

*Identity Crisis: The Nude in 1930s Modern Canadian Art*

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## ABSTRACT

In their unwillingness to fully assimilate or relate the human body to its surroundings, many artists who painted nudes in the 1930s in Canada found their works the subject of moral debate and censure. Rather than becoming the site of praise for a new Canadian sensibility in the visual arts, the nudes painted in this period would not come to be associated with a uniquely Canadian artistic practice, and the genre failed to assume a pivotal place within the canon of Canadian art history. Viewers could not imagine themselves as heroic pioneers in front of a painting like Lilius Torrance Newton's *Nude* (1933), or could they see anything distinctly modern and revolutionary in its execution that would allow them to hold up such an image as an example of an inherently Canadian art. The nude in Canada did not incite the admiration of an art-going public who instead came to associate a national art movement with the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven. Censored, debated, praised, and criticized, the nude genre ultimately failed to have the same impact as landscape painting on the visual arts in Canada.

Landscape painting was able to mediate the relationship between the natural world and its human inhabitants in a way not offered by the nude or figurative painting. In 1916, *Saturday Night* magazine published an article jocularly recounting how the typical Canadian artist was a "husky beggar" who pulled on a pair of Strathcona boots and set off into the woods with a rifle, a paddle, and enough baked beans for three months. Such assertions would lead a critic like Barker Fairley to complain later that, "[N]ot one Canadian in a hundred goes into an art gallery looking for anything but hills and trees and lakes and clouds and flowers and fruit." Ultimately, the nude was not able to provide a collective viewing position that could embody a national sentiment. It was unable to

penetrate the Canadian consciousness in a way that would win it a place alongside the rolling topography and pristine lakes of the Group of Seven.

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## INTRODUCTION

To extend the creative faculty beyond the professional meaning of art and to make of it a more common language of expression is also part of [the Canadian Group of Painters] aim. Hitherto it has been a landscape art, typical of all new movements, but here and there figures and portraits have been slowly added to the subject matter, strengthening and occupying the background of the landscape. Here also more modern ideas of technique and subject have been brought into the scope of Canadian painting, keeping the art in the vanguard of our forward stride as a nation.

-“Foreword,” Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Canadian Group of Painters, 1933<sup>1</sup>

Nearly two metres tall, the figure in Lilius Torrance Newton’s *Nude* (1933, fig.1) is startlingly larger than life. *Nude* is an arresting painting that reinterprets the genre using modernist techniques, combining Newton’s talents as a portraitist with the tradition of the nude figure study to produce one of the most compelling works painted in Canada in the 1930s. The painting depicts a Russian model posing, her head slightly tilted, one hand resting firmly on her hip, the other crossed over her chest and resting on her left shoulder. She stands poised with confidence in modern green sandals, her wavy hair in a fashionable short-cropped cut, and superimposed onto the representation of a painted portrait on an easel. The viewer is positioned at a remove from the scene, just slightly below the model who is portrayed in the artist’s studio. The woman’s naked form dominates the canvas, while the chair and easel behind her seem to support her body and push it towards the picture plane.

Newton is best known in Canada as a portrait painter and while her *Nude*, referred to in some of the scholarship as a Russian model or dancer, remains unnamed, it fits with the artist’s oeuvre as a painter of likenesses, be they family, friends, or distinguished

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<sup>1</sup> “Foreword,” Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by [the] Canadian Group of Painters (Toronto: Canadian Group of Painters, 1933), unpaginated, quoted in Anna Hudson, “Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950,” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1997).

figures from Canada's past. The figure's nudity (or nakedness if the green sandals are taken into account) and anonymity rendered as cool smooth flesh is not unlike the scores of nudes from art history: models whose robes are discarded as they pose in the artist's studio.<sup>2</sup> *Nude* is unquestionably connected to the lineage of such paintings as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538, fig. 2), Boucher's *Triumph of Venus* (1740, fig. 3), Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855, fig. 4), Ingres's *Source* (1856, fig. 5) and Manet's *Olympia* (1863, fig. 6). However, elements in the painting confound a simplistic interpretation of its status as mere academic nude. Newton, like many of her contemporaries, explored the relationship of figure and landscape by placing artistic genres in dialogues. With *Nude*, she reinterprets the tradition to produce a painting that oscillates between portraiture and studio nude, while her choice of model, setting, and formal technique offer a nude that is neither radically avant-garde nor one that clearly adheres to tradition.

