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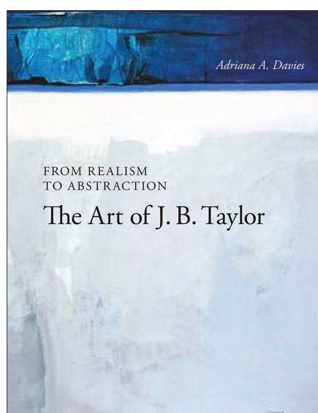

FROM REALISM TO ABSTRACTION: THE ART OF JB TAYLOR

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6 | Significance and Contribution

In order to determine the significance of Taylor's work and contribution to Canadian art, it is important to look at how contemporary and later critics viewed him. Taylor's work sold well to academic and non-academic staff of the University of Alberta, but also, through the Jacox Gallery, to other lovers of contemporary art. This in itself is a significant indicator of success. In addition, his exhibits were always well and positively reviewed. American art critic Clement Greenberg became involved in Canadian art circles after being invited to teach at the University of Saskatchewan art summer school at Emma Lake. In 1963, he was asked by the editor of *Canadian Art* magazine to write about western Canadian art.[1] In his review of the Edmonton art scene, Greenberg writes:

> The most professional and accomplished of all the abstract painters whose work I saw in Edmonton was John B. Taylor, whose example (not style) may be responsible for the fact that most of the abstract art there stays close enough to nature to be called semi-figurative. The fault I found with him lay, however, precisely in his professionalism: in fact that his art was so completely and seamlessly encased in a rather familiar manner from Klee, prismatic cubism and what I call "Northwest Indian" abstraction. And I felt (I hope Mr. Taylor will excuse this presumption in saying so) that he could have put his high talent to better use in more forthrightly representational art.[2]

While Greenberg was perceptive in placing Taylor's work in the camp of abstract art, his observations about his influences are wrong since Taylor's breakthrough into abstraction was influenced by British artist Piper. Ironically, Greenberg's advice that Taylor become more "forthrightly representational" would have required him to take a step backward to his former style.

Fellow artist and art critic Dorothy Barnhouse, in an April 20, 1968, *Edmonton Journal* review titled "Prosaic Subjects Infused with Imagination, Drama," writes:

> Mr. Taylor paints nature, not as it is, but as it should be and as he wishes it to be.
>
> *Slow Drama*
>
> A flat rock face or an ancient façade becomes a stage where flickering light and mysterious shadow present the slow drama of erosion and decay.
>
> Mr. Taylor is primarily a tone painter and hues are rather suggested than exploited. When he uses purer color it is for chromatic surprise and he applies it succinctly, following the time-tested maxim of thin in shadow, thick in light. He uses light tones as he does textural devices of sand, glue, and resins in minimum quantity for maximum effect.

She understood the dramatic change in Taylor's work in the 1960s and his innovation. This exhibit travelled to the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Art Gallery in Charlottetown, where it was extremely well received.

This exhibit was reviewed by Rev. Adrian Arsenault, Chair of the French and Fine Arts Department at St. Dunstan's University, who wrote a review for the *Evening Patriot* (October 11, 1964). Arsenault was an interesting personality in Canada's art scene at the time. He had degrees in art and drama from Laval University, the Sorbonne and the University of Washington. He was a professor at St. Dunstan's from 1963 to 1969 and then went on to teach at the University of Prince Edward Island. He was the province's representative on the Canada Council and was one of the moving forces in the building of the Confederation Centre for the Arts. He was also an artist in his own right, working in various media, including acrylics.[3] The review, titled "Taylor paintings speak soft, intimate language," states:

> This is indeed a most interesting one-man show. Technically competent, the works have completely emancipated themselves from Canadian landscape tradition. They are nonetheless concerned with the land: stone, rocks and mountains, soil. The spirit is contemplative, and the production, though it appears leisurely, is ecstatically executed.

