

## MARION NICOLL: SILENCE AND ALCHEMY

by Ann Davis and Elizabeth Herbert

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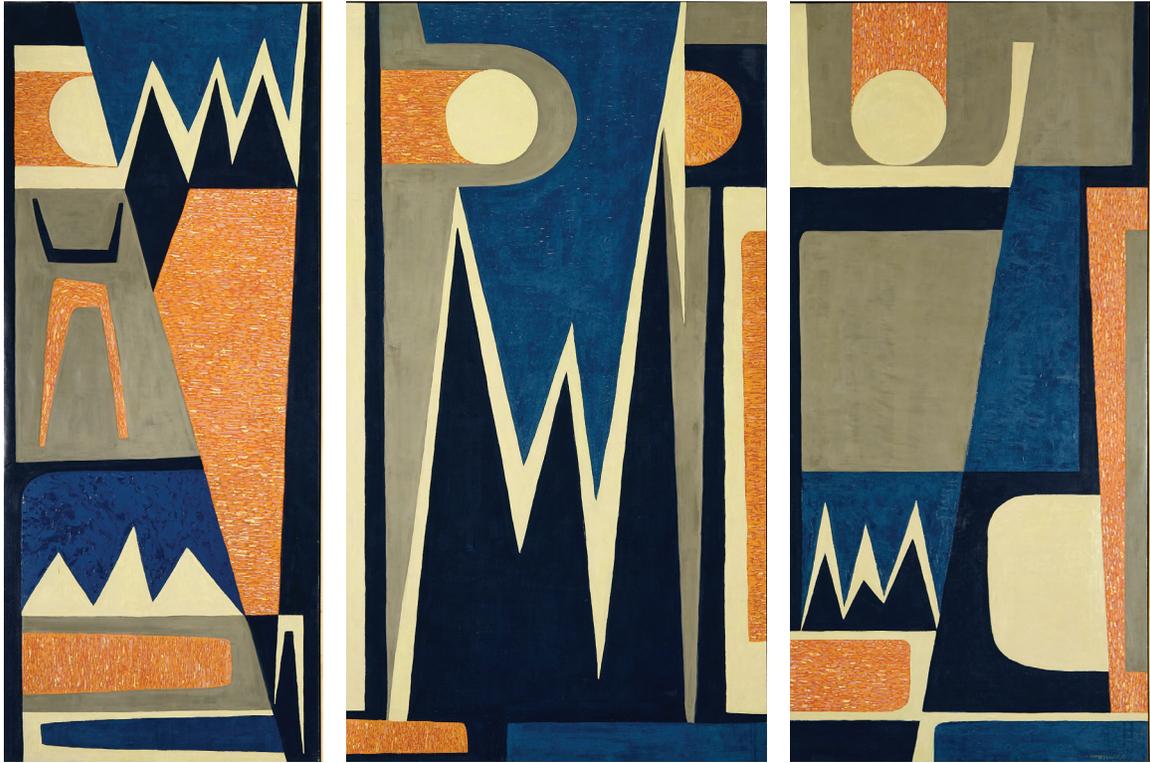
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Marion Nicoll

*Journey to the Mountains: Approach, The Mountains, Return*, 1968

Oil on canvas

*Approach* 274.3 × 114.3 cm; *The Mountains* 274.3 × 152.4 cm; *Return* 274.3 × 129.5 cm

Collection of Nickle Galleries

## MARION NICOLL AND THE SUBLIME

by Elizabeth Herbert

Around 1945, the artist J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald introduced a younger colleague to the practice of automatic drawing. The idea that by allowing her hand to wander around an empty page, she could express her dormant creativity captivated Marion Nicoll. She said later,

He really roused things up. In Jungian theory you forget absolutely nothing ... sight ... sound ... it's all stored in your subconscious. It is stored there in its true form, not colored by personal bias of any kind. It is a source of information; you put your hand down, you watch, and you wait. Look, look! there it goes! I've made things that would make your hair stand up – birds, forked tongues, and male and female mixtures. I don't think I ever would have been an abstract painter if I hadn't gone through 1946–57 with automatic drawing.<sup>1</sup>

Nicoll's assertion of a causal relationship between her automatic drawing and abstraction is well documented, central to her art, yet largely unexamined by critics. Marion Nicoll was more than merely the sum of her influences, but until they are added together her achievement cannot be counted. Her art unified themes from disparate sources in unique ways. This study will parse these stylistic and iconographic themes and integrate them, just as she did as an artist.

Jock Macdonald's automatic drawing, characterized by a profusion of zoomorphic forms that he called "my pollywogs," stemmed from his connections to British Surrealism.<sup>2</sup> His automatics exemplify what the critic Lawrence Alloway called "The biomorphic 40s," in which "crowded, manic biomorphism is directly linked to automatism which was cultivated by surrealists as a means of direct access to the unconscious mind."<sup>3</sup> Nicoll's automatic drawings follow Macdonald's suit, encouraged by his assertions that the appearance of biomorphic forms in her drawing demonstrated a connection to her unconscious. "Ha! Ha! This is interesting news about what is happening in your automatic paintings. Things are beginning to move ... now that you find things definitely suggestive of nature forms, you can be sure that the door is open – Excellent!"<sup>4</sup> Over the next decade, Marion Nicoll filled hundreds of sketch books following that advice, but kept all those images to herself.

