



Back to Doris McCarthy exhibit speaks to the artist as lover of life

Doris McCarthy exhibit speaks to the artist as lover of life

June 27, 2010

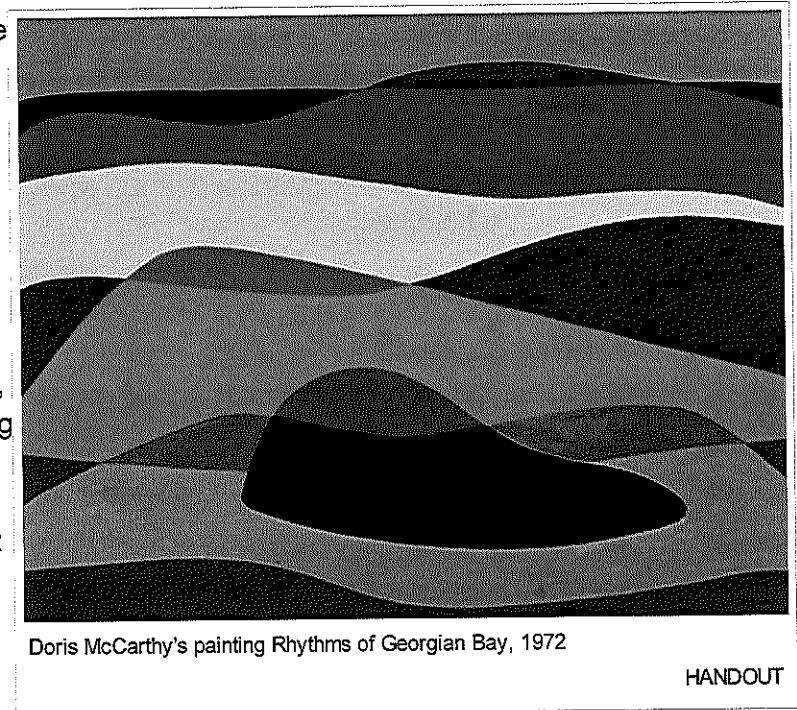
Murray Whyte

Doris McCarthy turns 100 next month, and the occasion's been marked in the best possible way: with a bang. Last week, a sprawling, two-venue exhibition of her iconic landscapes opened, covering almost as much ground as McCarthy herself, spanning 80-plus years painting her beloved Canadian wilderness.

That's a little syrupy, though, and McCarthy, renowned for her bold, impetuous style, both in art and in life, is anything but. So let's push aside quaint notions of centenarian homage — because that's certainly what curator Nancy Campbell has done — and look at McCarthy, unfiltered, which, I imagine, is exactly what she would want. And from what I understand, defying Doris is something one does at one's peril.

For the record, I asked to speak to Doris and was politely rebuffed; at almost 100, she's grown frail, finally, confined to her home, a difficult circumstance for an artist who, well into her 80s, was travelling in helicopters and dogsleds to remote locations to paint landscapes untouched by human hands.

Indeed, collectively, the exhibitions, at the University of Toronto Art Centre downtown and at the not-coincidentally named Doris McCarthy Gallery on its Scarborough campus, are called "Roughing It In The Bush: The Landscapes of Doris McCarthy," a nod to the Susanna Moodie journals of



Doris McCarthy's painting Rhythms of Georgian Bay, 1972

HANDOUT

the same name, and a literal acknowledgement of the artist's sense of adventure.

This played out both on the canvas and in life. Seeking communion with the landscapes she loved, McCarthy gamely trekked wherever her interest led her: remote lakes in Northern Ontario, the Alberta Badlands, shifting ice floes in the far North (the cover of the beautiful little book published for the occasion shows McCarthy, swaddled in a parka, plopped down in the shadow of looming icebergs, paintbrushes propped in the snow beside her).

What Campbell shows here, though, is not just the canonized McCarthy landscapes but a little-seen practice from the late '60s and early '70s. McCarthy, a devoted teacher at Toronto's Central Technical School, had established herself as an artist but felt a debt to her students in a fractious era when conceptualism was blooming. "(I)t was essential that they should understand the 'isms' of the day: minimalism, abstraction, colour field, found art," she told Harold Klunder, a renowned painter himself who was once one of her students, in an interview published in 2004. "In order to teach them, I wanted to experience those 'isms' for myself."

