

GEORGE

Peter Bell,
Painter-in-Ordinary.

WOOD

In 1964 a nice thing happened. The Alberta Society of Artists made a gift to Memorial University of a solicited exhibition of seventeen works by its members. At a time when our Permanent Collection consisted of about half a dozen paintings only, this gesture initiated a relationship between St. John's and Calgary which continues to bring benefit to both our communities. As Curator of the Art Gallery at that time, I made it my first duty when funds permitted, to visit Calgary and in some way reciprocate this generosity. Our cultural ties have developed considerably since then, and Memorial University has exhibited the work of many artists from Alberta. While this exchange may have originated out of some human sentiment, it has thrived essentially on artistic merit. My several visits to Calgary have brought me into touch with a vigorous community of artists, one of great diversity and human involvement.

Calgary is a city of contrasts, sage and philistine living side by side. It has nurtured its own brand of mediocrity. A city having every opportunity for social growth, yet disporting an evasive loyalty for the superficial. Many cities would give their Huskie Tower for her artists!

In our aggressive age, many artists, in our little big cities especially, have gambled their integrity on the promotional magic of the commercial dealer. But it is not the function of the artist, through his work, to change anything. It is his function simply to 'be' ... and perhaps all these things will be added unto him! It was probably in Calgary this truth dawned on me. I could mention many artists there whose work moves me for its sincerity, its conviction. Artists whose work echoes and transforms their passions, whose work testifies in turn to their integrity as people. It may have been in Calgary that I first wondered whether a 'bad' man could be a 'good' artist -- a doubt I find repeatedly confirmed. (I don't, of course, know whether there is such a thing as a 'bad' man).

Movements come and movements go, erupting momentary pinnacles of excitement, spreading attenuating waves as they collapse, leaving a confusion of

FLAG SET



naked opportunists and camp followers. A few only survive. Those having a deeper vision and still holding an inner star before them. These emerge in greater stature, chastened by a fire of artistic challenge, spiritually intact. Calgary had her moment too. In the late 50's and early 60's an astonishingly diverse artistic community realized a kind of tribal coherence. Several whose work became known then have since dimmed individually, leaving an influence behind. Others have grown in the shadow of that moment, illuminating in their own peculiar way the darkness around them. Some -- and it seems to me Calgary enjoys more than a normal share of them -- have attained an almost priestly identity with their work.

George Wood is one of them.

Initially I met George Wood as Curator of the Art Gallery of the Alberta College of Art, but he is better known to me as a painter and a person. They are, of course, essentially the same.

Contemporary artists are quite usually articulate about their work -- some because they understand what they are doing, others because they are doing what they understand. But while many blather about their work to a point where one wonders why they do it all, George Wood seems always to have known how far to talk about something whose motivation lies in the spirit. And it is with aspects of the spirit that he is concerned. I have no idea whether he admits to any formal religious dogma, but he is a deeply religious person. His abundant poetry testifies also to this. His awareness of his totality, his unquestioning wonder, and his personal dedication as justification of his being.

When it comes to talking about his paintings, George Wood might prefer to leave it to the works themselves. They talk. I remember an exhibition of his paintings we exhibited some four or five years ago, shortly after the opening of the art gallery in the Arts & Culture Centre. We were unpacking them when one of the Commissionaires walked in. After a puzzled scrutiny he asked "You're

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not going to hang those, are you?" Two weeks later I met the same Commissionaire in the gallery. "I know," he said, "I've been looking at them pictures and if I had the money I wouldn't mind buying myself!"

Like most good paintings they are self-portraits. The past, with loved objects and associations, remembered in dream-like exuberance. Very conscious dreams with the actuality of space zealously respected as though to bind the moment of experience. Dream-like, it evaporate. But within the discipline a comprehensible geometry, objects and the environment around them are transformed in a fantastic colour, capturing the viewer in a new awareness of them.

I have seen only a few -- the earliest -- of his works in this exhibition. As a whole they represent a new direction for George Wood. The flag, with its inevitable connotations, is a violent, the obtrusive and insubordinate. It lacks intimacy. George Wood's paintings are -- for all their subtlety intimate. It is an aggressive symbol, blinkered, arrogant, seemingly incompatible with the humanity of his paintings. But, as I have said, I saw only the first of the series. There is possible something about the flag my own prejudices hide me from. Perhaps through its transformation in a work of art cruelty may be exorcised. At least for the artist.

George Wood's paintings may have much in common with the work of other artists. Well known names suggest themselves, especially some French painters early in this century. But this is not to say any influence derives from them. While it may tempt the viewer to make comparisons, it would be an error to mistake similarities for influences. All too often major influences in a painter's work come from the most improbable source. George Wood's paintings, with their exuberant colour and texture, are tremendously sensual. Whatever their inner significance for the artist, they offer a visual experience for the viewer. Listen to them, and the song they sing echo for you.

1.
"I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come
back...the feeling that I could last forever...outlast the sea...
the earth and all men."
Joseph Conrad

What started to be a poem

about nightfall,

Appears to be no poem at all

by daybreak.

Take Heart

Sickman Freud

Hanging private hang-ups

On a whole human race

Placed heaven in question

But provided an undeniable hell.

2.

"The more absolute death seems, the more authentic life becomes."

John Fowles