In terms both of form and content, the automatics determined Macdonald's subsequent career as an abstract painter. For Nicoll, however, it was the method, not the material, of automatic drawing, that mattered. "It gave me assurance. I'm now absolutely sure that I have a place on which I stand, from which I can paint; that's what the automatic drawing did. It beat a path in and I know I'm not going to dry up."<sup>5</sup> This practice carried Nicoll into another art-historical stream, also originating from Surrealist automatism. As the American Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell argued: "What happened in

American painting after the war had its origins in automatism assimilated to the particular New York situation, that is, the Surrealist tone and literary qualities were dropped and the doodle transformed into something plastic, mysterious, and sublime.”<sup>6</sup>

For Marion Nicoll, that transformation to the sublime involved inner urges and awe-inspiring scenery and culminated in the 1968–69 triptych *Journey to the Mountains*. Her descriptive titling of the three panels of her painting as: *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return* (1968), demonstrates her awareness of the Jungian theories of Joseph Campbell, as presented in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).<sup>7</sup> This work, apparently so unusual in her oeuvre, integrated themes in her art and herself. Iconographically, the triptych reflects the formative years under her teacher A. C. Leighton, whose own art expresses a combination of gratification, excitement, and anxiety evoked by the sight of mountains. Her mountains call to mind Leighton’s preoccupation with that same subject, and their gigantism can be understood as a visual metaphor for the catalytic power they exercised over his art. Leighton’s response to the Rocky Mountains allied him to the venerable artistic tradition developed around the idea of the sublime. Another version of that idea resonated among the abstract artists of New York. Thus, Barnett Newman’s well-known 1948 essay, “The Sublime is Now,”<sup>8</sup> placed the onus on the artist, focussed on the inner landscape of his imagination, rather than on the soaring peaks of the natural world, to create his own experience of the sublime. As befits these influences, Marion Nicoll turned the spare, large forms of the American Abstract Expressionists into objective correlatives for her own observed subjects. Here Nicoll used large forms to create dynamic structures liberated from distracting detail. These characteristics in her art stemmed from her experience with Will Barnet at Emma Lake, and subsequently in New York. Thereafter, she created increasingly larger arenas in which formal relationships between shapes abstracted from nature became the true subject of her work. With

fewer constituent elements, the structure of Nicoll's images became more cohesive and their effect more dramatic.

Nicoll arrived at Will Barnet's Emma Lake Workshop of 1957 with a background of academic art training and a fervent, private practice of automatic drawing. She was technically proficient, self-disciplined and creatively at a loss: "I wasn't satisfied but I didn't know what to do." Brush in hand, Nicoll contemplated the model, mirror, books, and other elements that Barnet set for the workshop to sketch.

I drew a line ... and there it was ... once I saw what I was doing I was astonished. Barnet had a way of setting up a still life so it had an odd partial reflection of a figure. Your eye would stretch ... all of a sudden, I was cut loose. I spent three weeks at Emma Lake.<sup>9</sup> This [abstraction] was for ME, believe you me ... I felt like somebody had cut off a hundred pounds and given me wings.<sup>10</sup>

The psychological tension arising from self-imposed isolation, perhaps exacerbated by the largely monotonous proliferation of undulating lines and colour washes of the automatic drawings, had a rebound effect for Marion Nicoll. She was hungry for a means to express a formidable creative intelligence. Her wholehearted embrace of abstract art during two weeks spent at Emma Lake during the summer of 1957 was, for her, a vividly dramatic experience. However, it was predicated upon a body of knowledge about tone, an extreme sensitivity to line, and the habit of minute observation she had learned from "the best teacher I ever had," A. C. Leighton.<sup>11</sup> This knowledge lay dormant while she quietly filled her drawing notebooks, after hours of teaching crafts and design to students at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (known as "the Tech," and later the Alberta College of Art and Design). After her conversion to abstraction, it emerged

transformed when she began to create abstract paintings in New York, in 1958. Nicoll understood this connection, and she conveyed gratitude to her longstanding teacher and friend for his gift of knowledge and means that now, remarkably, sustained her new way of painting. She recalled that: “Leighton looked at the things I was doing when I came back from New York and he was upset .... But what I told him was what he had taught me about drawing was there ... and his sense of expansion, of scale.”<sup>12</sup>

Nicoll’s conversion to abstraction was sudden. Facing the model at Emma Lake, she had a remarkably lucid experience of being in two different, but related, states of mind. One was the internally focussed and disinterested mode she cultivated over a decade-long practice of automatic drawing. The other was the outwardly focussed, task-oriented stand of an art student, looking intently at what she was about to paint. In a moment of intense self-consciousness, she witnessed her own creative transformation. Though British Surrealists explained automatic drawing by reference to the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Nicoll associated them with interpretations of these ideas by Carl Jung. According to Jung, the unconscious was a treasure house of universally shared mythic images whose contents must first be revealed, then integrated into conscious awareness, in order for an individual to achieve psychic wholeness, or individuation. Nicoll’s recollections of her experience at Emma Lake are remarkably consistent with Jung’s description of that process.