> As we move toward the present year, the style, the language spoken, become more and more abstract. The earlier paintings – a number reminding one of John Piper's works – appear rather eclectic in content and style, baroque in their theatrical use of architectural motifs, slightly poster-like.
>
> Then they gradually become contemplative, more secretive in nature, more stark; the subject tends to become one with the form and the medium. The latest paintings, full of introverted intimacy, constitute a painstaking search of textures and graffiti which nonetheless retain an unquestionable quasi-human emotional quality. Most of the recent works speak of melancholy and dampness, lonely and inaccessible landscapes seen as from above but at close range. They tell – they don't quite sing – monochromatic ballads of hard prehistoric mountain sides, dried up lands and dark crevices, time-worn rock where life has given up trying to survive.…
>
> John Taylor is indeed an interesting painter, shunning the loud, brassy language of so many painters, the "action" effects of the American school of abstract expressionists, the regional and traditional Canadianisms that have made so many well-painted works unexciting.[4]

Rev. Arsenault places Taylor's work in that cusp between American Abstract Expressionism and Canadian regional art. Taylor painted at a time when modernist trends and styles were in ascendance in Canada, including Abstract Expressionism. In his later works, though, he still has a foot in both camps; he has moved significantly away from the early-twentieth-century representational art that is rooted in place. His predecessors in Alberta, who he knew both as artists and teachers, included Walter J. Phillips, who from 1940 was a resident artist at the Banff School of Fine Arts, and H. G. Glyde. Glyde and all of the instructors in the extension art program nurtured local Alberta artists, who almost without exception were landscape artists.

Canada's centenary in 1967 resulted in an affirmation of national identity and pride that culminated in the opening of Expo '67 in Montreal. The fair's theme, "Man and His World," was an expression of a global vision that included art and culture. Canada was struggling then, as it is today, with competing provincial and national visions and a desire to be accepted on the international stage. These same tensions were present in the art scene and, for many critics and young artists, regional art was parochial, and international modernist trends were the wave of the future. This conflict was playing out at the end of Taylor's life and, since that time,

non-representational work has dominated the art scene not only in Alberta but also in Canada as a whole. An examination of reviews and the art history literature pertaining to Alberta demonstrates the conflict and also the ascendance of abstract art.

The memorial exhibit curated by Allison Forbes in 1973 drew record crowds to the Edmonton Art Gallery. To accomplish the exhibit, donations of cash were solicited by the art department at the university. Ron MacGregor wrote in a review titled "He captured mountains – and Albertans' admiration," in *The Edmonton Journal*, December 1, 1973:

> The works in this show encompass a period of a little over 20 years. Only part of the prolific output, they are visible evidence of Taylor's affection and respect for natural forms: for their simplicity, for their durability, for their strength.
>
> They held so much to interest him that for a long time he was content to represent them comparatively literally. His aim seems to have been to evoke a response from the viewer that comes from ready identification with familiar elements.
>
> ....
>
> The nature of the elements with which he concerned himself was perhaps responsible for Taylor's continuing interest in texture at a time when many artists were turning to flat surfaces and the staining of unsized canvas.
>
> His use of white glue and sand, the scoring he produced with the wooden end of his brush, were means to achieve equivalence with the granular surface of rocks. It comes as no surprise to read in the catalogue of Taylor's admiration for the British painter John Piper, whose heavily-hatched surfaces and savage juxtapositions of light and shadow must have struck a responsive chord in him.
>
> The last paintings of his life have a special fascination. His attention had been progressively focusing upon the mountains, first on the rock-face, then by degrees on the mysterious realm of the glaciers.
>
> There is a strange sense of pilgrimage about these later works. It is as if the mountains drew him always closer to them with a promise that if he persisted, he would, one day, know their innermost secrets.

MacGregor concludes:

> Taylor was not interested in achieving great status in the art marketplace. He did what he wanted to do, impervious to pundits and style-brokers, and at the end of it all he had captured the aura of the Rocky Mountains in a manner that completely eluded those distinguished visitors – Leighton, Sargent, Brown[e] – who came to paint, but failed to understand.

MacGregor also places Taylor in the context of Alberta art in his review titled "Alberta's art heroes, past and present," *The Edmonton Journal*, Friday, April 13, 1973. He is reviewing an exhibit at the Edmonton Art Gallery titled "Art in Alberta: Paul Kane to the Present," curated by Karen Wilkin to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the EAG (the exhibited also travelled to the Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary). He writes:

> But the most striking contrast in the interpretation of Alberta's landscape is to be seen in the juxtaposition of works by Belmore Browne and Jack Taylor.
>
> Browne's has all the conventional trimmings of the Great Canadian Landscape: conifers, a stream, snow tinged pink by the setting sun.
>
> In Taylor's painting, all the excess generalities have been stripped away, so that what remains is rock, snow and an austerity that John Donne would have admired.
>
> Browne's looks as if it had been assembled from a Handikit of winter scenery: it has no particularity. Taylor's, on the other hand, is the apotheosis of Alberta's Rockies.[5]

