



*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot, from "Four Quartets", final section

Landscape provides Gregory Hardy with an inexhaustible source of mystery. His paintings are not representations of actual landscape as much as they are surrogates for the artist's experience of nature. In an amalgam of the observed and the imagined, Hardy invokes the memory of the original experience, and finds an emotional and spiritual equivalence. Acknowledged in this process is a recognition of the seemingly arbitrary character of memory, where some aspects of experience achieve a greater significance in the mind than others. Hardy's paintings, rooted in the experience of the transformative processes of nature, serve as metaphor for the duality of an inner and outer world.

In Hardy's formative years, a desire for adventure, for the unknown, paradoxically found a balance in the corresponding need for the security of the familiar. Born in Saskatoon and raised in a home at the outskirts of town, his early years were spent, in large part, satisfying youthful curiosities of life in the country. As a young man, Hardy had the somewhat romantic notion of becoming a National Geographic photographer, a decision that led him to enroll at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto. Hardy describes his work there as that of a documentary photographer. His subject was the run down area of town, often depicting a single figure. One of the projects he undertook while at Ryerson

brought him back to Saskatchewan, and an involvement with an important group of artists, among them Otto Rogers, Joe Fafard, Douglas Bentham, Robert Christie, Dorothy Knowles, and William Pehudoff. Towards the end of his time in Toronto, Hardy, perhaps inspired by his engagement with Saskatoon's painting community, produced his first artworks; collages from his own photographs, as well as works made by painting directly on his photographs. After almost three years in Toronto from 1970 to 1973, Hardy, longing to paint full-time and feeling an emotional pull from the prairies, moved back home to Saskatoon. The paintings he produced at that time were most often of single figures in a landscape. Some were from direct observation, others were invented. Eventually the figures disappeared from his paintings.

Almost 30 years later, among the family photographs, other memorabilia, and paintings that adorn the walls of Gregory Hardy's Saskatoon home, is a much admired watercolour by Saskatchewan artist, Robert Vincent. While the Vincent painting is visually interesting in its complex structure of shadow, light, and reflections, it also suggests, for Hardy, a quasi-dream world. It depicts a winter scene experienced while traveling on a winding northern road. There is a sense of enclosure, with a partially frozen lake surrounded by a forest. Reflections draw in the larger world of clouds and sky, making a connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm. This visionary sensitivity of the particular to the universal is an important consideration in Hardy's work. For Hardy, the Vincent work connects with his own experience of the identical scene, which he discovered when on the road to Wolliston Lake, during his former employment with the department of highways.

What distinguishes Hardy's paintings in the present exhibition from those of his past is the practice of bracketing or framing the landscape. The painted border elements function as intermediary zones, providing a buffer from outside space, and a transition into an intimate interior place. Hardy's framing of the landscape connects with the enigmatic interiors of British painter, Howard Hodgkin. Construction of the image is through intuitive brushwork applied layer by layer in a combination of wet-into-wet and overlapping dry-brush strokes. Important to maintaining clarity of surface is the use of 'tar gel', which enables acrylic to be worked like oil paint. Successful resolution of the painting is dependent on Hardy's considerable experience of the brush-in-hand. Colour carries a distinctly emotional resonance in Hardy's paintings. The often brooding tonalities within his works align them to the late paintings of Friedel Dzubas, whom Hardy met at the 1979 Emma Lake Artists' Workshop. In their balancing of naturalism and symbolism, Hardy's paintings also relate to the Symbolist painters of Northern Europe, active during the period 1890 to about 1910.