The moment when this mythological situation reappears is always characterized by a peculiar emotional intensity; it is as though chords in us were struck that had never resounded before.... So it is not surprising that when an archetypal situation occurs we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power.<sup>13</sup>



Marion Nicoll  
*The Model*, 1958  
Watercolour on paper  
26.5 x 20 cm  
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts



Marion Nicoll  
*Sketchbook*, 1968  
Pencil, ink, felt pen on paper  
26.9 × 21 cm  
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts,  
1978.048.001.A-O, Capital Arts M5-5

After Emma Lake, Nicoll rushed headlong toward the centre of contemporary art. “We’re going to New York,” she told her husband. She loved the city. “It stank, and there were all those crimes and everything, but that is a beautiful city. I’ve never worked as hard in my life as I did that year.”<sup>14</sup> Mornings were spent at the Art Students League in Barnet’s classes, and from noon until 11 p.m. she painted. Barnet took her to the galleries and introduced her around. She was taken seriously and was offered a teaching position at the Cooper Union. Nicoll’s refusal of this offer and decision to return to Calgary marked a turning point in her life.

By 1957, avant-garde painters from the Canadian prairies were starting a fertile relationship with New York Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by its artists and promoted by its critics. Nicoll’s own creative itinerary, however, was not simply a micro-cosmic version of what Kirk Varnedoe has called “the Road to Flatness,” the narrative of how non-objective, abstract painting allegedly evolved from modernism in Paris to mid-twentieth century New York Abstract Expressionism, “according to which pioneers like Matisse initiated a series of narrowing refinements that eventually led artists to distil the essence of being pictorial, in the absolute particulars of color and shape on a plane.”<sup>15</sup> Granted, when Marion Nicoll came to artistic maturity, artists and critics in avant-garde New York accepted this narrative, exemplified by Clement Greenberg’s well-known declarations about the nature of contemporary painting. Marion Nicoll, however, associated with New York painters who rejected that narrative. In 1960, Will Barnet wrote that: “I want every part of the canvas to be a constant image, with no passages, vaporous, obscure or left as ground.... I go beyond much of the current painting where forms float and the surface is still there as a foil, as something, somehow, plastically inexistent.”<sup>16</sup>

As much as she admired the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Hans Hofmann, Nicoll, like Barnet, refused to emulate the amorphous and atmospheric

character of their work. To the question posed by Moppet and Hall: “Why are your shapes so clearly defined? Why do they have to be that way?” she responded:

I hate a mushy line ... an uncertain intermingling... Painting for me is all on the picture plane, the actual surface of the canvas, with the power held in the horizontal and vertical movements of the expanding color shapes. There can be, for me, no overlapping transparencies or fuzzy edges – all these are a hangover from romantic, naturalistic painting.<sup>17</sup>

In Barnett’s workshop at Emma Lake she began, not only to mine her subject for abstract, formal relationships on canvas but to see them in new ways: “Barnett had a way of setting up a still life with figure ... your eye would stretch.”<sup>18</sup> Nicoll consciously began to paint on the picture plane because she was now able to see such planar relationships between three-dimensional forms in the world. Barnett’s comment about forms floating on the surface of paintings undoubtedly refers to the work of Mark Rothko, wherein the viewer perceives coloured forms hovering above the ground, instead of serving to establish that ground. Nicoll’s rhetorical aversion to an “uncertain intermingling” makes the same point. She consciously painted on the picture plane in order to create forms on the canvas which sustain a particular set of visual relationships discovered in a subject, rather than simply pulled from her imagination or flowing off her brush. While in New York, she responded to some critical comments on her painting:

What you describe is ‘abstract expressionism’ which is anathema to a ‘classical abstractionist’ such as myself. I start with something – the model – the street we live in, the newsstand at the corner and struggle with the thing, drawing it, trying to find the skeleton that is there.<sup>19</sup>

Nor, unlike many of her contemporaries, did she abandon her academic training. “ I think you have to learn how to draw before you start expressing yourself... Whether people like it or not there are rules ... there are natural laws that can't be broken. Man, by nature, needs the enclosure of discipline, imposed by society, or built by himself.”<sup>20</sup> Ron Moppet commented: “Calgary artists at that time always felt that they had to earn their abstraction” by proving their mastery of conventional techniques.<sup>21</sup> Nicoll paid the dues for that discipline during her earliest days as an art student. When Leighton was her instructor at the “Tech,” he deemed a group of her landscape sketches “splashy work.”<sup>22</sup> As a corrective exercise, he instructed her to draw careful copies of bootlaces. Nicoll, grateful to receive a framework for her practice, accepted his criticism good-naturedly. She incorporated Leighton's exacting technical standards into her own design curriculum. Echoing Leighton and Barnett, Nicoll declared that: “you have to be a craftsman if you're going to be a painter.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Marion Nicoll became an abstract painter in part because she shielded her art practice from the conventional methods and values of her peers. She saw continuity between Leighton's teaching and the methods of her abstract painting.