The tensions between provincial, national, and international movements were experienced very strongly at the University of Alberta in the 1960s and 1970s. Among the most articulate proponents of concepts of Canadian identity, and what has been described as "Western alienation," was University of Alberta professor and author Dr. Henry Kreisel. In an editorial article titled "The West – still the unknown country," he talks first about his own lack of knowledge about the West when he came in 1947 and continues:

> Central Canada has long regarded the other regions of the country as appendages, and that's how the consciousness of our country has been shaped.
>
> ....
>
> The result of this was the creation and perpetuation of certain stereotyped images. But in a real sense the West remained an unknown part of the country.
>
> You may object that all this happened in the past, 25 or 30 years ago. And things are a little better now but not very much better.
>
> ....
>
> The new stereotypes are no more helpful to an understanding of the region than the old ones.
>
> Yet the materials for an adequate understanding of our region exist. It can be argued, for instance, that prairie literature is the richest body of regional writing in the country.
>
> Writers like Philip Grove and Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Ross and W. O. Mitchell, Margaret Laurence and Rudy Wiebe (to mention only a few) have created a rich image of the people who settled here and of the forces that shaped them.
>
> Any painters from Paul Kane onwards to such contemporaries as Dorothy Knowles and William Perehudoff, J. B. Taylor and Marion Nicoll, Takao Tanabe and Norman Yates have given us a rich pictorial heritage.
>
> ....
>
> For the development of a true national consciousness it is necessary that all the regions of the country understand one another. Or at least be properly informed about each other.[6]

The situation has not changed dramatically since Kreisel made his observations. The National Gallery of Canada in its Canadian painting exhibit area still has a preponderance of Group of Seven works as well as other central Canadian establishment artists. The only major exception is Emily Carr. There is no sense of the landscape tradition established by the CPR artists, and certainly there is no representation of the western landscape tradition as it evolved under the artists that Kreisel names above. With respect to non-representational art, it is the Quebec artists, including Jean-Paul Riopelle, that dominate.

Within ten years of his death, J. B. Taylor had been forgotten though his work continued to be exhibited largely as part of group exhibits. In 1980, the Edmonton Art Gallery mounted a seventy-fifth anniversary exhibit for the Province of Alberta titled *Painting in Alberta: An Historical Survey* (July 1 to August 31, 1980). Curator Karen Wilkin, again, contributed an essay on "Paul Kane to the Present." The essay provides an overview of the development of art in Alberta and represents not only the work of itinerant painters such as Kane but also the CPR artists and Group of Seven members who painted the West. She also creates a kind of "who's who" of significant Alberta-born artists, or those who spent significant time in the province. With respect to Taylor, whom she describes as "a transplanted Albertan," she writes:

> Taylor, a native of Charlottetown, spent most of his painting career in Alberta, teaching for many years in the art department of the University of Alberta, succeeding H. G. Glyde as its head[7]; he also taught at the Banff School. Taylor's work ranges from fresh *plein air* landscape studies, which capture the sparkling light of the prairies, to brooding studies of icefields. Done just before his death in 1970, the icefield paintings become near-abstractions, with their flattened perspective, cool colours, simple shapes. Although Taylor's work is not well-known outside of Alberta, his activities as both painter and teacher won him a large audience of admirers within the province.[8]

She included three Taylor paintings in the exhibit, all early works: *Alberta Badlands*, n.d., *Looking West*, 1951, and *Snow Patch, Sunshine*, 1951.

In 1982, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts mounted an exhibit of works in its own collection. The exhibit was curated by Jetske [Sybesma]-Ironside and is titled *Spaces and Places: Eight Decades of Landscape Painting in Alberta*. The introductory essay is titled "Spaces and Places: An Introduction to the Formative Years of Painting Alberta." She includes two paintings by Taylor: *Peace River, Above Hudson Hope, BC*, 1960, (oil on masonite) and *Lake McArthur No. 7*, 1963 (oil on canvas). She writes of this painting:

> Jack Taylor, in *Lake McArthur No. 7*, concentrates on an almost abstract depiction of a massive rockwall. The painting is a good example of the so-called "dark paintings" from the early 1960s, in which the artist explores the subtleties of light on a rock

> face. In spite of the intricate textures of the stone seen at close range, Taylor still retains in the foreground, at the bottom edge of the painting, a faint reference to water: a mountain stream or lake. The translucency of water, in subtle contrast with the opaque and solid rocks, foreshadows Taylor's last work.[9]

