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## From realism to abstraction: the art of J.B. Taylor

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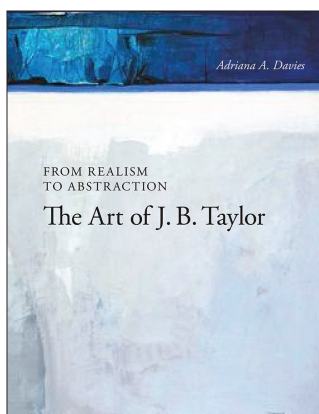
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**FROM REALISM TO ABSTRACTION:  
THE ART OF JB TAYLOR**  
Adriana A. Davies

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## 7 | Conclusion

Christopher Taylor has created a database of his father's works that provides insight into what fuelled his creativity. There are 678 works in the database of paintings that he has located, and he has images for 484 (194 are thus unknown). Of the known works, 391 are Canadian landscapes broken down as follows: mountains, 109; glaciers, 100; foothills, 50; parkland, 46; prairie, 32; badlands, 15; Maritimes, 27; Yukon, 3; and Northwest Territories, 2; West Coast, 7. There are 105 Italian pictures; 28 aircraft pictures; 62 portraits; 11 miscellaneous, known works; and 81 not fully catalogued in any category (either subject is unknown or the documentation is very sketchy). The primary sources of Taylor's work are, thus, mountains (in my discussion I include glaciers with them) and the Italian pictures. Wallis Kendal, an artist and activist who studied with Taylor in 1968, wrote a moving tribute to Taylor's work:

When he showed me the work he was doing he explained that he was trying to get inside the emotions of the mountains, most notably the icefalls and glaciers. He was fascinated by the surface tension of ice and snow and the composition that surfaces create when they expand and contract. He was very excited by the prospect of his journeys to and from the mountains. It was as if he had waited a lifetime to explore their visual elements with the eye of the philosopher. He was the professor about to burst out of his enclave, on the cusp of a great discovery of understanding. I remember vividly when he brought out some of his most intimate paintings. They were not just works of art. They were the philosophy of nature at its most primal state. The very beginning of time reformed.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that Taylor's mountain paintings, whether the early, more traditional representations of nature, or the late-period, more abstract works, are significant contributions to Alberta

and Canada's artistic canon. His innovation in the use of acrylic paints and movement into abstraction, had he lived, would have placed him in the vanguard of artists creating non-representational acrylic works that has dominated, and continues to dominate, painting production in the province into the twenty-first century. As with other artistic eras, contemporary curators tend to focus on the art of the moment, and what is considered avant-garde. Thus, multi-media productions tend to dominate exhibits such as *The News from Here: The 2013 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art* at the Art Gallery of Alberta. Interestingly, Curator Nancy Tousley's vision for the exhibit emphasizes place and identity, which are hallmarks of landscape art. She writes: "'The News from Here' is that we have entered an era of post-regionalism in which the significant particularities of place have been sharpened, nonetheless, and set in relief against the fabric of an increasingly interconnected world."<sup>2</sup>

One cannot but wonder whether Taylor would have moved further into abstraction and even beyond what I have described as the "idea of mountains." It is interesting to compare him with Norman Yates, Robert Sinclair, and Takao Tanabe, who continue to paint highly stylized landscapes. All, in fact, serve a bridging function between more traditional landscape painting that can be seen as a representation of nature and abstract paintings that are more about form and colour. Does that relegate them to the ranks of "regional artists," which in the Canadian art scene has become a pejorative term, although this staggers the imagination? Does anyone accuse Constable, Turner, or any of the Dutch Masters, whose subject matter is quintessentially regional, to second-class status? Having said this, it is clear that Taylor was aware of the changes in the art scene and experienced them first-hand as the Department of Art at the University of Alberta evolved. He had made at least two trips to art schools in the United States to see what new methodologies had been developed for the instruction of art. He had travelled to Europe twice. He had read art historical assessments such as Gombrich's work. The paintings of the last ten years of his life demonstrate his awareness of change, both in societal and art historical terms. They also reveal his ability to process it and create works that are uniquely his own.

Landscape painting continues to be about a sense of place, and place is an essential component of regional and national identity. Taylor is a master of this, and the critical opinion of his time, as well as the popularity of his art with buyers, demonstrate that he tapped into that sentiment, which he shared. Taylor's mountain paintings, whether representational or abstract, simply depict places of the heart. These paintings defy artistic and critical fashions and trends and, just as classic books are read from one generation to the next, present and future audiences will connect to the wonder in his work and the celebration of all landscapes.

In the end, his works are about time – the enormous span of geological time and the finite span of human existence. In the high places of the Rocky Mountains, he was able to connect with the unimaginable span of geological time. This is what he depicted in the fractured rocks and ice of glaciers and icefields, and the fossil-rich rocks of the badlands. When he looked at the ancient civilization of Italy, he read the human past in the aged walls and evolving architectural styles. Thus, his work has a universality that transcends the specifics of his subject matter, and he belongs in the canon of significant artists of the twentieth century.