The awkward twist of the Russian model's torso and her rigid and firm *contrapposto* stance call up the pose of a Praxiteles sculpture or the model in Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*. The composition of the portrait clamped onto the easel behind the woman's head and shoulders, the realism of her features – those carefully manicured eyebrows, painted lips and polished nails—suggest a real woman who, if Newton had chosen to represent her clothed rather than naked, could very well be someone of social significance, a distinguished figure in her fashionable green shoes and bobbed haircut. Newton has executed a decidedly complex painting here. However, critics at the time gave

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<sup>2</sup> A number of artworks come to mind that represent a nude woman or model who has undressed in the artist's studio, including Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855), Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), Gustave Caillebotte's *Nude on a Couch* (c.1880), or Edward Vuillard's *A Nude in the Studio* (c.1909-11), to name only a few.

short shrift to the work's visual complexities and focused instead on the woman's nakedness and the propriety of the nude.

Newton painted only one nude during her career,<sup>3</sup> while other artists such as Prudence Heward and Edwin Holgate executed many more. Curator Michèle Grandbois recently found that out of 150 exhibitions held between 1918 and 1939, there was at least one nude in each show, a figure that contradicts the established perception that the nude was rarely viewed by the Canadian public.<sup>4</sup> As both a means of exploring aesthetic technique and of continuing to investigate the relationship of the figure in landscape and the artistic ability of artists, the nude had been and remained foundational to the emergence and institutionalization of the visual arts in Canada. That the nude played an important role in the careers of artists and in the first art exhibitions held in Canada has been largely obscured by the well-known and by now oft-told story of how the Group of Seven set about unmaking and remaking “the prevailing conventions of landscape painting for the purpose of producing a national art,” as John O’Brian and Peter White have recently observed.<sup>5</sup> The Group’s vision of a palpably Canadian art and identity inseparable from the country’s geography continues to hold sway over the Canadian cultural lexicon and identity today: one need look no further than the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver or the controversial construction of an artificial lake as part of the G20 summit in Toronto in June 2010. The marketing of the Olympics, for example, continued to

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<sup>3</sup> Newton did produce other nudes in sketches and pastels. For example, The National Gallery of Canada owns a pastel by Newton entitled *Nude Figure* (1923). This extant sketch suggests that she may have produced other nude studies.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Hudson, “Disarming Conventions of Nudity in Canadian Art,” in *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2009), 80.

<sup>5</sup> John O’Brian and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 3.

suggest Canada is a land of snow-capped peaks, pristine lakes, and untouched forest rather than a country in which four out of five Canadian live in urban centres.

Absent from the Group's masculine narrative that bound Canadian identity to the exploration and conquest of a so-called empty land devoid of inhabitants is any semblance of the human figure. Figurative painting—and the nude in particular—has been excluded from the discursive production of a definition of modern Canadian art. This marginalization of figurative painting and the nude has been aided and abetted by art historians whose continued re-evaluation of the Group of Seven's artistic authority has been at the expense of any serious consideration of the role that the nude and figurative painting played in modern Canada. The nude, unlike landscape painting, could not be employed by artists to represent a distinctly Canadian art movement. The nude genre could not provide the identificatory possibilities offered by landscape painting: that is the masculine, rugged pioneer espoused by the Group of Seven's artworks could not be invoked by the nudes painted during the same period.