He influenced me in tone. One thing I know is tone. Without thinking about it, I know the tone of every color I look at. What it is in relation to the next color as far as light and dark is concerned. This sounds trivial but I use that today in abstract painting.... For the whole winter, we used two colors; he'd set up a still-life group (and) burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. We had to get every degree of light/dark, warm/cold that there was ... not matching the color but matching the warmth or coldness and the light or dark, and we did this for one whole school year.<sup>24</sup>

In the later 1950s, within this disciplined framework of traditional education and technical expertise, Nicoll began to unleash very big, strong forms. An analysis of them reveals a vital continuity between historically distant and contemporary ideas of the sublime, her breakthrough to abstraction, and the influence of Jung's concept of individuation. Connections between these ideas and Nicoll's art were forged at different times and places.

To find an artistic voice, Nicoll turned to her subconscious and learned to combine the creative energy arising from within herself with that aroused by her teachers. Her epiphany at Emma Lake, an intuitive leap, preceded by thousands of privately rehearsed steps, was a vivid demonstration of the Jungian theory in which "you forget absolutely nothing."<sup>25</sup> Then, in New York, Nicoll was surrounded by painting on a grand scale and by painters who asserted themselves through the use of bold forms and techniques. These passionate Americans taught her creative entitlement: that an artist's forms could, and should, match the scale of his vision. That gendered pronoun is significant; during the 1950s, entitlement in art was overwhelmingly a male experience. Nicoll's espousal of tough standards and arduously acquired technique was her way to establish unimpeachable credentials within a culture that assigned privilege according to sex.

Meanwhile, the focus on bold forms was consistent with her earlier experiences of Leighton's mountain subjects. Marion Nicoll enrolled as an art student at "the Tech" in 1928, with a nineteen-year-old's overweening confidence and experience: "I came from the Ontario College of Art with my nose in the air.... Leighton put me back where I belonged."<sup>26</sup> She entered Leighton's world of academic and technical discipline and the subjects that dominated his work: mountain range panoramas, crashing glacial falls, and gigantic silent skies where travelling clouds drift and gather among peaks and jagged snowfields. The familiar outdoors of Nicoll's Alberta girlhood was transformed by

Leighton into atmospheric watercolour and pastel sketches, rapidly executed and acutely observed, by an artist who recently had found himself in an unexpectedly exhilarating landscape. As he recalled,

The grandeur of the scenery, the purity and beauty of the colouring being indescribable ... the scale of the landscape was tremendous. I soon found that a fourteen inch by ten inch canvas was too small, even too rough in composition, and something much larger was necessary to portray the magnitude, the imposing force and dignity of those mountains.<sup>27</sup>

These statements invoke Edmund Burke's famous comparison of the merely beautiful to the awe-inspiring sublime. Burke cites mountains and their properties, like vastness and height, as natural sights apt to provoke heightened emotions.<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant developed similar ideas.<sup>29</sup> The association between the idea of the sublime and the experience of mountains culminated in the educational Grand Tour, when upper-class youths crossed the Alps in order to see Italy and the material remains of the Renaissance and Classical worlds. Terry Fenton emphasized the importance of this tradition in the 1989 catalogue for the exhibition *Alfred Crocker Leighton and The Canadian Rockies*:

Huge, remote, and beautiful, the Canadian Rockies were Leighton's predestined subject. Chosen for him by a combination of circumstance, temperament, and tradition, they stimulated his genius as did nothing else. Circumstance was provided by his employer (the Canadian Pacific Railway), temperament was innate, tradition was quintessentially English. English sensibility had discovered the beauties and terrors of alpine scenery during the eighteenth century while en route to Italy on the Grand Tour.... By the



A. C. Leighton  
*The Lake, Molar Mountain*, ca. 1948  
Pencil and watercolour on paper  
29.2 × 29.5 cm  
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection,  
purchased with funds donated by Dr. Brian Hitchon, 81.20



A. C. Leighton  
*Valley of the Giants, Banff*, ca. 1950  
Oil on canvas  
45.72 × 55.88 cm  
Leighton Art Centre, Calgary, Alberta  
Leighton Foundation Collection

mid-nineteenth century, alpine scenery was so highly regarded in England that John Ruskin devoted several chapters to the subject in his study *Modern Painters*. By Leighton's time, the tradition was entrenched in British Art.<sup>30</sup>

Leighton had more than just a traveller's interest in the mountains. Armed with paints and brushes, he climbed right into them and felt an obsessive need for a bigger canvas to carry the weight of his subject. He strove to make art worthy of the mountains: "At Christmas break, rather than relaxing, Leighton spent eight days sketching in the mountains. Often waist-deep in snow, with his easel buried almost out of sight, the cold stiffened the pigments on his palette and caused him to suffer from frostbite."<sup>31</sup>

Marion Nicoll's earliest work reveals the influence of her physical environment and her teacher's passionate devotion to it. After 1945, the habit of automatic drawing loosened her brushstrokes and emboldened her view. Leighton's *The Lake, Molar Mountain* (ca. 1948) and Nicoll's *Bright Day* (1947) were painted at about the same time. The iconographical influence is obvious. Though Leighton's watercolour is more subdued and conventional than Nicoll's oil, both images are constructed with painterly, impressionistic brushstrokes that convey the movement of light on the ground. Leighton's background mountains are punctuated by a huge snowfield, cupped between adjoining peaks by a necklace of abstracted grey nuggets. In Nicoll's *Bright Day*, abstracted forms come vividly to the surface, creating a strong impression of transient cloud cover and a blustery spring wind.

