



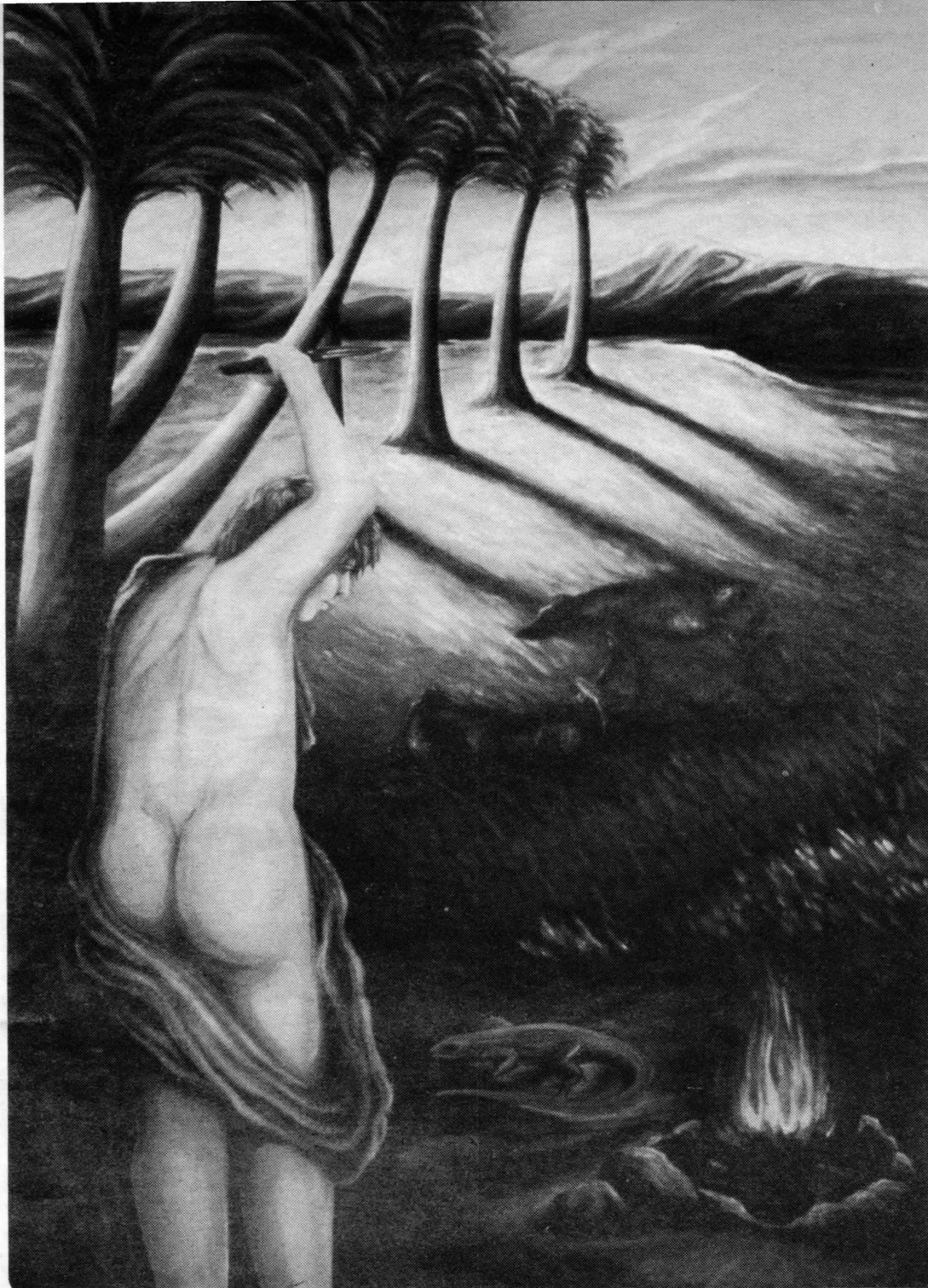
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Review: Nicola Wojewoda

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Nicola Wojewoda; *The Flesh Eaters*; 1985; oil on wood; 72 x 50 in. Photo: courtesy Garnet Press.