Michèle Grandbois, Anna Hudson and Esther Trépanier's recent exhibition catalogue, *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950*, provides some valuable points of connection between the nude's relationship to photography, modern dance and sculpture and is a welcome contribution to an understanding of the nude in Canada. My study aims to build on Grandbois, Hudson, and Trépanier's long overdue examination of the role of the human figure in Canadian art by focusing on the reasons for the disenfranchisement of the nude in Canada. Grandbois asserts "even as Canadian art was asserting its modernity, it refused to identify with the nude. The timelessness and universality of the nude did not accord with the nationalist ideology defended by Canada's

modern landscapists—unless it was part of the landscape.”<sup>6</sup> However, I would argue that while artists such as Edwin Holgate received praise from some critics who viewed his paintings as more successful in their integration of the nude into her natural surroundings, others who attempted a similar integration of figure and background were met with censorship and controversy. Brooker’s *Figures in Landscape* (1931, fig.7), for example, attempts a similar convergence of nude bodies and landscape to Holgate’s nudes, but Brooker’s painting was the subject of moral censure and criticism. Furthermore, even in a painting such as Holgate’s *Nude in the Open* (1930, fig. 8), where the nude appears at first glance to echo the Group of Seven in the landscape behind it, a closer examination reveals a discord between the elements in the painting and points to the inability of the genre to express the aims of Canadian modern artists during the interwar period. The nude failed precisely because it could not participate in the nationalizing project espoused by the Group of Seven and their supporters. Paintings such as *Figures in Landscape* and *Nude in the Open* were unable to connect with the masculine identity fundamentally connected to Canadian landscape painting. This failure also extends to those nudes depicted in landscape: Brooker’s *Figures in Landscape* was removed from the walls of the Toronto Art Gallery by Arthur Lismer for fear that “the presence of the picture might be detrimental to children who might view it.”<sup>7</sup> The nude, with its potential to be either traditional or transgressive, became a locus for conflicting opinions about Canada’s modernity.

Artists painting nudes in Canada during the interwar period did not offer idealized images of recumbent beauties in imaginative scenery. Instead, many of the nudes painted

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<sup>6</sup> Michèle Grandbois, “The Challenge of the Nude,” in *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2009), 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> “‘Nudes in Landscape’ Causes Art Dispute,” *Toronto Daily Star*, March 7, 1931, 58.

during the 1930s underscore the interrelationship between artist, model and spectator which had historically been obscured by the understanding that the woman represented in a nude painting by Giorgione or Boucher was not a real woman but an unthreatening image of an idealized woman available for the gaze of the male viewer. Courbet and Manet first broke down the safe distance between the idealized female form and the modern spectator; and Canadian artists in the early twentieth century continued to present de-idealized, realistic women in studio poses and realistic environments that call attention to the very act of the nude's production. Following Harry Berger's reinterpretation of the art of portraiture, my own study argues that "the fiction of the pose"<sup>8</sup> at work in the nudes painted in Canada did not embody ideals with which a newly forming art-going public could identify. The performances involved and the identities at work in the production of the nude in Canada were such that the genre could not, and did not, capture a Canadian public searching for its own sense of national identity.

What is striking about the nudes painted in the 1930's in Canada is their sheer diversity. The broad assortment of visual strategies employed by artists is symptomatic of the genre's failure at this time. The nude was unable to provide a viewing position that could be occupied collectively: a viewing position that Canadians did find in front of the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven. As a result of the nude's failure to cohere in the early twentieth century, it did not establish an esteemed position in Canadian modern art. In Prudence Heward's *Girl Under a Tree* (1931, fig. 9) we see the horizontal nude in landscape which looked to one critic like "a Bouguereau nude against Cezanne-esque

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<sup>8</sup> See both Harry Berger, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000) and Harry Berger, "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," *Representations* No. 46 (Spring, 1994): 87-120.