Despite his penchant for academic propriety and the colour grey, Leighton was fascinated by the dramatic, expressive potential of mountain scenery. His *Valley of the Giants, Banff*, an oil painting from about 1950, is as sublime a scene as any eighteenth-century Romantic writers could have imagined. Joseph Addison wrote, "In order to produce these peculiar impressions of sublimity on the human mind, certain degrees of material

largeness are absolutely necessary.... No beauty of design ... will entirely take the place of what might be called brute largeness.”<sup>32</sup>

Leighton’s enthusiasm for mountains and the sublime led him to found the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1935. With a small group of devotees, Leighton and Nicoll embarked on regular sketching trips to Canmore, in a vehicle dubbed “The Maroon Mariah.”<sup>33</sup> These transcendent mountain images and her first teacher acquired a personal significance for her. Nicoll continued to admire the exemplary academicism of his methodology, both as artist and teacher: “Leighton was the best teacher I ever had. He was a complete influence, and I trusted him completely,” she declared in a late interview.<sup>34</sup> Never did she record resentment toward the repetitious drawing exercises, the narrow boundaries of practice, or the exclusive emphasis on the importance of tone, versus colour, in Leighton’s art program. In fact, these characteristics resonated with an important aspect of her personality, which favoured a systematic approach to creativity.

Unlike the model of the modernist painter of art history, Marion Nicoll did not “reject” academic art teaching; she absorbed it like nutrients. When Will Barnet encouraged her to paint in an abstract style, Nicoll was already equipped, through her years with Leighton, with a profound and practised understanding of tonal and colour relationships and mastery of line. As Leighton arranged white porcelain tableware and old boots, Barnet assigned drawing exercises from the model, as a matter of course. On a page of teaching notes, from 1956, he wrote: “How to think and feel the forces of a figure – leaning on an object.”<sup>35</sup> Like Leighton, Barnet engaged the structure of his subject and admired form above colour: “form is the very essence of painting and color the final binder.”<sup>36</sup>

Barnet saw in Marion Nicoll’s work at Emma Lake a formidable ability to comprehend relationships between the “forces,” or structural dynamics, of her subject and to

transform their living presence onto a flat surface. With initial guidance from Barnett, Nicoll learned to paint shapes on canvas that suggest the figure's substance, vigour, and potential for movement, whatever her actual subject might be. Her increasing confidence began to be expressed in larger paintings, with wider and increasingly elevated views of her home landscape.

Again, landscape as a subject and the sublime as a theme characterized not just Leighton but the avant garde. Robert Rosenblum noted in his influential article "The Abstract Sublime": "As imprecise and irrational as the feelings it tried to name, the sublime could be extended to art as well as to nature. One of its major expressions, in fact, was the painting of sublime landscapes."<sup>37</sup>

Following her year in New York, Nicoll and her husband Jim travelled to Sicily. There she painted her first mature abstract painting, *Sicilia II, The House of the Padrone* (1959) is a masterpiece of exquisitely subtle and dynamic spatial relationships, close luminous tones, and animated planar forms. Its dynamic power derives from the deliberate visual instability of its parts. That is, spatial relationships between forms may be read alternately, but not simultaneously, in two antithetical ways. For example, the large black shape in the middle of the picture looks like a lateral view of a cube surmounting the roof of the house. This subtle illusion stems from the slight downward slant of the narrow strip that points toward the right edge of the canvas, which the viewer's eye interprets as a corner. Equally, this black shape can be read as a perfectly two-dimensional part of an abstract design, which is abutted on the left side by a square-shaped form of luminous beige with an irregular top edge. The black, tail-shaped form above this beige square tapers toward the left edge of the image. Or, is this form only a fragment of that large black shape that would be visible, were it not obstructed by the beige square? In other words, is this picture the "dynamics of the horizontal and vertical elements" Nicoll describes, or the

“skeleton” she started with: the massive old bones of a Sicilian stone house? It is neither of these things at once, but both of them in sequence. Comparable dynamics of colour and shape recur throughout *The House of the Padrone*. The flatness of the picture plane is emphasized by the visual relationship between the taupe-coloured shape below the top black “corner” and the corresponding black form at the bottom right of the painting. The central taupe protuberance points toward the sharp corner of beige on the right, which turns the eye toward the finger of black at the bottom. This finger points to the terracotta corner on the lower left, drawing the viewer’s gaze down along its sloping irregular top land and back into the middle of the painting, to make the visual circuit once again, without ever once entering an illusory space “into” the picture, somewhere beyond its literal canvas plane. Nicoll had struggled to transform her analytical grasp of subjects into forms whose relationships are sound and complex enough to sustain many visual meanings. Here in Sicily in 1959, on a canvas three feet high and three and a half feet wide, she found a vehicle to express the monumentality of her vision.