In 1990, twenty years after Taylor's death, Sybesma guest-curated an exhibit titled "The Sublime Revisited: Mountain Paintings by J. B. Taylor," for the Fine Arts Building Gallery, Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta. The exhibit includes the works of Taylor's second period (1962–70). In her short contextual essay, Sybesma references CPR artist John Fraser, and Immanuel Kant's, *The Critique of Judgment*, and also Paul Crowther's *The Kantian Sublime*. The focus of the essay appears to be a desire to contrast Taylor's close observation of the Rocky Mountains with Fraser's less-closely-observed works, which, according to established Canadian art historian Denis Reid in his benchmark work *Our Own Country Canada*, were sometimes based on photographs. She writes:

> What does all this have to do with Taylor? My contention is that, contrary to the "CPR artists," Jack Taylor was not satisfied with taking a "free ride" by painting mountain scenery on the basis of photographic images. Further, in order to create his abstract alpine compositions of the 1960s, Taylor had experienced year after year at O'Hara that effervescent feeling of being literally on top of the world. Only after he had absorbed perceptually the region surrounding the lakes O'Hara, Oesa, Opabin and McArthur could he synthesize his feelings about it. Only then could he paint their "light at the edge of shadow," as Dorothy Barnhouse once put it.[10]

Jane Lytton Gooch in her book *Artists of the Rockies: Inspiration of Lake O'Hara*, illustrating a hundred years of landscape painting by the Lake O'Hara area in the Canadian Rockies, presents the region as a place of power. Focussing on one subject enables Gooch to show how its depiction has varied over time, and her book provides an almost art historical lesson on the evolution of landscape painting styles. Gooch writes:

> Landscape painting dominated Canadian art until the 1940s, but abstract images became more popular in the '50s and '60s. The careers of J. B. Taylor and Lawren

> Harris are examples of this trend as they moved from stylized images to totally abstract symbols of the alpine scene. The art inspired by Lake O'Hara over the years offers, in microcosm, the spectrum of Canadian art history, from the artistic explorers in the school of railway painters, to the Group of Seven discovering the spirit of the Canadian northland, through a period of abstraction when artists turned away from representational landscapes, and, finally, more recently to a renewed interest in painting O'Hara in a more realistic way.[11]

I think that her linking of Harris and Taylor is significant. She writes of Taylor:

> J. B. Taylor, originally from Prince Edward Island, returned to O'Hara many times over twenty years in his attempt to capture the feeling of the alpine landscape and, especially, the effects of light around the mountain lakes above O'Hara – Oesa, Opabin, and McArthur. He made his first trips to the mountains in 1948, the same time he started teaching in the summers at the Banff School, and his O'Hara landscapes of the early '50s represent mainly small portions of the alpine scene, with the rocks and isolated trees, rather than the expansive mountain landscape. The more he experienced his beloved O'Hara, however, the more abstract his compositions became until in the late '50s and throughout the '60s, before his death in 1970, his paintings express the interplay of light on designs of ice, rock, and water. A retrospective exhibition in 1990 at the University of Alberta clearly showed that O'Hara was a great inspiration to him.[12]

She uses Taylor's work *McArthur #1* (1968, acrylic on masonite, private collection) as an illustration in the book.

In 2005, Nancy Townshend published *A History of Art in Alberta 1905–1970* and dedicated it "to Alberta's first and second generation of artists who laid the foundation for Alberta's contemporary visual arts." She includes a short critical biography of J. B. Taylor in "Chapter 6. Modernism with Objectivity 1947–1970." She begins with a quote from Les Graff (1995): "Individualism in Alberta's art has been so minute that it wasn't strong enough in a group way that it wasn't recognized by the rest of Canada."[13] That is an interesting perspective, but many so-called "schools" of painting do not necessarily involve individuals working together but rather

a set of common themes or even style and medium. The entry includes short quotes from a range of reviews of Taylor's work, including Greenberg's observation cited above.[14] Greenberg, a polarizing force in Canadian art, was to have an enormous influence on younger Edmonton artists who created non-representational works in acrylics and who became a small "New York" school in their own right.