Artists often take two steps back and one step forward in order to develop new work. Hardy's 1970s landscapes provide an early antecedent to his current works. Their imaginative structure of bar-like forms recall the abstract landscapes of former Saskatoon artist, Otto Rogers. Hardy acknowledges that he learned a lot from Rogers about mark making and space articulation. Perhaps most significantly, Hardy learned from him the importance of keeping on working at a painting; making it more and more complex, and more and more beautiful. Hardy's early paintings, which he refers to as pictographs, often

included references to the sun, as well as other landscape forms, and were painted with two or three inch house brushes; a fact that accounts in large part for the size and character of the marks. An examination of Hardy's present studio reveals an extraordinary assortment of artist brushes of every conceivable size and shape; evidence of the continuing importance of the hand in his visual shorthand of marks. Some of Hardy's 1970s paintings contain circular forms at their center, surrounded by delicately modulated colour. In discussing these works, Hardy confirms an enthusiasm for the imaginative landscapes of Adolf Gottlieb. Hardy's current paintings also reference his experience of Mexican altars. Objects such as a bowl or even a dead chicken, treated as icons in an act of veneration, were bracketed on either side by brightly coloured cloth. This framing device is apparent in his 1995 still life paintings completed in Ecuador.

The catalyst for these new works can also be traced back to Hardy's familiarity with historical European painting. In 1983, while visiting the Museo del Prado in Madrid, he chanced upon a Tiziano painting, *Venus y el Amor*. The Tiziano painting integrates an interior scene and a landscape. Through the dark red curtains of a loggia – inhabited by a well-dressed man playing the organ, in the company of a reclining nude female with an infant – is a classical garden complete with a fountain, grazing deer, and an avenue of trees stretching out to a distant horizon; a solitary figure walks a path towards the horizon. Hardy's interest in the relationship of interior and exterior space, as seen in this Tiziano picture, connects with his own interpretation of the prairie landscape. After an Evening Rain, *The Heart of Summer* is a study in contrasts and of differing registers of representation. The structure of the piece is of an enclosed landscape with a river meandering towards the horizon, illuminated by the raking light of the setting sun just after a rain storm, and framed by an assemblage of swiftly applied strokes of colour. The dark red at the left edge is a direct reference to the colour of the curtain in the Tiziano work. After an Evening Rain, *The Heart of Summer*'s contrast of a broadly painted edge and the subtle modulated tones of the inner landscape contributes to a reading of the picture as an imagined idyllic landscape; one that contains elements of both desire and loss. Tiziano's and Hardy's paintings both establish a unity of the temporal and the spiritual.

Distant Thunder, while similar in composition to *After an Evening Rain, The Heart of Summer*, has a more direct connection to the actual subject. *Distant Thunder* is another of Hardy's pictures where vivid atmospheric phenomena, in this instance just after a rainstorm, serve as metaphor. It has about it a sense of an epiphany, of a special moment, which presents itself with extraordinary intensity. There is, at work, an affirmation of the dramatic transformative power of nature. Gesture and wrist movement are essential to the expression in this work. Perhaps one of the most content laden marks is a dry-brushed area of pale lemon yellow just above the horizon. It is charged with a feeling that is difficult to pin down, and is all the more powerful because of it. The painting as a whole is suffused with a clarity of light that offers up the possibility of new beginnings. *River in Badlands* presents a similar composition as *After an Evening Rain, The Heart of Summer*, where a river winds its way through a treeless landscape of gently rolling terrain. *River in Badlands* provides an ageless landscape independent of human activity. In the foreground are figurative-like rock formations, sentinels at the entrance to a

landscape of absence. Here the elemental grandeur of sky and earth lives on in its own terms. River in Badlands was the result of a canoe trip Hardy took from Medicine Hat to the Saskatchewan border, memories of which were aided by a photograph he had taken during that trip some seven years earlier.

The genesis of Storm near Marengo was observations made while driving late one afternoon, under a sky of cobalt blue with the atmospheric of a distant storm. It was really a composite of feelings experienced over some ten miles of watching. In this painting, the metamorphosis of clouds across an expansive, panoramic space, and their headlong rush toward the spectator establishes a rhythm of forms and intervals that finds a parallel with music, and, in particular, an orchestral composition. Hardy, who often paints to classical music, will at times allow music to influence the direction of a painting. In response to a suggestion of late Beethoven as a musical analogy for his paintings, Hardy preferred Johann Sebastian Bach whose work, in its abstract quality, is as contemporary today as it was when it was composed. To the left and right edges of Storm Near Marengo are subtle vertical forms suggestive of curtains drawn back, revealing perhaps a Wagnerian stage set. The dynamism of light and colour enters into a paradoxical relationship with a heavily impastoed paint surface, achieved through an extended period of work encompassing several years. In the act of forming, covering up, and remaking, an archetypal object is created whose physical presence, very much resembling a wall, embodies an elemental spirituality.