Nicoll’s antipathy toward “overlapping transparencies and fuzzy edges” is a metaphorical way to communicate her precise intentions and muscular resolve to make art with big, strong forms. She rejected the taped, artificial exactitude of painted lines exemplified in the work of hard-edge Abstract Expressionists like Frank Stella, in favour of the organic outlines and contours of Will Barnet’s painting of the 1950s. The hypersensitive quality of the edges of Nicoll’s forms is a crucial formal device in her mature abstract painting. Despite her rhetorical disavowal of painterly romanticism and fuzzy edges, her forms are fluid, mobile, and variously animated by their surroundings. The painter Sean Scully’s comments on the work of Mark Rothko applies equally to the art of Marion Nicoll: “[Rothko discovered] ... these beautiful in-between colors and the way they are

allowed to breathe, the notion of the sensitive edge, so you have the minimalist spirit and the romantic spirit in one person.”<sup>38</sup>

Over the course of the 1960s, as her work becomes larger and more spare, the slightly irregular edges become increasingly significant. They record the minute movements of her arm and hand, subtly animating simple, large areas of flat paint so that the visual relationships between them become charged and dynamic. Although persistently naturalistic colour references anchor her images to the world outside, Nicoll becomes, as her close friend Ron (Gyo-Zo) Spickett said, “one with the object of thought.”<sup>39</sup> When Geoffrey Simmins posed the question “Marion made the comment that she ‘was drawing on both sides of the line.’ “What do you think she meant?,” Spickett replied: “That’s seeing the space, if you’re drawing a line oblivious to where you are, then you’re seeing form and you are not seeing relationships.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in *Alberta VI, Prairie* (1960), the long, rectangular expanses of a varied group of prairie fields and roads and the incandescent pallor of a full moon on a darkening horizon are displayed like captured territory, while elements of the notoriously challenging panorama of Alberta landscape point us toward the centre stage of the painting. The jutting red stripe at the lower right is halted by the short but visually alarming stroke of the same colour on the left, directing our gaze back toward the black T-junction of the horizon. This red stroke signals the existence of the picture plane, lest we read the white enclosure beyond simply as open air. A bluish-green square drifts gently within the confines of upper-right corner of the painting, rising slightly toward the beckoning white disk. This small but crucial movement creates a widening aperture of luminous brown night sky underneath, which is neither simply an illusion of depth nor an unambiguous strip of painted canvas. In *Alberta VI, Prairie*, the familiar sensation of a prairie horizon diminishing at the periphery of sight is transformed into a vision of the dark earth rising under the light of an ancient moon.



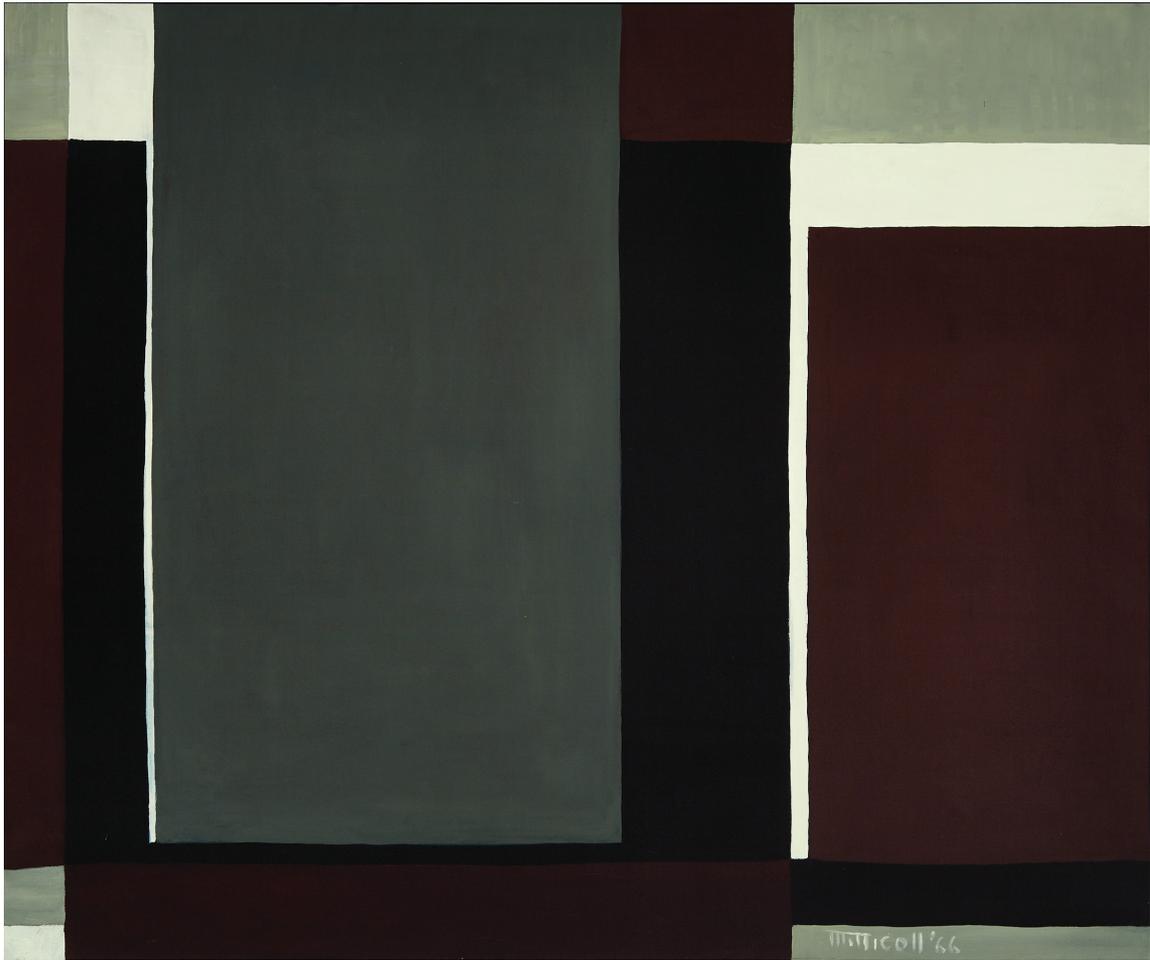
Marion Nicoll  
*Alberta VI, Prairie*, 1960  
Oil on canvas  
60.9 × 152.4 cm  
Private Collection, Calgary