background.”<sup>9</sup> There are Pegi Nicol MacLeod’s nudes with flowers such as her *Descent of Lilies* (1935, fig. 10) and *Torso and Plants* (c. 1935, fig. 11); Bertram Brooker’s more modern and realistic nudes like his *Seated Figure* (1935, fig. 12); Kathleen Munn’s cubist nudes such as *The Dance* (1923, fig. 13); Liliias Torrance Newton’s posed studio nude of 1933; and Edwin Holgate’s nudes in more Group of Seven-like landscapes like *Nude in the Open*. These artists deployed the nude as a means through which to stage their artistic abilities and to set themselves apart from their predecessors, including Canadian artists like William Brymner (1855-1925) and Randolph Hewton (1888-1960). It is clear that artists like Brooker, Newton, and Holgate were interested in finding ways to explore the relationship between landscape and the body. However their efforts to do so failed to cohere during the interwar period in Canada. The nude in this period was also unsuccessful because it did not adhere to the conventions of the genre, nor was it truly modern or avant-garde in its reinterpretation of tradition in Canada. Newton, Brooker and MacLeod did not merely repeat images already seen in art history: the idealized woman lying asleep in a landscape as in Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* (1508-1510, fig. 14); the idealized Odalisques of Ingres; the soft, idealized curves of a recumbent Venus, be it that by Titian c.1555 or by Boucher in 1740. Nor was the intervention of Canadian artists into the genre as radically modern as that of Manet’s *Olympia*, his *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863, fig. 15) or Courbet’s *Source* (1868, fig. 16). Courbet and Manet had both already broken with the past in their self-reflexive deployment of the genre in such a way as to call into question the idealized representation of the nude female body and of the relationship of art and representation to capitalist modernity. Like their French predecessors, many Canadian

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<sup>9</sup> John Lyman, “Journal,” vol. II, entry for 28 April 1932, in the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, Montreal.

artists, in foregrounding representational practice, were met with criticism and censorship. Both Brooker and Newton had their nude paintings removed from exhibitions, while polemics about the genre's propriety had been, and continued to be, widely debated in newspapers and magazines across the country.<sup>10</sup> The nudes painted by MacLeod, Heward, Holgate, Brooker and Newton underscore the relationship between artist and model. By painting real, modern women, these artists presented artworks that broke with tradition, yet many of the modern aspects of the nude were unpalatable to the Canadian public at the time of their exhibition.

In 1926, journalist F.B. Housser wrote of a new, distinctly Canadian movement in painting which demanded "a new type of artist; one who divests himself of the velvet coat and flowing tie of his caste, puts on the outfit of the bushwhacker and prospector; closes with his environment; paddles, portages and makes camp; sleeps in the out-of-doors under the stars; [and] climbs mountains with his sketch box on his back."<sup>11</sup> At the time of his writing, Housser's vivid description of this ideal artist/pioneer was embodied by members of the Group of Seven. Following the First World War the desire to continue the construction of a Canadian national identity reached new heights. The achievements of Canadians during World War I intensified political efforts to distance Canada from British authority. With the 1931 Statute of Westminster, this distinction was codified and

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<sup>10</sup> A great deal of debate arose, for example, around the exhibition of three nude paintings at the 1927 Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. There were many nude paintings at the CNE, however John Wentworth Russell's *A Modern Fantasy*, George C. Drinkwater's *Paolo and Francesca*, and Rosalie Emslie's *Comfort* were singled out and, as historian Jane Nicholas notes, "sparked a contentious debate carried out in newspaper columns and over 100 letters to the editor. Although the majority of the coverage was in Toronto newspapers like the *Evening Telegram*, *Toronto Daily Star*, *Globe*, and *Toronto Telegram*, articles and editorials also appeared in *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Forum*, and *Hush* as well as regional papers like the *Kitchener Record*, *Hamilton Spectator*, and *Vancouver Sun*." Jane Nicholas "A figure of a nude woman': Art, Popular Culture, and Modernity at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1927," *Social History* Vol. 41, No. 82 (2008): 314.

<sup>11</sup> F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement, The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1926), 15.

Canadians increasingly came to see themselves as a unique country separate from both its colonial mother country and its neighbour to the south. The Group of Seven and their supporters were foundational in the establishment of a Canadian identity connected with the land and virile adventure explorers. Viewers found reaffirmation of an identity connected with the landscape in the paintings like Tom Thomson's *Jack Pine* (1916-17, fig. 17) or Lawren Harris' *Maligne Lake, Jasper Park* (1924, fig. 18). In the process, the art-viewing public of the 1920s and '30s came under cultural pressure to apprehend Canadian art as primarily masculine or, to borrow Kaja Silverman's words, as coming from a "preassigned viewing position" that was masculine and heroic.<sup>12</sup> The Group held their first exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1920. The Group was comprised initially of seven artists: Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frederick Varley, Frank Johnston, Franklin Carmichael and A.Y. Jackson. Tom Thomson, who had died in 1917, became synonymous with the Group, and the seven artists later became ten with the additions of A.J. Casson, Edwin Holgate, and L.L. FitzGerald. John O'Brian and Peter White's recent anthology *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*<sup>13</sup> has done a great deal to re-examine the Group of Seven's nationalizing project. Despite the continued reappraisal of the Group's history in Canada, there remains a need for more critical examinations of the Group that address the male dominance of the Group and their efforts to posit a collective Canadian identity associated with their austere, sanitized modernist landscapes.

