

# McGill News

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ALEX COLVILLE



# The paintings of Alex Colville

"A relaxed, but explosive quiet"

by Peter O'Brien

Alex Colville is one of a small number of Canadian painters who enjoys an international reputation. His work is in the collections of art galleries and museums across Canada, as well as in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Musée nationale d'art moderne in Paris, and the Nationalgalerie in East Berlin. In 1971, the German art critic Heinz Ohff wrote that Colville may be "the most prominent, indeed the most important realist painter in the Western world."

A travelling retrospective of Colville's work that includes working drawings and such well-known paintings as "Horse and Train" and "To Prince Edward Island" was at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from 2 February to 1 April. While in Montreal for the opening of his show, Colville delivered an illustrated public lecture at McGill and conducted a small student seminar in the department of art history. As a complement to the Colville visit, this department along with that of Canadian studies invited the Art Gallery of Ontario's Curator of Contemporary Canadian Art Dr. David Burnett to speak on the subject of "Critical Issues in Canadian 'Realist' Painting." Burnett is the author of the recently-published book, *Colville* (Art Gallery of Ontario-McClelland and Stewart Ltd.), which provides a much needed overview, tracing the painter's career from his early years as an official war artist in World War II Europe to his most recent work. Placing him within the context of art history, Burnett shows how numerous well-known painters, including Jan Vermeer and Thomas Eakins, have influenced Colville's vision.

Of the many aesthetic and critical issues raised during the visits of Colville and Burnett, perhaps the most important was the question, "What is 'realism' in the visual arts?" During his lecture, Colville stated that "the things we make have only an extrapolated connection to experience. . . . What I do is not reality." The scenes in his paintings are staged, contrived, or in his words, "manufactured . . . artificial." He stated that in fact there is no such thing as "realism": each person brings his or her own conscious and unconscious "realities" to a work of art. Speaking with the art history students, he stated that "every individual brings to the examination of any given work of art a different experience, so that



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the work is different for everybody who looks at it."

In many Colville paintings the characters are turned away from the viewer; or they hide or partially cover their faces with a hand, hat, or binoculars. Colville noted that it would be uncomfortable for the audience if the people in his paintings were "turning around and looking at you." Rather than being confronted by the scene, we are encouraged to participate in it. We become an integral part of the viewing process by bringing our own life experiences to the work. Colville is more interested in an active than a passive audience: "An important thing in a work of art, I think, is the ability of the viewer to identify, to find some way to get into the thing."