Marion Nicoll  
*Bowness Road, 2 am*, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
136.0 × 186.0 cm  
Collection of Glenbow Museum



Marion Nicoll  
*Foothills No. 1*, 1965  
Oil and lucite 44 on canvas  
136.0 × 186.0 cm  
Collection of Glenbow Museum, gift of Don and Shirley Grace, 1995



Marion Nicoll  
*Calgary III - 4 a.m.*, 1966  
Oil on canvas  
113.5 × 136.2 cm  
Collection of Nickle Galleries

Through the 1960s, Nicoll's forms become heavier and more declarative, her angles sharper, and her canvases larger. At the same time, her life-long surroundings, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the prairie, the city of Calgary, and "the street she lives on," in Bowness, become her chosen subjects. *Bowness Road, 2 am* (1963), *Foothills I* (1965), and *Calgary III-4 a.m.* (1966) are evidence that she is taking stock of a world in which she alone is the centre. These were hard years. She yearned for New York, where, she lamented to a *Calgary Herald* interviewer: "I'm twice as alive.... New York is a friendlier place than Calgary ... to me, it's the most beautiful city in the world." At home, she said, "I cannot sell my work."<sup>41</sup> In 1965, a short feature about Nicoll, titled *Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher*, commented that "Mrs. Nicoll's abstract paintings are accepted and sold in Edmonton, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Eastern Canada but not in Calgary. Why is the artist's hometown exceptional?" Nicoll replied: "I wish I knew. Many of the local artists are acknowledged throughout Canada and even in the United States but not by Calgarians."<sup>42</sup>

Her concentration was undiminished by lack of recognition and financial success. *Bowness Road, 2:00 a.m.* is a huge and ambitious mural-sized view of her neighbourhood, in the silent half-light of the wee hours. Nicoll has created a series of interlocking irregular geometric shapes in subtle variations on a grey scale. They suggest the proliferation of acute angles and variously proximate planes of built structures assembled along a panoramic view of the suburban street. The black band with an abrupt unilateral extension on the viewer's right splits the scene into two unequal portions. On the other side of this band, which is Bowness Road itself, are the solid forms, intermittent illuminated patches, and unordered angled spaces of the neighbourhood. The viewer is drawn into a compelling and continuous assessment of their literal and implied relationships. For example, the dark grey and pale blue interlocked "F" shapes are simultaneously

cantilevered away from both the left edge of the painting and the enclosed lighted rectangle bordering the road. As a result, this composite shape appears to detach itself from its black frame and to obliquely approach the adjacent lighted rectangle. The narrow, black space between the composite “F” form and the rectangle thus alternately appears on the verge of both closing and opening. The dynamism created by such ambiguities informs the entire painting. Nicoll’s forms, though basically geometrical, resist exactitude. In this way, they call to mind the changeable nature of appearances themselves: like footprints in the snow that are filled with violet shadows in late afternoon, a neighbour’s windows that are transformed into sheets of gold by the setting sun, or a receding highway that unravels like a black ribbon in the rearview mirror of a speeding car.

In Nicoll’s work, relationships between forms and spaces are inherently unstable. This leads to a continuous reassessment of these shapes whose contours have multiple functions or formal identities. We are tantalized by an empty space that turns out to be a plane, or a corner that is a crooked line on a flat surface. The way we see things, the nature of vision itself, is a subject in the art of Marion Nicoll. As a product of her “struggle” to decipher and represent the “skeleton” of things, her work embodies both the character of the subject and the method of its capture. Nicoll repeated to a journalist this same year (1963) the credo of her own, personal abstraction: “When I use the word ‘abstract,’ I do so in the strict meaning of the word as given in the dictionary ‘to take from.’ All my work is soundly based on natural forms and experiences.”<sup>43</sup> She was not casting aside the incidental, subjective aspects of her subject in order to extract from it a group of universal forms like the triangles of the Theosophists. Nor did she share the Abstract Expressionists’ disassociation of form and process from content. Instead, she sought to incorporate the experience of seeing, as well as the subject, into her art. Picasso’s comments on the nature of this sort of creative process remain the most profoundly insightful:

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark.... They [ideas and emotions] form an integral part of it, even when their presence is no longer discernible.<sup>44</sup>

*Calgary III – 4 a.m.* was painted three years later at the brink of daybreak. Panels of grey-mauve, purple, and violet are painted sparingly so as to reveal amorphous areas of light-coloured canvas in their centres. These fading panels of the night's end are punctuated by narrow white stripes of emerging morning light. The big, black enclosure of night around the centre is now slightly awry, like a mat slipped away from the focal point of a properly framed picture. Nicoll's subject is a particular set of relationships in space and in time; at night on the prairie or at 2:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m. in the city.