The Group's images of vast, empty wilderness without human inhabitants allowed viewers to place themselves in the position of the male artist, to identify with J.E.H.

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<sup>12</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> John O'Brian and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill-University Press, 2009).

MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson, or the Group's main inspirational figure, Tom Thomson. The best-known Group of Seven paintings are those that do not contain any hint of humanity or its traces. In order to represent an untamed yet conquerable land that integrated viewers' intellect with their surroundings, the Group of Seven framed the northern Ontario environment as devoid of habitation despite the centuries-long presence of the Aboriginal peoples of the area. As art historian Brenda Lafleur notes, the Group of Seven asserted themselves as pioneers of the 'real' Canadian landscape while their "empty landscape tradition" was intimately tied to the male 'bush-whacking' artist who would 'capture' that landscape in his art.<sup>14</sup> Paintings of empty, supposedly untouched wilderness allowed viewers to imagine themselves venturing courageously into the wild to colonize and settle the represented land. As Eva Mackey summarizes, "the paintings of the Group embodied the dreamwork of settler nationalism in Canada."<sup>15</sup> The power of this dreamwork would persist decades after the Group's dissolution in 1931. As the genre of landscape painting came to stand in for Canadian art, the nude, by contrast, became a locus for social anxieties around shifting gender roles and sexuality.

There is of course a long history of the nude in landscape. In Albrecht Dürer's 1525 print *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Woman* (fig. 19) we can see the artist grappling with the integration of the nude female body and the surrounding landscape onto a two-dimensional surface. Likewise, Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* shows the tradition of representing an idealized beauty and painting as an ideal. The nude has been deployed by artists and examined by scholars for centuries and the genre's meaning

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<sup>14</sup> Brenda Lafleur, "'Resting' in History: Translating the Work of Jin-Me Yoon," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996): 221.

<sup>15</sup> Eva Mackey, "Death by Landscape: Race, Nature and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology," *Canadian Woman Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2000): 127.

and status have shifted as both social and artistic conventions have changed. Where historically the nude had been intimately connected with the discursive production of the artist's and the spectator's masculinity by offering a reification of masculine desire, in 1930s Canada it proved to be the site of contentious debate and moralizing censure. The nudes by Heward, Newton, Brooker and Holgate capture the genre in a moment of crisis. The removal of nude paintings from numerous galleries and exhibitions foreshadows the nude genre's ultimate failure as a modality through which artists were able to work out a range of overlapping relationships, such as that between figure and ground, and the threat it posed to the social order.

My interest in the nude in Canada was first ignited by Michael Ostroff's examination of the life and work of Pegi Nicol MacLeod in the documentary film *Something Dancing About Her*<sup>16</sup> and Laura Brandon's book *Pegi By Herself*<sup>17</sup> as well as my subsequent research on Liliis Torrance Newton and Prudence Heward. Brandon's projects have done much to build and retrieve an archive on MacLeod; however their focus is primarily biographical rather than art historical. I hope that my examination of nudes by MacLeod, Heward, and Newton will invite further scholarship on the genre as well as encourage further research on these women artists. Learning of these women artists' striking nude paintings led me to seek out other nude paintings created by their contemporaries: such as Lawren Harris, Bertram Brooker and Jori Smith. The dearth of scholarship on MacLeod, Heward, and Newton meant that my initial study was motivated by a desire to recover for these artists a place in the canon of Canadian art history.