In the tension between abstraction and representation present in these works, Quietly an Evening Storm, situates itself clearly within modernist abstraction. Its tiered structure of elemental forms and strongly resonating colour draws inescapable comparison with Mark Rottiko's late 1940s paintings, but its register of representation is drawn more towards naturalism. It is a perceptual balancing act; the recognition of landscape elements is met by an awareness of pictorial structure and movement of paint as physical substance. Stopped before the edge by bracketing forms, the deep blue sky, transfiguring clouds, and variegated ground are objectified, becoming symbols of transcendent experience. The process leading to the realization of Quietly An Evening Storm was twice removed; it began as a drawing, then a small painting, and finally the large painting. Memory becomes the arbiter in the simultaneous desire to represent what was there, and to convey what it felt like to be there. Waterfall is an edgy painting that, although devoid of specific references to human impact on the natural environment, nevertheless depicts a beautiful yet fragile landscape. Reticent to tell stories that may assume too much importance to the viewer, Hardy recounts that while experiencing this Newfoundland landscape of small pine trees backed by a rugged hillside, he could hear shots of moose hunters hidden from view just over the horizon. Waterfall has a Spanish quality about it; its earthy harmonies and fugitive forms evoke fundamental concerns about the human condition. Balancing the landforms is a canopy of crystalline blue with a surface so infused with content that the term elegy seems entirely appropriate.

In his attention to the cycles of birth, death, and regeneration in a forest Hardy finds a correspondence with the oeuvre of two Saskatchewan artists of an earlier generation, Ernest Lindner and Leslie Saunders. Forest Floor images a magical world deep within the

forest. It embodies elements of both tragedy and transcendence. The experience that led ultimately to this work was during a canoe trip and the urgent need to take shelter in the face of a storm. The painting has both a decided physical presence, related to the substance and texture of growing and decaying fir trees, as well as a fugitive aspect of light that makes, of the spongy moss and lichen covered forest floor, a shifting atmosphere of images not unlike that of reflections in a pond. A young sapling at center right, with its emblematic form joins with Ernest Lindner's forest theme of transformation. Hardy's intuitive painting process of layering paint, putting on and covering up over an extended period, is, of itself, a metaphor for revelation.

A special place exists for Hardy, not far from his country acreage, a short distance east of Saskatoon. It is a secluded, quiet place not usually visited by others. A small pond enclosed by a stand of trees is for Hardy what the garden lily pond was for Monet, a subject so imbued with meaning that it becomes a site of veneration; the journey to it, however short, is like a pilgrimage. *Sun over Pond: Smoke Haze* depicts this site, shrouded by smoke-filled air. The effect of this painting is one of considerable subtlety; no small achievement when one considers the underpinnings of strident colour that coalesces at the painting's edge. Its veiled presence provides it with an ambiguous space and time, neither being firmly rooted in the present or the past. Its delicate beauty stands as an homage to the essential elements of landscape-earth, sky, and water.

Gregory Hardy's paintings materialize out of a process that begins with his physical presence in the landscape, the notation of certain visual cues through drawings, and finally the painting process where memories and material construct an equivalence for the original experience. They depend, for their effectiveness, on the ability of the painted mark to access remembered experience in an intuitive manner that engages both mind and spirit. Stroke by stroke, layer upon layer, they construct their own history through a process of emergence and obscurity. The viewer's entrance through and into the interior space of Hardy's paintings parallels that of the artist's journey; his desire to find, in the temporal, an entrance to the spiritual.

George Moppett



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