Not one to go with trends — "I've been unfashionable since the beginning," she told Klunder; "Landscape painting went out shortly after I started. It was not what was 'done' in those days" — McCarthy nonetheless started playing with a particular "hard-edge" kind of landscape painting that took its cue from the flat, graphic geometries of abstraction.

Through the late '60s and early '70s, she made almost 100 such works, gorgeous and playfully minimal, elemental compositions that prioritized ordering space with colour and light, most of them wonderfully kinetic and bursting with joy. Still, at the time, McCarthy remained slightly dubious about the work, along with her longtime dealer, the Wynick-Tuck Gallery in Toronto. The paintings weren't offered by the gallery, ending up in McCarthy's personal storage for decades.

They've been seen on occasion but never in such number, and never as a comprehensive part of her career. Klunder's interview was part of a 2004 show that opened her eponymous gallery at U of T Scarborough, where a few of the works were displayed. This time, they dominate. In Scarborough, they sit alone, undiluted, in the main gallery space, while downtown, they're placed side by side with the landscapes McCarthy is best known for. In the wildly divergent styles, a curiously holistic sense emerges of McCarthy's irrepressibility to gamely and sincerely render her zest for her life and work any way she could.

It's easy logic to see why the work was held off to one side: even in her gamely experimental practice — over the decades, she was constantly trying on different materials and techniques, from watercolours to thick oils, working her way through crisp realism, oblique impressionistic work, the bright colours and flattened perspectives of folk art, and eerie, luminous depths, of mountain scenes and forests dark with intrigue — the work seems almost a playful anomaly.

Given her already-iconic status, easy logic shows there was something at stake. Even then, McCarthy loomed large, both for her own work

and her stature as Canadian artistic connective tissue: She studied with Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer at the Ontario College of Art in the '30s, and went so far, as a particularly brazen 17-year old, to knock on the door of fellow Group member Lawren Harris to pick his brain. Needless to say, they made a huge impression on her, if not in style, then in substance.

"I don't think I was ever influenced by the Group of Seven's actual paintings," she told Klunder. "I was very strongly influenced by the tradition of going out into nature and painting what was there. I bought it. And I still buy it."

By the time the 2004 exhibition opened, McCarthy, at 94, remained productive, painting one of her signature works, *Pink Iceberg with Floes*, a year later. At the time, McCarthy's famous brashness was in full view. Asked by Klunder to explain her contribution to Canadian art, McCarthy responds unequivocally: since the 1930s, she says, "I don't know any who has equalled my output in either quality or quantity. Do you?" she asked Klunder. "Come on, Harry," she teased. "Don't be afraid."

The 2004 show helped put McCarthy's endlessly gleeful curiosity into sharp focus. Its title was "Everything Which Is Yes," taken from a favourite e.e. cummings poem. It's an adroit way to summarize the open-hearted experimentalism of McCarthy's entire career.

Nonetheless, looking at the hard-edge works for the first time, I was struck by the revelation they were. For McCarthy, what was a private testing ground — a self-improvement sideline, really, the better to instruct others — is an achievement few artists could muster in a career. Oblique landscapes reduced to simple graphic compositions, such as 1966's crimson-and-ochre *Rhythms of Georgian Bay*, or 1969's *Lakescape Horizon (Winter Horizon)* show an artist in full command, at play. McCarthy may not have been convinced of the work's merit at the time, but you can be certain she had a hell of a good time making it.

Which, really, is what Doris McCarthy's art, and life, has always been about (see the photo of her sunbathing nude in the '30s for further proof.) At this stage of her life, showing this work seems notably apt: At 100 years young, Doris McCarthy is still surprising us. Long may she continue to do so.

Doris McCarthy: Roughing It In The Bush continues at the University of Toronto Art Centre and at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, U of T Scarborough campus, to July 24.