However, to simply add these artists to the canon would be to leave the male-dominated

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<sup>16</sup> Fiona McHugh, Michael Ostroff, and Edward Riche, *Something Dancing About Her*, DVD. Directed by Micheal Ostroff (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Laura Brandon, *Pegi By Herself* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

system of art making, as well as the conventions of the nude genre, unquestioned. I was also wary of approaching these women artists' works as being about sexual difference. This framework of analysis would have reaffirmed a well-established and outmoded view that women's art can be viewed as the expression of the artist's biography and female psychology. Rather, my thesis aims to avoid the perils of reductive readings of 'the feminine' in art history. This is not to discount that women have lived in social and historical contexts that involved unequal access to resources, dissimilar gender norms, and embodied subjectivities. I would contend, however, that gender difference is not always visible in the works of women artists, as is the case with the nudes under examination here.

My study is not concerned with what would constitute a "feminine" or "masculine" style or mode of expression. There are no pictorial inscriptions of gender difference in the nudes painted by Heward, Brooker or MacLeod, and there is nothing to suggest that artists like MacLeod or Newton viewed gender as a decisive facet of their artistic production. My examination of the production of the nude in the early twentieth century in Canada aims to articulate an analysis of the nude that is flexible and will allow for future studies of the genre in Canada as well as for further theorization of the genre historically.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the nude's marginal status in Canadian art history, one only need consider the paucity of literature on the subject. While the nude in Europe has been the subject of both theoretical and historical studies, there exists to date no comprehensive or scholarly text on the Canadian nude. There are no nudes painted in Canada included within the 480 pages of Brian Foss, Sandra Paikowsky and Anne Whitelaw's 2010 volume, *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*. Paikowsky's essay in the book, "Modernist Representational Painting Before 1950," includes sub-headings such as "The Landscape," "The Self-Portrait," "The Still Life," and "The Figure." However she does not include a heading for the nude nor does her section entitled "The Figure" include any discussion of the genre in Canada over the past century.<sup>18</sup> An understanding of the genre's history in Canada can only be reached by consulting the two exhibition catalogues on the subject. Until the 2009 catalogue by Michèle Grandbois, Anna Hudson and Esther Trépanier<sup>19</sup> there had been only one other exhibition catalogue that took the nude as its point of departure: Jerrold Morris's *The Nude in Canadian Painting* from 1972. Grandbois and Hudson's catalogue does much to expand upon Morris's brief examination of a few select nudes painted in Canada prior to the 1970s. However, *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950*, while long-overdue in its examination of the nude in Canada, is intended for a popular audience and does not critically examine the theoretical status of the nude as a genre within Canadian art history. While the exhibition echoes critiques of

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Foss, Sandra Paikowsky, and Anne Whitelaw, eds., *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century* (Don Mills, ON: University of Oxford Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> A catalogue of the same title accompanied the exhibition curated by Grandbois and Hudson: Michèle Grandbois, Anna Hudson, and Esther Trépanier, eds., *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2009).

the Group of Seven's artistic authority within the canon, little space within the catalogue is devoted to an explication of the progression of the genre's theorization.

It is conventional, in discussions of the nude, to cite Kenneth Clark's much-criticized *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, published in 1953, in which he posits the male body as the representative of all humans, the ideal human form, and the original nude. The female nude, according to Clark, is never wholly able to escape her biological essentialism and as such the Greeks did not idealize the female nude body in the same way we do today. This idealization would come much later during the Italian Renaissance.

Many feminist art historians, including Marcia Pointon<sup>20</sup> and Lynda Nead,<sup>21</sup> have taken Clark to task for his obvious distaste of the biological female form. According to Pointon, in order to resolve his issue with the naked female body Clark establishes the naked/nude dichotomy by which the naked, real corporeal subject is reviled, while the nude projects into the mind an image "not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed."<sup>22</sup> Nead rightly criticizes Clark for his use of the category "the naked" to signify the "unformed, corporeal matter" of the female body which is only transformed into a nude through an imposed "unity and constraint, the regulated economy of art."<sup>23</sup> According to Clark, it is through the exercise of the rational, elevated male mind that the naked female form is transformed from raw material into aesthetic ideal, a contention which reifies the problematic and now familiar philosophical binary of mind/body whereby the mind, characterized as male, is favoured over the body, associated with the female.