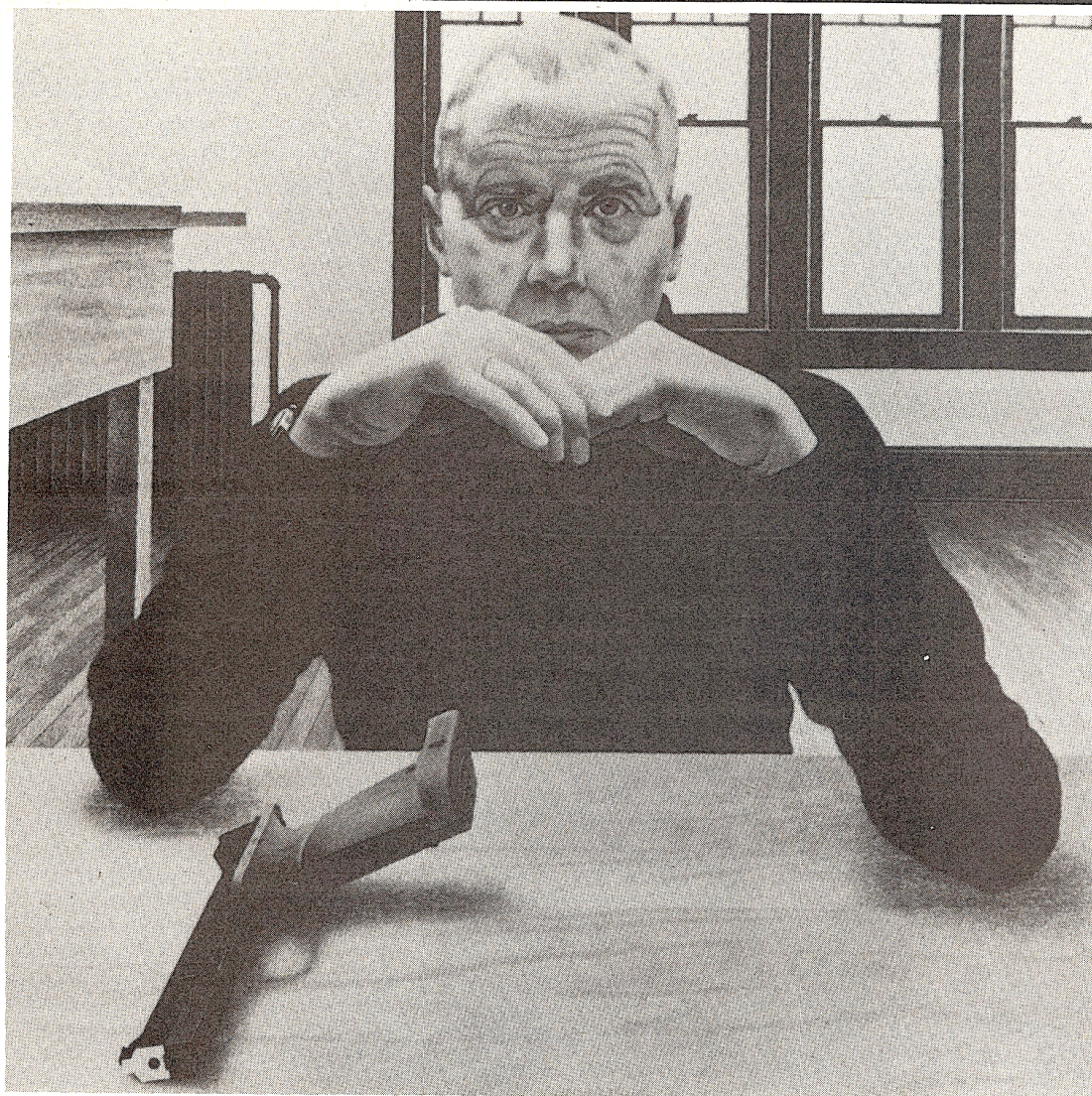
In a recent painting, "Target Pistol and Man," a man looks at us. His hands hide the bottom portion of his face, and a target pistol rests on a table with its barrel

pointed towards us. The situation, as well as the man's pose, evoke many different imaginative responses. We are compelled to ask a multitude of questions regarding the relationship between the man, the gun, and the audience.

Burnett in *Colville* talks about the "immediate and striking" impact of "Target Pistol and Man" on the viewer: "Yet the picture, so clearly constructed, so tightly locked, is somehow not at rest. It calls for completion. Is there a key to it, a hidden clue that will set it still? Do we need to find a category for it? . . . If, for instance, we could see it in photographic terms, as a painstaking transfer from a photograph, we could recognize it as a frozen moment from a continuous action. If we could look at it in terms of narrative, then we could find ways to reconstruct its past and project its future. If we accept the picture as a self-portrait, then it could be a painted soliloquy, an image of

Vivian Kellner





*Target Pistol and Man* 1980  
Acrylic polymer emulsion  
60.0 x 60.0 cm  
Private Collection

soul-searching for which the pistol stands both as a symbol for and an instrument of death. Or is it that the picture is simply a way to tug at the spectator's attention, an imposition into his space backed up by the threat of aggression?"