Three years later, she was commissioned by an Edmonton collector to paint a mountain scene. This extraordinary work, called *Journey to the Mountains*, is a triptych that measures 12 feet high and 9 feet long. The scale alone suggests that *Journey* was destined for an interior wall of an ambitious architectural project. Certainly, the mathematical precision of measurements and proportions of the preparatory drawings indicate that it was intended for a specific space. For unknown reasons, the collector reneged on their agreement, inflicting serious financial and psychological damage. With no hope of selling the massive painting, Nicoll donated it to the University of Calgary, where it was installed in the lobby of the library. This overwhelming work, unlike anything else she ever painted, literally overfilled the visual field of any viewer less than twenty feet away. For this reason, it is strikingly reminiscent of Addison's description of the qualities inherent in a sublime view: "By greatness I don't mean bulk of any single object ... but

largeness of a whole view considered as one entire piece ... huge heaps of mountains... Our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity.”<sup>45</sup>

Nicoll called the work *Journey to the Mountains* and titled each of the three panels. From the left they are: *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return*. By the logic of the panel titles, the work should be read like the narrative in a text, left to right. Yet, unlike a textual narrative, it presents differentiated times, not sequentially, but simultaneously. The *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return* are represented not from our point of view but from that of the artist. Mountains are visible in the distance, then up close, then disappearing into the distance as if seen when looking back, from a car window, perhaps reflecting past experiences of travelling there and back again, in “The Maroon Mariah.” This vehicular perspective is suggested by the rearview-mirror-like white shape near the bottom left in the first panel. This is not a “view” of a mountain panorama; the degree of schematization of natural elements, mountains, sky, sun, and moon precludes classification as landscape.

*Journey to the Mountains* is an outcome of Nicoll’s experience of A. C. Leighton’s Banff School of Art and her longstanding familiarity with his devotion to Rocky Mountain iconography. The question now arises: is a particular idea expressed by Nicoll’s *Journey*? The answer lies in the creative history of the artist herself. The *Journey to the Mountains* is the journey of the hero, as revealed in its immense diversity and singular thematic content by the Jungian scholar Joseph Campbell. The second edition of his seminal work *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* was released in 1968, the same year Nicoll was working on the triptych. Campbell’s “Journey of the Hero” has three stages, which are captured in the first three chapter headings: Departure, Initiation, and Return.<sup>46</sup> The

journey, metaphorically, is an exploration of the self, which culminates in psychological awareness, individuation, and achievement.

The union of the conscious with the unconscious through automatic drawing prepared Nicoll for the revelatory experience at Emma Lake. From that moment on, she knew she must be a painter. Her relationships with A. C. Leighton, Jock Macdonald, and Will Barnet were instrumental to her life as an artist. Her resolution of these influences is apparent in her work from 1959 until her death. The three panels of *Journey to the Mountains*—*Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return*—correspond to the three stages of the hero's journey; Departure, Initiation, and Return.

For Marion Nicoll, the Rocky Mountains resonated with a deep, personal symbolism. She witnessed, through Leighton, the dramatic, formative power of the mountain sublime. In New York, discussion of the subject continued in Barnett Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now," which asserted that the sublime could reside in non-objective forms, rather than "outmoded legends."<sup>47</sup> In this context, *Journey to the Mountains* is an allegory of her growth into artistic maturity. The work is forbidding, intimidating in its scale. To carry the weight of her history, she needed the biggest boat she could pilot. The images are severe and cerebral rather than sensuous, cold despite large areas of textured orange, and symbolic rather than expressive. It is a scene of arduous exertion, measured endurance, and piercing topography.

It is also, like *Alberta VI*, *Prairie*, and many of Marion Nicoll's other works, a declaration of ownership over a chosen motif. Mountains, of all the subjects in the history of Canadian art, are the most resonant and symbolic. Historical ideas of the sublime were

subsumed into the personal and spiritual mountain images of members of the Group of Seven who visited the west and discovered in the Rocky Mountains a geometrical correlative to their spiritual strivings. They are the subject *par excellence* of Lawren Harris himself, whose abstracted mountain paintings became emblems of the central Canadian art establishment. For Marion Nicoll, these mountains were of deeper and more personal significance. They were witnesses to all stages of her life's journey – amid them she lived through many movements of the planets, and many changes of perspective. In 1969, the immobilizing pain from severe rheumatoid arthritis dictated an end to the boldest and most creative part of her life. *Journey to the Mountains* is Marion Nicoll's final large project. These sharp, vivid peaks and pointed skies are a modernist's vision of the self, within the panorama of home.

**Elizabeth Herbert** has a BA from the University of Toronto, an MA from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (UK) and an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art (University of London, UK). She teaches at the University of Calgary and is the author of *The Art of John Snow* (University of Calgary Press, 2010).

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