PLACES OF PRODIGY

NICOLA WOJEWODA

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From Northrop Frye's essay on the Canadian 'imagination' as a seige mentality against our hostile wilderness to Margaret Atwood's treatise on survival as a collective theme in our literature, prominent writers have tackled a dogma which surrounds the issue of our 'national' identity and its representations. The roots of this stranglehold over wilderness as a patriotic commodity have traditionally clustered about the work of the Canadian artists known as the Group of Seven. Their influence over the populist conception of a 'Canadian' art was so great that even today the mention of their names is enough to pro-

duce involuntary shudders among artists and critics young enough to have escaped the full force of their pre-eminence in the 1940's and early 50's. This is not to say, of-course, that artists working in Toronto have not been subject to other cultural impositions in the last decades. From abstract expressionism to pop art to a conceptual blanket that sought to stifle painting as an authentic means to soothe modernism's woes, artists have produced within and around the strictures of critical canons. It seems, however, that in the 1980's painting has been resurrected as 'okay'. The theme of the northern wilderness in landscape has not been so fortunate. Plagued by a critical legacy which has been transposed into the arena of kitsch, it appears that it exists in an ambiguous limbo of a never-never land

where there is nothing left to say. The recent work of Niki Wojewoda challenges the silence on the part of contemporary and literary critics. She has undertaken to revitalize the relation of landscape to the dichotomy of nature and culture; presenting it as facets of original and personal vision.

It is perhaps a truism to state that the dichotomy of city versus the wilderness rather than the city versus the countryside is specifically North American concern. Yet the evolution of its articulation in Canadian art has been subject to a peculiar contradiction in representation. While the idealized landscapes of the American Sublime movement became recognized as contextually addressing the political and cultural issues affect-

United States' industrial development, Canadian landscape artists of the period were caught in a Flemish 'old masters' style which conveyed little of the tensions that historically characterized Canada's colonial period. The emergence of the Group of Seven presented an opposite conflict. Gone were the Dutch scenes and tranquil fields filled with distinctly European looking cows. Instead, in every household hung a reproduction of a Tom Thomson lone pine which left Canadians incapable of conceptualizing nature outside certain stylistic parameters. Contemporary artists who wish to explore landscape as a central aspect of our so-called 'post-modern' condition have inherited the constraints of this history. On one hand, they must recognize the subliminal hold-over which the legacy of an over-familiar terrain of 'wilderness' has on our 'imagination'. For after-all, it is the stuff from which high-school, not to mention university, courses in Canadian art history are made of. On the other hand, if they reference these stereo-types too literally, they run the risk of producing kitsch, or a critical expose upon its popular deployment. The power of Nicola Wojewoda's paintings and drawings lies in her subtle acknowledgement of these representational impasses in landscape while creating work which forces the viewer to re-think his/her relationship to nature.

Three large canvases hang in the first floor; they suggest a sub-text for the more diverse range of approaches found in the upper storey of the gallery; setting the context for the death of the landscape while the pieces upstairs evoke its rebirth. In *Wood's Edge*, a fine by five foot charcoal drawing on paper, the background landscape is executed in an eclectical manner reminiscent of the Flemish tradition. A woman sitting on a rock, her back turned to the viewer, appears to play an absent flute. A large dog of a Gainsborough complacently sits at her feet. The picture's focus, however, does not rest with the romanticised, almost gothic, landscape of the Niagara River region, but with the foreground figure. Clothed in an expression of enigmatic melancholy which would be equally at home in a Charles Dickens' novel or a Queen Victoria's bar, it is as if he has interiorized the history of the landscape in his morbid features. Slightly displaced by the perspective he occupies in the drawing; he is part of the landscape but somehow dispossessed from its narrative. And it is this disjunction, utilized in Wojewoda's other work as well, which allows the landscapes to be executed in terms of pastiche without dispersing the import of the piece into an archaic sensibility. In *The Enigmatist*, Wojewoda's other charcoal on paper, conveys a dreamy, clearly gothic atmosphere. Someone suggested that both works use moonlight as a source of the dense black and white gradations which characterize these drawings. I would argue it is an obscured sun and its filtered rays which are the subject of their sombre landscape. It is as if the figures exist in the projected limbo of a nuclear winter, yet the metaphorical overtones in the work are slim. Her pieces are not about ecology or pollution or a collective angst, but about the individual's incomprehension in a world which juxtaposes the marvellous, the terror, and the wisdom of a nature that is buried underneath our urban

existence and kitsch reproductions of its power.