In the painting, "Child Skipping," reproduced on the cover of this *News*, it is also apparent that Colville wishes to elicit an intellectual as well as an aesthetic and emotional response from his audience. This "frozen moment" of a child suspended in mid-air encourages our imagination to complete her movements for her. Burnett points out that she is suspended between the two buildings dominating her childhood — home and school. "In picture after picture Colville brings disparate elements into balance," he writes, "reflecting the complex of demands we face daily. We must reconcile our inner selves with the circumstances of the outer world. The girl in 'Child

Skiping' does not yet fully see this, absorbed as she is in her game. We, as spectators, can live her future through our pasts. We can reconcile these elements for her, just as we can come to terms with events in our own lives by bringing their movements into a balance that we control."

At times, Colville's paintings exist more as ideas than as things. One of his best known, "Horse and Train," shows a train and a horse converging on what seems to be a collision course. There is something deterministic yet at the same time free about this image: the train alludes to an imminent collision, but the horse is in mid-stride (as the child is in mid-air) and runs forward as though freedom were not an illusion. Many of the things that Colville paints (trees, animals, water, people) are recognizable, yet there is always a disturbing intelligence that informs the work.

This notion of recognizability brings up another question — that of regionalism, an important topic when discussing Colville, because of the misunderstandings that accompany this term. Many of Colville's paintings are set in and around Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where he has lived most of his life; yet the ideas behind the paintings incorporate a much larger map. The same could be said of James Joyce's *Dublin* or Johann Strauss's *Danube*: although there is a geographic influence, their themes are universal. When asked about regionalism, Colville stated that he thought it was a foolish idea: "I don't think of myself as a regionalist in the silly, sentimental way that people talk about it (yet) I'm a person who wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

Colville prefers familiar surroundings, not so much because he considers the Maritimes particularly beautiful, but be-



*To Prince Edward Island 1965*  
Acrylic polymer emulsion  
60.9 x 91.4 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



cause of his concern for tradition and a sense of rootedness. "I don't think any place is more beautiful than any other," he says. "But I like being where I know what's going on. Every time you move, for example, you lose your friends, you lose your known environment, you undergo a real trauma. All your connections are broken and you have to rebuild your life."

Rather than being classified as a regionalist painter, Colville belongs more comfortably to a loosely-knit school known as the "magic realists," a group that includes such American artists as Edward Hopper, Grant Wood, and Andrew Wyeth. In 1942, Alfred H. Barr defined magic realism as "a term sometimes applied to the work of painters who by means of an exact realistic technique try to make plausible and convincing their improbable, dreamlike or fantastic visions." The term is particularly useful when we look at or talk about a Colville painting such as "Pacific," which shows a gun resting on a wooden table and be-

hind it a man turned towards the ocean, with his back to the viewer and his head cut off by the top of the canvas. Although everything in the painting is clear and instantly familiar, there is a nightmarish vision presented, a relaxed but explosive quiet.

Colville has been a practising artist since the late 1930s, but it was not until 1963 that he could quit his teaching job and devote himself completely to his painting. Over the years he has been involved in various art activities in Canada, the United States, and Europe. In 1967-68, he was a visiting artist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and in 1970 with the Berliner Künstlerprogramm. He has honorary degrees from a selection of Canadian universities, has been an Officer of the Order of Canada since 1967, and in 1982 was named a Companion of the Order of Canada. In 1981, he was appointed the Chancellor of Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. He has also received several important commissions: he designed the

coins for Canada's 1967 centennial and in 1975 the commemorative medal for Governor General and Mrs. Jules Léger.

Colville's work and teaching have also been of considerable importance to a younger generation of Canadian painters, including Hugh MacKenzie, Christopher and Mary Pratt, Tom Forrestall, and D.P. Brown. His influence on these Maritime artists has not been to encourage a regionalism, but to inspire them with the universality of his unique vision and with the confidence that has always sustained his work.

During the McGill seminar, Colville joked about being the "locomotive of art history . . . I know this sounds pretentious," he says, "but I don't believe in false modesty. I've always taken myself seriously — even as a kid. I always thought, 'I'm going to try and do really great things.' Really! I always felt that way, and I don't see why everybody doesn't feel this way. I think we should go all out." □