

# The unfinished canvas of her life

*With several new shows celebrating her work — one a retrospective spanning seven decades — 89-year-old Doris McCarthy is planning her next painting trip abroad.*

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It is a cliché of the Canadian art world to speak of the energy level and artistic output of painter Doris McCarthy, age 89. "I worked with her yesterday," says a youthful assistant at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, where a 70-year retrospective of McCarthy's work opens today, "and I'm still tired."

What is remarkable is not just that McCarthy continues to work, but that she still finds new landscapes to see and think about, vigorous ways to apply paint to canvas and paper, and never hems in her instinctive impulse to travel and explore. As she writes in her 1990 autobiography, *A Fool in Paradise*: "since I was a Thursday's child, I took it for received truth that I would have 'far to go' and do a lot of travelling in my life."

Anyone who has experienced McCarthy's luminous oil paintings of the North from the seventies and eighties, or her most recent dreamy watercolours of Ireland, heard the spring in her voice as she discusses new projects, or read her intimate and passionate autobiographical writing, knows that she has many more miles and many more canvases in her yet.

If she seems everywhere these days, it is because she is. Celebrating Life: The Art of Doris McCarthy will be at the McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg, Ont., until March 20. An exhibition of her works on paper, The View from Here — A Retrospective of Watercolour Paintings, 1950-2000 (note the years in the title: not often are artists given credit for work they have yet to produce), is at the Art Gallery of Mississauga until Dec. 10.

As if that weren't enough, she's also featured in the most recent issue of Canadian Art magazine. She continues to have her annual show at her long-time Toronto gallery Wynick/Tuck, and is working on a one-person show in Edmonton for the spring.

She recently donated her beloved property on eastern Toronto's Scarborough Bluffs, "Fool's Paradise," to the Ontario Heritage Foundation, along with a \$500,000 endow-



ment, to be used in perpetuity as a retreat and work space for artists, writers and musicians.

Education has always been important to McCarthy. She managed to find the time, along with her teaching and mentoring, and the 80 solo shows she has had over her career, to earn her BA in English Literature from the University of Toronto in 1989, at age 79.

When asked what she is up to these days she laments, just slightly, the burden of media interviews, and then launches into a few of her activities: "I skated this

morning, I'll soon be working on material I gathered earlier this year from a month in Ireland and a month in Newfoundland. Next April I'm off to Italy. Oh, I'm going great guns."

The McMichael show is as much an homage to McCarthy as it is an exhibition. Accompanied by a 240-page, full-colour catalogue with articles by Peter Gzowski, Christopher Hume and Murray McLauchlan, the show includes almost 100 of McCarthy's works, in both oil and watercolour, spanning her career. The show also includes





Above, McCarthy in 1987; left, in 1957. Below, *Beach at Tillel*, 1994, one of the works on view at McMichael.

archival material ranging from personal journals to handmade rugs. It is curated by Jean Blodgett, the McMichael's Director of Collections and Programs. "It took three of us to keep up with her one day when we visited her to select work for the exhibition," says Blodgett.

The main impetus behind this show is that McCarthy recently decided to donate works and related material from her career to the gallery. "My hope is that the McMichael could become the centre of research on me," she says.

She has not decided all of the things she will give, but it will surely be a rich and expansive cache. Her career started in 1926, when she was awarded a full-time scholarship to the Ontario College of Art, at the recommendation of Arthur Lismer. Through him and fellow Group of Seven painter J. E. H. MacDonald, McCarthy met other members of the Group. She later exhibited with Painters Eleven artists Jack Bush and William Ronald, and during her 40 years of teaching art at Central Technical School in Toronto, worked with then-budding artists Harold Klunder and Joyce Wieland.

That the gallery was able to secure such a vast archive of work and related material is a coup. McCarthy is both sympathetic to the founders, Robert and Signe

McMichael (whose curating philosophy is at odds with that of the gallery's board), and blunt about the need to keep the McMichael vital. "I have deplored the recent controversy," she says. "I'm very saddened that the founders have not accepted the changes as the gallery grew. Their hope of keeping it as it was is unrealistic."

Among the highlights of the show is McCarthy's abstract, random composition of logs, *Beach at Tillel* (oil on canvas, 1994), and the lush, sure-handed confidence and warmth of her recent Irish works, including *Irish Bog, Co. Mayo* (watercolour, 1999). Her translucent blue-green iceberg paintings, represented here by several canvases, are food for the eye and the northern imagination.

"I have not yet slowed down," she says when asked whether she's planning to relax or give her body a rest. "The lightning has not struck, yet I'm lucky of course." Her career and health are founded on much more than luck — a clear and expansive sense of her own vision, the desire and ability to work hard at her craft, and a sprightly sense of humour — but who's to argue with her?

*Celebrating Life: The Art of Doris McCarthy continues at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg, Ont., until March 20. 905-893-0344. Doris McCarthy: The View from Here — A Retrospective of Watercolour Paintings, 1950-2000 is at the Art Gallery of Mississauga, until Dec. 10. 905-896-5088.*

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