Spirit Matters* is a highly spirited effort to bring a worthy artist to public attention and retrieve a history in danger of being lost.

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