The large oil painting on wood which comprises the third piece in the downstairs setting offers the viewer a further hint of the tensions which operate within Wojewoda's approach to landscape. Entitled *The Flesh Eaters*, a cherub-like figure dominates its foreground, again slightly out of sync with the picture plane. It is difficult to take him seriously. He holds a knife, posed for the kill, yet the lizard which he is apparently threatening is as much an applique as he in the landscape. The trees behind him which line up in a classical perspective are painted in a manner which synthesizes an art deco style with a surrealist tinge. Nothing is quite natural in this painting, yet its whole comprises a believable scenario.



Nicola Wojewoda; *The Wood's Edge*; 1985; charcoal on paper; 108 x 60 in. Photo: courtesy Garnet Press.

Again, it is not the archaic symbols of the primitive which Wojewoda is lightly playing with, but an element of kitsch which punctuates our inherited representations of the landscape. Like the charcoal drawings which contain a residue of the black-velvet genre of livingroom art, there is an acknowledgement of pastiche, but at the same time a work which draws upon sources beyond the conscious effort of appropriation. For in *The Flesh Eaters*, there is a city subtly traced into the dusky blue mountains, barely visible in the wealth of colours and formal strategies which comprise the whole. Two fierce dogs loll indolently in the pasture, like the European cows of a Homer Watson painting. The total effect is not a rejuvenation of our primitive origins, but a question upon our contemporary position within the context of the landscape's history. The viewer is drawn back into the work through the glint of the knife. Although the figure holding it is a reproduction from the renaissance attitude towards an idealized pastoral setting, the knife itself is still

powerful. It is suggestive of the contradictions which beset an urban context, wherein flesh is served from supermarkets yet 'irrational' acts of violence still occur between men and women, between individuals who are dispossessed of the sources of aggression and possessed of an inheritance of representation which presents nature as a series of stylistic conventions.

Upstairs, there is one small painting which literally suggests a means by which to re-vitalize the specificity of the Canadian experience in nature. Entitled *The Capture of Ursa Minor*, it depicts a nude figure lassoing a grizzly bear, framed by frescos of the Roman/Greek villa variety. The Greeks and Romans may have produced the readings of the stars which mapped classical mythology, but it does not mean they cannot be re-contextualized in another story. In North American Indian traditions, the lassoing of a bear brought one protection against the unpredictable whims of nature. And so Wojewoda's re-telling of the myth brings the wilderness from the historical and the idealized into a realm where personal interpretation becomes prominent. Thus her three *Northern Summer Series* escape any hint of kitsch in her use of birchbark to silhouette her Canadian animals. Instead, they are refreshing and whimsical plays upon the northern landscape and a tracing of the constellations which populate its mythology; geese, and fish and owls. Likewise, in *Fragments Recalled*, broken pieces of asphalt painted in oil deflect the connotations of the cave drawing. They become vignettes of an urban lifestyle, the tiny naked figures posed in gestures of rushing office workers and sexual partners.

East of the Sun takes the playfulness of Wojewoda's miniatures and the disjunctions which characterize her larger pieces to create a magical synthesis of the landscape as an idealized but intimate experience. A large turtle dominates the middle section of these five wood panels pieced together to produce a slightly disjointed oil painting. Like the turtle in *The Enigmatist*, its inscrutable expression and almost placid prominence represents a tension which gives Wojewoda's work its provoking blend of archaic yet contemporary references. For this is not the sort of turtle one finds in primitive protection on the Galapagos Islands, but rather it is your everyday sort of house-pet variety. It is a reptile of captivity, enclosed in mock environments with tiny ponds and plastic palm trees. But by the same token, it still conveys in its bearings the legacy of its species. It suggests the wisdom acquired through its reputation for longevity and its patient, ambling scrutiny of the world rushing by it. It becomes, like the other animals in Wojewoda's work (lizards, owls, fish), a source of wisdom in nature that neither the artist's struggle with representation, nor the viewer's relation to the work, can attain. It is the enigma and the enigmatist in her drawings; occupying neither a position of symbolism nor realism within the landscape; but assuming a place where prodigy as a marvellous thing arising out of nature can still occur despite the layers of kitsch and idealism which negate the possibility of its representation.

Dot Tuer