

Contemporary Canadian Painting

William Withrow

(McClelland and Stewart Limited 1972)

"Art," says John Meredith, "should always be a mystery. It isn't possible to totally explain any work of art anyway, since it is this mysterious quality which makes art so beautiful." It is suitable comment from an artist who uses uncomplicated techniques to create works of great originality and mystery.

Meredith's paintings are as accessible to the uninitiated viewer as they are to the most knowledgeable historian because his art is the least derivative of that included in this book and because Meredith himself has no program of explanation for it. His work is among those things that simply exist and are to be experienced. A good example is *Untitled Diptych* (ill. p. 151), the focus of which is a mandala-like form, which looks like the seal of some mystical society, surrounded by cabalistic markings. Meredith himself, however, professes little knowledge of the mandala, although it has become a popular sign in the counter-culture, with its Oriental and philosophical connotations and its Jungian application as symbolic of the effort to reunify the self. But Meredith has come to it less intellectually, more instinctively, and shows little interest in investing his work with meanings borrowed from other spheres of human thought or activity. This attitude is as true of his other works; Meredith paints from his viscera, not from his head.

This may help explain why he has remained singularly uninfluenced by the work of other Canadian artists, an astonishing fact when one considers that he is the younger brother of William Ronald (pages 105-12), a man who was a mover and maker in Painters Eleven and in the artistic revolution which shook Toronto in the late fifties.

John Meredith was born in 1933 in the town of Fergus, Ontario, and was interested in drawing and painting by the time he was in grade three. He left school as a youngster and went to work in an aircraft factory; in 1950, with the blessing of sympathetic parents, he enrolled in the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, where he studied until 1953. His teachers included Carl Schaeffer, Eric Freifeld and, most important, Jock Macdonald (pages 17-24), who encouraged him to go his own way artistically. Although he has a solid grounding in drawing the human figure (the core of the O.C.A. curriculum at that time) and feels that such a background is useful to any artist, he showed little interest in it.

During his years at the college, when his brother, William Ronald was becoming a highly articulate leading figure of the Toronto art scene, Meredith pursued his own lifestyle, living in Brampton and commuting to Toronto for classes. He had little social contact with Painters Eleven, a group he considers to have been in the generation before his own; by the time Meredith began to exhibit, Painters Eleven had disbanded. Both brothers have dropped the family name, Smith, and each uses his given name only, for professional reasons.