

Lenin's ability to persuade the party to abandon its traditional commitment to bourgeois revolution in favour of soviet power and proletarian dictatorship that underlay Bolshevik political success in 1917. It was this that permitted the Bolsheviks to formulate radical positions in favour of workers' control, land reform and peace that eventually won over the mass of the popular classes. Le Blanc underestimates both the extent of this programmatic shift and its political impact. Yet, without a new program the Bolsheviks would probably have finished up as a relatively well organized but politically impotent party, unable to lead an insurrection and eventually swept away with the rest of the left by a right wing dictatorship.

On the balance, though, Le Blanc has made an important contribution to our understanding of Leninism and Bolshevism. Not only has he read his Lenin, but he has also achieved an impressive mastery of the secondary historical literature. This he deploys in a highly readable and critical fashion to relate the development of Lenin's organizational theory to its social and political context. The result is a fine work of historical synthesis, of great use both to historians of socialism and to activists.

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Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada 1992).

To be clear from the start: *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* is an impressive undertaking. Denise Leclerc, assistant curator of later Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), and the staff of the NGC, have assembled a multi-media production. The 158 paintings and sculptures in this exhibition (representative of 62 artists who lived in seven different urban centres across Canada) are complemented by the presentation of some of Molinari's original manuscript musings on *Plasticisme*, a short video, a recorded audio commentary, and a well-documented, finely-written catalogue which also contains an extended technical essay by NGC art conservationist Marion H. Barclay. The

entire program has been, or will be, on display at five different galleries or museums in different parts of Canada over the course of the next year. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* is, in other words, not a simple exhibition but rather, a serious endeavour in public history which merits the serious attention of Canadian cultural historians.

This exhibition takes as its central theme the concept of crisis. This crisis was not, however, triggered by political or economic developments. Instead, in the extended historical introduction to the catalogue, Leclerc argues that the crisis of Canadian art in the 1950s was structured largely by the internal efforts of Canadian artists to respond to the international challenge to established artistic practices raised by abstract art in general, and in particular American abstract expressionism. The crisis emerged as a variety of different artists in a series of different locations wrestled with the impact of abstraction on their own artistic ideals and practices. This intellectual wrestling began as a movement away from figurative art. But, once severed from its established moorings, Canadian art entered a period of rapid experimentation as artists moved onto qualitatively new aesthetic ground. In short order artists began to use a variety of new materials, experimented with a broad array of new styles of painting and sculpting, transgressed the boundaries defining different types of art, and attempted to establish new aesthetic standards. The result, according to Leclerc, was both a radical break with previous aesthetic canons and a vibrant period of artistic development within which artists such as Jean-Paul Riopelle, Guido Molinari, The Painters Eleven, The Regina Five, and Jack Shadbolt moved to the forefront of Canadian art.

The story which is here being told through these diverse media is, then, a story of the transformation of Canadian art and, ultimately, of the triumph of abstraction. This story develops differently in different parts of Canada. For example: in Montreal, the *Plasticien* movement emerged in opposition to the radical, surrealist impulses of *automatisme* and the discourse of *Refus Global* constructed in the 1940s by Paul-Emile Borduas and his followers. In Toronto, painters such as Jack Bush and Harold Town moved in a process of critical interaction with American artistic de-

velopments and against the residue of the ideals of the Group of Seven. And finally, in the Canadian West, Leclerc explores the interaction between the state institutions (especially universities), American influences, and the western environment to argue for a unique western approach to abstracted landscape. And it is a story which is told in an innovative and effective manner. Leclerc's introductory essay combines elements of traditional art historical writing (with its emphasis on stylistic analysis, quality, and the internal development of art) with a serious effort to comprehend the larger historical context. She rightly establishes the artists themselves as the centre of her narrative, but is also sensitive to the interaction between artists and the broader historical situation. Exhibition material explains carefully the importance of developments in painting materials and the significance of economic advancement, the rise of consumer culture, American international hegemony, population growth and the changing role of the state in the promotion of culture in Canada. In short, the historical context within which this exhibition is set is what Leclerc sees as the final consolidation of a truly modern society, the artistic counterpart of which is abstraction.

Taken on its own terms this exhibition can only be considered a success. The complicated and multi-faceted nature of this exhibition make it a presentation not to be taken lightly. To explore the full scope of this production can be a demanding exercise. The exact meaning of *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* truly emerges only through the composite effort of the various media involved in the presentation of this exhibition. For those who wish to engage the program on this level, the effort has its rewards. It will also, however, raise issues which require attention. For example, Atlantic Canadian historians may not be happy with the lack of consideration of this region in the exhibition. But, to be fair, Leclerc demonstrates a sensitivity to regional differences and the relative absence in this exhibition of Atlantic Canadian artists may indeed reflect this historical record. This absence does suggest important questions about the Atlantic Canadian artistic response to modernity which is currently being studied by

other historians and truly does fall outside the parameters of this presentation. In particular, the central question here is why we should accept *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* on its own terms.

