

Artistic Tension

Debate fuels growth as art society turns 80

BY HEATH MCCOY, CALGARY HERALD JULY 9, 2011

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Spotlight

Pulse: Alberta Society of Artists at 80 Years is at the Triangle Gallery until Aug. 24.

It's been 80 years of push and pull for the Alberta Society of Artists.

Eight decades of fractious undercurrents and heated debate. Several generations of tension between schools of artistic thought, with the traditionalists and the modernists ever struggling to take the lead.

It's been this way since the ASA was founded, says Jacek Malec, director and curator of the Triangle Gallery, which is now showing the exhibition Pulse: Alberta Society of Artists at 80 Years.

But that very dualism has spurred the society's members to create an impressive collection of world-class art, much of it featured in the Pulse display, at the gallery through to Aug. 24.

"It's this kind of ongoing debate that makes the group so interesting," says Malec. "It's not just everybody patting each others' shoulders. . . . It's much more dynamic."

This disparity, so central to the ASA's nature, goes back to the society's earliest days when the organization was founded by A.C. Leighton in 1931.

A well-schooled artist hailing from Great Britain, Leighton came to Canada in 1924, recruited by the Canadian Pacific Railway to paint the sort idyllic Canadian scenes that would promote tourism and railway travel. A landscape painter in the British watercolour tradition, he quickly fell in love with the Canadian Rockies.

In 1929, he accepted a position as head of the art department at the Art Institute of Calgary (which became the Alberta College of Art and Design) and, two years later, he assembled the ASA.

With an eye toward putting on displays and bringing in travelling art shows, the ASA, then comprised of 14 members, had its first exhibition at the Calgary Stampede.

But for all his good intentions, many artists found the society under Leighton to be too conservative and exclusionary.

Leighton -who was also a founding member of the Banff School of Fine Art - favoured the traditionalist style in which he himself painted, his landscapes rendered with an eye toward strict realism.

"Some of the artists here weren't happy with that heavy doctrine imposed on them," says Malec.

Notable artists of a more modernist, experimental bent, such as Maxwell Bates, a student of German Expressionism and W.L. Stevenson, who worked in a French Post-Impressionist style, were shut out of the ASA in those early years.

Things changed after the Second World War when H.G. Glyde succeeded Leighton as president of the ASA.

"That's really when the Society blossomed into a pretty inclusive organization that accepted a lot of different artistic approaches," says art critic Mary-Beth Laviolette, curator of the Pulse exhibit.

But even today the ASA -which now has 239 life members with an additional 93 supporting members - is characterized by the friction between the two camps.

"There is still a lot of ASA artists (who work) within that studio landscape based art," says Malec.

"Some of the members are still of a very conservative mind set So there's a diverse panel, between the modernists and the traditionalist doctrine."

But the landscape tradition has an important role in the ASA's history that shouldn't be undervalued, Malec notes.

"Even in the abstract art I still get the scent, the smell of canola and wheat. It's something you can't ignore. You still see elements of the landscape there. It's somewhere ingrained."

When curating Pulse, however, Laviolette wanted to emphasize the various stylistic approaches that the Society has touched on over the years.

"There's this impression that the Alberta Society of Artists today remains a rather conservative organization because of the fact that so many of its members are landscape painters," Laviolette says.

"But there are many different things going on. . . . There's a lot of post-modernist work being done."

To highlight this fact, Pulse is divided into two sections, one with a historical focus and the other featuring contemporary artists, Calgarians Linda Daoust, Eveline Kollijn, Liv Pedersen, Bonnie Scott and Bev Tosh among them.

"The thinking behind it is that the ASA is into a new century and a new decade . . . so let's focus on some of the more contemporary energies within the membership," Laviolette says.

Whether one is a lover of traditional or progressive art, the 80th anniversary of the ASA is a landmark worth celebrating, Laviolette stresses, because the Society has been vital to the cultural growth of Alberta.

"You had this amazing idea happen in the midst of the Great Depression with this Society being

formed to help build a stronger visual arts scene in Alberta," she says. "It helped our artists move from being amateurs to professionals."

In addition, the works of the artists over the years now act as important historical documents of Alberta's past.

"Think about the grain elevators which have mostly disappeared from the prairies," Laviolette says. "Many of these artists, as part of their work, would do paintings from different small towns, depicting these grain elevators.

That's a permanent record. . . . They helped to create a sense of place about Alberta."

Furthermore, the society helped Calgary grow up, making the transition from its frontier roots to its position today as a city of considerable cultural standing.

As Laviolette sees it: "I see the Alberta Society of Artists . . . as being one of the building blocks of our cultural community."

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