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<sup>20</sup> Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830-1908*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Nead, *The Female Nude*, 14.

Some twenty years after Clark's study, John Berger attempted to redress Clark's omission of the power relations that inform the deployment of the nude throughout history in his book *The Ways of Seeing*.<sup>24</sup> However, Berger does little to remedy the patriarchal underpinnings of Clark's investigation. Berger's attempt to analyze the role of class and gender in the nudes painted in European art sees him make moralizing generalizations and compares wholly disparate examples of nineteenth-century academic nude painting with a photograph of a naked woman in a pornographic magazine without attending to the numerous differences between the two images. Pointon's endeavour to correct some of the shortcomings of Clark and Berger is welcome, but she and Lynda Nead both go too far in dismissing the nude altogether as a visual category and as a rhetorical strategy. Lynda Nead, in *The Female Nude: Art and Obscenity*, suggests that the only positive representations of the female form can be those produced by women.

Nead's account of how the art historical category of the nude, which prior to the nineteenth century had been ungendered and came to signify a female subject produced by a male artist for a male audience, is firmly situated in the 1980s and 1990s "Sex War" debates about pornography and discrimination against women.<sup>25</sup> In critiquing Clark and Berger and building on T.J. Clark's Marxist and psychoanalytic reading of Manet's *Olympia* in his book *The Painting of Modern Life*, Nead posits a reading of the nude genre as one used throughout history as "the internal structural link that holds art and obscenity and an entire system of meaning together;" according to Nead, it has been the

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<sup>24</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

<sup>25</sup> These debates were made famous by scholars and activists such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon on the anti-pornography side and Gayle Rubin, Susie Bright, and Carole Vance on the pro-sex side of the debates.

“containment and regulation of the female sexual body.”<sup>26</sup> For T.J. Clark the nude functioned prior to the nineteenth century as a means to reconcile the categories of propriety and pleasure; while Nead goes further, arguing that the nude came to reconcile this conflict by operating as a locus of containment and repression of gender and sexuality.

Nead’s argument that pornography plays an important role in the production and maintenance of the boundaries between high and low art is a welcome theorization of the genre. However, her analysis does not attend to the ways in which the nude is historically situated. Furthermore, Nead’s generalizations about the complex relationship between artist and observer neglect the question of how the nude and obscenity operate in historically specific moments to constitute gendered subjects. Lacking an adequate long-term historical perspective on the nude, Nead does not attend to the ways in which the genre shifts dramatically after Manet’s intervention into its production in the late nineteenth century. Her reliance on psychoanalysis also poses a problem, as psychoanalytic theory can run the risk of dehistoricizing images<sup>27</sup> while reinforcing the now overly familiar theorization of the male gaze as the primary constituting factor in the production of female representations.<sup>28</sup> For Nead, “the aestheticization and sanitization of the female body within patriarchal culture” which lies at the heart of the high art nude went unchallenged until the advent of feminist art in the 1970s. This does not account for the ways that many artists, including women, intervened in the genre prior to this period. It is my contention that artists (in Canada for example), painted nudes that were highly

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<sup>26</sup> Nead, *The Female Nude*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Shaw, “Exchange and Excess: The Production and Effects of the Female Nude in Modern Visual Culture,” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2004), 14.

<sup>28</sup> The most notable text on the subject of the male gaze and female subjectivity is Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Brandy (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 746-757.

self-aware of the interrelationship between artist, viewer, and model and that consequently both challenge the tropes of the genre as well as the viewing public.

My study offers an historicized reading of the nude in 1930s Canada. By not using gender as my theoretical focal point, I provide an alternative way of understanding the category of the nude as a visual tool connected to the process of subjectivation. As an art historical genre, the nude female body is a modality through which social, economic, and cultural relations are mediated, while nude images themselves fold back and inform these same relations. When sexual difference is not thematized in the images under discussion, it is problematic to analyze them using psychoanalytic or feminist theory which posits an essentialized difference as foundational to representation and spectatorship. Because both men and women were painting nudes in various artistic mediums and with various technical strategies in the early twentieth century in Canada, the view that the nude operated solely as a locus for masculine viewing and representational production no longer holds sway.

