

GREGORY HARDY BIOGRAPHY

Birth Date: 1950 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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 and Joe Fafard,. 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. 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. Color 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. Hardy acknowledges that he learned a lot from Canadian artist Otto 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.

Hardy's paintings both establish a unity of the temporal and the spiritual. Hardy's pictures often depict vivid atmospheric phenomena, just after a rainstorm or snowstorm and serve as metaphor. The works have about them 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 in some of his works. 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 and also landscapes of absence. Many times the works are really a composite of feelings experienced over miles of watching. 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. The tension between abstraction and representation present in

Hardy's works, situates itself clearly within modernist abstraction. Its tiered structure of elemental forms and strongly resonating color draws inescapable comparison with Mark Rothko'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. Memory becomes the arbiter in the simultaneous desire to represent what was there, and to convey what it felt like to be there.

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 become a site of veneration; the journey to it, however short, is like a pilgrimage.

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.

Written by George Moppett