

APPRECIATION

Doris McCarthy: chameleon of the canvas



Doris McCarthy in a 2004 portrait.

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Doris McCarthy turns 100 on July 7, a frail 100, reportedly. It's anticipated she will mark the occasion without much fuss (certainly no interviews are being granted) at Fool's Paradise, the home she built on land purchased more than 70 years ago near Toronto's Scarborough Bluffs.

To many people, the name Doris McCarthy is familiar, and, at a public gallery somewhere in Canada, they may well have laid eyes on some of her landscapes or landscape-based works - produced in a career stretching back to the late 1920s, when McCarthy studied under the Group of Seven's Arthur Lismer at the Ontario College of Art.

Intriguingly, what still has to be fixed is McCarthy's place in the history of the country's art.

Is her work, undeniably protean, finally a mere footnote to the epochal achievements of Lismer, Lawren Harris and the rest of the original Group? Or has she carved out enough unique territory - or territories - to secure a place in the Canadian pantheon?

McCarthy, for what it's worth, seems to have made up her own mind in this regard: In a 2003 interview, she argued that she should be judged - in fact, judged favourably - in relation to Emily Carr, "probably the strongest woman artist that Canada has produced, except for Doris McCarthy. Frankly, I think my work will stand up in history next to hers, but God knows."

Or is it more the *idea* of Doris McCarthy that compels and will continue to compel - that of the tiny, flinty, intrepid female artist, unmarried, childless, travelling to the wilds of every Canadian province and territory to render her bliss on canvas; the woman, who, in the words of Group of Seven historian and Sotheby's Canada president David Silcox, resourcefully "fights upstream against a whole range of prejudices"?

These questions can be considered afresh for most of this month, thanks to *Roughing It in the Bush*, a McCarthy survey comprising more than 60 paintings. Split between the Doris McCarthy Gallery (established in 2004 at University of Toronto Scarborough) and the University of Toronto Art Centre on the main U of T campus, the concurrent exhibitions, curated by Nancy Campbell, run through July 24. The shows' oils date from 1938 (a panorama of the Bow River in Alberta's mountain fastness) to 2005 (*Pink Iceberg with Floes*). Collectively, they take the viewer on a pan-Canadian trek from McCarthy's own backyard to the High Arctic, from the Gaspé Peninsula to the Alberta badlands.

Perhaps the most arresting images are the 20 or so paintings at the Scarborough gallery. They celebrate a little-seen, little-known side of McCarthy's oeuvre: the roughly 100 "hard-edge" paintings she composed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While irrevocably rooted in the natural world, these works have a decidedly abstract cast. Their blocks of colour and their weave of flow and pattern evoke Milton Avery, Henri Matisse's paper cut-outs, the chevrons of Kenneth Noland and the op-art of Bridget Riley. For all its divergent styles - and few would disagree that McCarthy's career exemplified the artist as ever-evolving innovator - McCarthy's painting has always given paramountcy to form, but never more graphically (and elementally and fancifully) than here.

McCarthy's stature as what might be termed "the people's painter" remains unassailable. A quick flip through the encomiums and well wishes in the guest book at the Doris McCarthy Gallery is enough to affirm that. "You are especially blessed by God." "There isn't anything you can't do." "This makes my heart soar." "You are a real treasure."

But among scholars and critics, McCarthy "hasn't had the attention that ... she's deserved," according to Matthew Brower, curator of the University of Toronto Art Centre. She has no separate entry in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*; not a single citation in *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*, recently published by Oxford University Press.

Only two McCarthy oils and four watercolours are in the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection. While noting McCarthy's "very strong personal fan club," the National Gallery's curator of Canadian art, Charles Hill, said in a recent interview, "I don't think she's contributed anything original that's enduring."

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., holds one large oil. The Art Gallery of Ontario has one watercolour, dated 1958; and one oil, from 1946.

Dennis Reid, now chief curator at the AGO, didn't include McCarthy in the 1988 edition of his *Concise History of Canadian Painting*. (Lismer got more than 12 mentions.) But having recently been contracted to produce a new edition, he indicated McCarthy will get finally some attention. "Doris's longevity is remarkable," he said in an interview, "but what is most

Brower agrees: "There's been continual growth and progress and experimentation over the course of her career." If McCarthy's star may now be in the ascendant, perhaps it's because, Brower reasons, "there's slowly been a reconsideration of the significance of painting in the context of Canadian art."

"For an extended period, following the development of conceptual art, many of the important galleries saw painting as inevitably commodified, not serious, not rigorous." But in recent times, he adds, "I think there's a broader return to painting" along with a withering of the notion of what constitutes "the front line of art."

McCarthy had a hard time gaining critical traction in the 1950s, when abstract expressionism was king, and representational painting passé. Then, with the rise of conceptualism, Brower says, "no one wanted to look at painting, almost any kind of painting at all," which put McCarthy even further beyond the pale. Today, with the absence of any dominant orthodoxy and associated ideologies, McCarthy stands the chance of a more judicious appraisal.

Silcox, for one, admires McCarthy's "driven" nature and the way "she represents a kind of continuity and connection to the past."

Also, her curiosity and relentless inquiry into the Canadian landscape "is not something you find very often," he notes. "In Canadian art terms, I'd say Harris was someone who kept moving on. David Milne was. I think Emily Carr was. But there aren't many others, truth to tell. Even if the work may not be at the highest possible level or at the level that would command international attention, you have to admire the development ... I really like her."

Doris McCarthy: Roughing It in the Bush continues at the Doris McCarthy Gallery (U of T Scarborough, 1265 Military Trail; open Wednesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday noon to 5 p.m.), and at the U of T Art Centre (15 King's College Circle; open Tuesday to Friday, noon to 5 p.m.; Saturday noon to 4 p.m.) through July 24. McCarthy's long-time dealer, Wynick/Tuck Gallery (401 Richmond St. W., Toronto; open Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.) is displaying a selection of paintings and drawings through July 29.

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