The next comprehensive look at Alberta art came in 2007 with the publication of *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview*, by Patricia Ainslie and Mary-Beth Laviolette. Taylor is discussed in the section titled "Modernists: Embracing Abstraction," written by Patricia Ainslie, former vice president and senior curator of art at the Glenbow.[15] She includes Taylor's work *Composition #2* (1968, acrylic and gesso, Government House Foundation, Edmonton) and writes in the caption:

> Even in his most abstract work, Taylor continued to be inspired by nature in his search for an uncomplicated statement about the natural environment. His intent was to work on the picture plane and manipulate the surface to reflect his analysis of the underlying structure of rock and ice related to his study of glacial formations. Here, he has first applied a thick medium of gesso to the surface, which he has worked with a palette knife to create a shallow textured relief. Over this he has applied three bands of colour in thin luminous veils and then glazed the surface. The translucency of paint in close-valued blues is in a rich, harmonic key.[16]

While Taylor's name is only mentioned in passing by Laviolette in her book, *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art*, this is important in the contextualization of his work. The book was a project for Alberta's centenary in 2005 and focuses on artistic production after 1970. The title of her first section – "Place, Landscape and Art about Nature" – echoes the title of the 1982 exhibit mounted by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts – *Spaces and Places: Eight Decades of Landscape Painting in Alberta* (discussed above). The exhibit toured to Edmonton, Grande Prairie, and Calgary, in Alberta; Prince George and Burnaby, in British Columbia; St. Catharines, Toronto, and Stratford, in Ontario; and Sackville, New Brunswick. Its perhaps unstated mission was to take Alberta landscape art to new audiences, in particular, Canada's heartland of Ontario. In Chapter One: "A Troubled Genre: Post-1970 Landscape Art," Laviolette quotes art critic Liz Wylie's review of the exhibit in *Canadian Art*: "Since it is touring nationally, it is a shame that Spaces and Places was restricted to only landscape paintings, since most of Alberta's top contemporary artists do not work in this genre. Because of its emphasis on

the traditional, this exhibition serves to reinforce the national image of Alberta as a non-intellectual, unpeopled vacationland."[17]

Laviolette describes the movement away from landscape painting in Alberta (and throughout Canada) as follows:

> In general, unless the subject of landscape is used to address a contemporary art issue, like deconstructing or analyzing its representation in historical art and western culture, or how the developed world treats nature as a resource for exploitation, contemporary works inspired by or representing the Canadian terrain are largely viewed as passé, even problematic. As the Banff-based publication *The Cairn* informed its readership in 1994: "Landscape painting has fallen out of vogue in the mainstream of contemporary Canadian art."[18]

She notes that Alberta, by and large, has bucked this trend and concludes:

> It is true: painting of all kinds has survived and flourished in Alberta. But given what many in the influential public sector of the visual arts have focused their attention on across Canada, it can be said that what will have been thoroughly documented into the next century is art that is interdisciplinary, and whose strategies are conceptual and critical. Painting will be considered only when it addresses the same kind of social and cultural concerns that have preoccupied interdisciplinary work, including installation, video, mixed media, performance and photo-based art.[19]

In Chapter Two: "A Modernizing Perspective: Second Generation Landscape Painting," Laviolette distinguishes between the first generation of Alberta landscape artists (e.g., IIlingworth Kerr, A. C. Leighton, Margaret Shelton, Maxwell Bates, W. J. Phillips, Euphemia McNaught, Roland Gissing, W. L. Stevenson, H. G. Glyde, Catherine and Peter Whyte) and the second generation (e.g., Marion Nicoll, Thelma Manarey, Janet Mitchell, Jack Taylor, Norman Yates, Frank Vervoort, Ken Christopher, Ted Godwin, Joice Hall, John McKee, and Dulcie Foo Fat). She notes that the first generation "established landscape as a primary subject matter for art in Alberta – the overwhelming presence of the environment perhaps making it almost inevitable."[20] She sees them as "swimming against the tide" as "in the international art world, landscape

has become a minor genre – a regional practice that can't quite shake its associations with the nineteenth century."[21] Her contextualization of Taylor's work in the next passage is significant:

> Abstraction has also become the prevailing language of post-war art and although some first-generation artists are willing to experiment with it, few are able to adapt to it with the vigour or success of a Marion Nicoll or Jack Taylor. Still, even with the introduction of an abstract approach, the subject of landscape guarantees its reception will most often be limited to the region in which it is produced. Worse, it will sometimes be dismissed as an unworthy subject.[22]

It is important to understand the evolution of Alberta's art scene from 1970 onwards because it accounts for the eclipse of Taylor's reputation and work.

The most recent art publication that provides commentary on Taylor is Nancy Townshend's book, *Art Inspired by the Canadian Rockies, Purcell Mountains and Selkirk Mountains 1809–2012*. Townshend groups Taylor with modern artists inspired by these mountains. She observes: "J. B. Taylor (1917–1970) abstracted mountains, especially those around Lake O'Hara in paintings like *Landscape* (1963, Insert 22) and *Opabin #11* (1968). Creating abstracted and textured transparent layers, Taylor presents his visual equivalences of his experiences in these great mountains."[23]