The narrative which is presented does not rely on a mechanistic conceptual framework. In situating the artists at the centre of her narrative, Leclerc avoids falling into any form of reductionism that would establish a mechanistic relationship between social and artistic developments. This is an effective heuristic style which tells us much about the interaction between individual artists and their historical situation and the effect of this interaction on art. The difficulty here is not with method, but rather the way in which this method is employed. In limiting the focus to abstraction in the 1950s an artificial time-frame is created. This point Leclerc readily acknowledges. It is this artificial time-frame that creates the narrative theme from which the title of the exhibition is taken. In constructing the narrative on the basis of this conceptual abstraction, however, another, potentially more important narrative has been obscured.

In her historical analysis Leclerc is quite clear that she is tracing the evolution of totally modern art, defined as non-figurative abstraction, in Canada. Yet little time is expended addressing the philosophical questions which impelled modern Canadian artists of the pre-history of abstraction — the 1930s and 1940s — away from academic and romantic landscape modes of painting in the first place. What Leclerc leaves us with, then, is a group of artists who are entirely concerned with art. Larger social or cultural questions receive scant attention. Yet recent research into French Canadian *automatisme*, the socialistic Progressive Arts Clubs, and the art criticism of such influential intellectuals as Walter A-bell (a leading force in the establishment of the Maritime Art Association, founding editor of *Canadian Art* and its antecedent *Maritime Art*, and a key participant in the 1941 Kingston Conference) indicates that wider cultural, social and political issues were clearly on the artistic agenda in the 1930s and 1940s and that artists saw their art as intricately connected to some form of broadly defined progressive politics designed to alleviate or to resolve the

perceived contradictions of Canadian modernity. Tying all this together was a fairly sophisticated critique of the social and economic condition of the artist in modern society.

What happened to this broader cultural critique which infused the arts in the period just before the 1950s? Easy answers to this question are not readily available but some possible lines of enquiry have been suggested by Serge Guilbeault in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, his compelling study of the historical development of non-figurative abstraction in the United States. Guilbeault argues that the American artistic turn to abstract expressionism was built upon a personal artistic response to the collapse of more radical political and cultural artistic alternatives following the initiation of the Cold War, the failure of American socialism in the post-war era, and the consolidation of American international capitalist hegemony. Abstract expressionism in its intellectual foregrounding of individual expression in the work of art signified not only the pacification of a more radical artistic praxis, but also the evolution of a personalized conception of art which displayed a considerable affinity with the post-war program of American liberalism.

Was a similar process underway in Canada? If so, this would have important implications for the way in which we understand the rise of abstraction in Canadian artistic history. It would, in fact, seriously alter the narrative being presented in *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada*. In this sense, the story which could be told might not be a story of triumph. Instead, the real plot of our narrative might become the reconstitution of liberalism and the concomitant displacement of radical projects in the decades before 1950. The story of triumph could be in this way complicated by a recognition that in the course of the development of modern art in Canada as much was lost as was gained.

That Serge Guilbeault's narrative tells us something of the development of modern art in modern American society is, of course, no guarantee that the same thing, or even a similar thing, happened in Canada. That *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* does not demonstrate that the political history of modern Canadian art bore strong similarities to the political history of American abstract expressionism should not obscure the impres-

sive nature of this presentation. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* is a fine exhibition. Canadian cultural historians should take it as a cue to begin a more concerted examination of the political and philosophical history of modern art in Canada.

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Cathy Schwichtenberg, ed., *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press 1993).

In the spirit of the subject, let's start with the surface. The cover is eye-catchingly garish: ugly colours, silly type, awkward lay out, and a picture of Madonna that has been colourized (this seems more appropriate than "tinted"). The back has eight blurbs, three from academics with the usual claims ("Important," "radicalized," "truly contributes to a number of ongoing discussions"), and five from media sources, all commenting not on the contents (there's no indication they've actually read them) but rather on the potential controversy it might stir up. Like Madonna herself, this book will take notoriety if it can't have respect.

Not that it isn't desperately seeking respect. Its thirteen essays are marshalled into roughly equal sections dealing with race, gay issues, feminism and "the political economy of postmodernism," an organization that, like the book's pretentious subtitle, makes implicit promises that it doesn't fulfill. Neither of the first two sections really delivers: of the three papers in the section entitled "Reading race and Madonna's audiences," only two actually deal with race, and one of these is an analysis of college students' responses to questions about race in Madonna's videos. In the gay section, only two of the essays deal substantially with gay issues, and neither, curiously, are written by a gay man (which is surely one of the "subcultural identities" most persistently associated with Madonna's career).

The two "audience analysis" pieces that open the book make for a miserable introduction. The first performs a kind of wild psychoanalysis on critics of Madonna, who are ridiculously labelled "Madonna haters." Any-