

Doris McCarthy: A Century of Roughing It in the Bush

Doris McCarthy painting in Grise Fjord, Nunavut 1976

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BY [CANADIAN ART](#)



In some trend-oriented sectors of contemporary art, hot names seem to linger for just a few days, never mind decades. And that sometimes-fickle nature of the art world makes [Doris McCarthy's](#) creative longevity all the more impressive. On July 7, McCarthy turns 100, with a variety of exhibitions running to honour her eight-decade practice in landscape painting, plein-air process, art education and more. The largest and most important of these shows, "[Doris McCarthy: Roughing It in the Bush](#)," takes place at McCarthy's namesake gallery on the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus as well as at the university's [downtown art centre](#). Combining rarely exhibited hard-edge abstractions from the 1960s with classic McCarthy landscapes and assorted travel ephemera, "Roughing It in the Bush" promises to present the artist's much-loved oeuvre in a fresh and unexpected way.

Independent curator Nancy Campbell, who organized “Roughing It,” certainly has a track record of highlighting vanguard qualities in overlooked or familiar-seeming bodies of work. Her projects presenting contemporary Inuit artists alongside their southern, urban counterparts have made [Annie Pootoogook](#) and [Shuvinai Ashoona](#) into deservedly well-known talents, and currently pair [Ed Pien](#) and [Samonie Toonoo](#) at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. No doubt Campbell’s eye for cutting-edge content in unexpected material continues in the presentation of these little-seen McCarthy abstracts.



Doris McCarthy *Keyhole Harbour* 1965 Courtesy of the artist / photo Toni Hafkenscheid

Also honouring McCarthy’s legacy is “[Eight Paintings/Eight Decades](#),” an exhibition spanning the 1930s through to the 2000s at McCarthy’s Toronto dealer, Wynick/Tuck; a show of some other 1960s abstractions at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie; and an art camp and plein-air painting competition organized by [Mountain Galleries](#) in Jasper.

All of these events respond to McCarthy’s status as a pioneer in many aspects of Canadian art. (Though the reference might seem humorous, it’s no coincidence that “Roughing It” borrows its title from the famed memoirs of 1800s Ontario settler [Susanna Moodie](#).) Born in Alberta in 1910—eight years before women obtained the right to vote in Canadian elections, and 41 years before they obtained the right to do so in all provincial and territorial ones—McCarthy studied at the Ontario College of Art under Arthur Lismer and other members of the [Group of Seven](#). In 1930 she began actively exhibiting work and in 1932 she began what would become a 40-year teaching career at Toronto’s Central Technical School. She quickly became known for her striking representations of the Canadian Shield (she has long kept a cottage studio on Georgian Bay) and other natural landscapes.

In 1964 McCarthy became the first woman president of the Ontario Society of Artists. Following her retirement from teaching in 1972, she made her first trip to the Arctic, her paintings of which would, through the years, become a key body of work. And visual art wasn’t her only creative form: in 1990, she published *A*

Fool in Paradise, the first in a series of acclaimed memoirs. Along the way, she generated hundreds of paintings and received the Order of Canada, among other awards.



Doris McCarthy in the studio at Fool's Paradise 2003 / photo Ken Jones

Even when her life does end, McCarthy's legacy will not; thanks to an endowment she has created, her home on the Scarborough Bluffs is destined to become an artist's studio and sanctuary for decades to come. As Hillsdale artist and friend Marlene Hilton Moore says on the [MacLaren Art Centre's website](#), "When she eventually retired, Doris loved April best for painting, a no-nonsense month when the landscape shows its structural bones. I suspect this was a result of her previous hard-edge investigations. One sees in her later works how sparely she painted her ode to realism." For all of McCarthy's work in showing Canada its striking "structural bones" and its sometimes-ascetic beauty—as well as for all the artistic insights that are perhaps just beginning to be recognized—it's an ideal summer to consider this iconic artist's many talents.

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"Roughing It in the Bush" runs June 19 to July 24 at the [Doris McCarthy Gallery](#) and the [University of Toronto Art Centre](#)

"Eight Paintings/Eight Decades" shows June 22 to July 19 at [Wynick Tuck](#)

“Doris McCarthy: Centenary” is on view June 17 to July 11 at the [MacLaren Art Centre](#)



Doris McCarthy *Broughton Floes in Spring Fog* 1984 Courtesy of the artist / photo Toni Hafkenscheid