One of the problems of a psychoanalytic approach is that it often reifies patriarchal norms rather than offering a theorization for creative change or affirmative potentiality. The view that men are the bearers of the gaze and that the eroticized object of the gaze, the powerless Other, is female, is complicated when the object of representation—here, the nude female—is created by a female artist. Moreover, to posit a wholly psychoanalytic reading of the nude paintings produced in modern Canada is to once again to view paintings like Newton's *Nude* (and the nude women represented therein) as objects without agency and without consideration of the complicated interrelationship of artist, model (or real woman represented), and spectator. That there is nothing visually

“masculine” about Brooker’s *Seated Figure*, nor “feminine” about Heward’s *Girl Under a Tree* further problematizes the claims of psychoanalysis. To argue that women artists were socialized by a patriarchal culture to produce representations of nude women in line with their male peers is to denigrate the accomplishments of women artists like Jori Smith, Heward, Newton or Marion Scott. Psychoanalysis can offer a useful way of thinking about viewers identifying with the nude, however it does not provide an entirely satisfactory means of reading the nude in Canada during the interwar period.<sup>29</sup> My contention is that the nude in Canada was unable to offer identificatory fulfilment because it was unable to offer the collective identification necessary for the constitution of a national identity.

Given the scope of my thesis, I am less concerned with articulating a generalized theory of how the female nude came to be not just a subject but *the* subject and even the paradigm of Western art after the mid-1850s. Rather, I will examine a selection of nude paintings by Canadian artists from the interwar period to argue for the ways in which performativity, identity, and subjectivity are constituted and embodied by the nude genre during a decade which has been characterized by art historian Charles Hill as being without “a definite image in the history of Canadian art.”<sup>30</sup> The artworks I have chosen are intended to provide examples of the kind of work produced during this period and which exemplify the treatment of the human figure by a variety of artists who held a mutual interest in reinterpreting the genre for the exercise of their own artistic concerns. The

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<sup>29</sup> Berger, for example, uses Lacan’s theorization of the alienating ego ideal to discuss the ways in which orthopsychic norms were visualized and communicated in portraiture during the early modern period. Following Lacan, Berger writes that embodiments of the gaze are “the visual or scopic dimension of the dominant discourses by which a culture constructs its subjects to imagine and represent themselves, to give themselves to be seen, and to model themselves on the exemplary or orthopsychic norms of the group: the gaze “circumscribes us” and constitutes us “as beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world.” Psychoanalysis then, offers a means of understanding the identificatory possibilities of the nude and the ways in which it may, or may not, circumscribe viewers and visualize orthopsychic norms of identification. Harry Berger, “Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture,” 94.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 13-14.

nudes I have selected are by both men and women and were painted in Ontario and Quebec. The works illustrate the diversity of visual strategies used by artists in the 1930s and demonstrate the adoption of modernist pictorial techniques—whether strong Cézanne-esque brushstrokes or large blocks of vibrant colour reminiscent of Matisse. In attending to the absence of scholarship on the nude in Canada, my study argues that nude figurative painting could not participate in the nationalization of wilderness landscape promoted by the Group of Seven, for it could not offer the same identificatory fulfilment as that of a Canadian landscape painting produced by masculine “bushwhackers.” In Canada, artists built on the modern Realist nudes of Manet and Courbet in their exploration of the relationship of genres to one another and of artist, model and spectator. The nude also allowed artists to connect themselves to academic tradition in order to demonstrate their erudition, as Heward does in her evocation of the classic sleeping Venus pose in her *Girl Under a Tree*. The genre would fail to attract the widespread admiration of a Canadian public because it was neither wholly transgressive, nor did it fully adhere to the tradition of the nude.

## METHODOLOGY

Viewing the nude as a genre concerned with containment and the idealization of the female form has occluded the role of the very real and corporeal woman used as sitter in many nude representations throughout art history. As noted earlier, Harry Berger's analysis of early modern portraiture in *Fictions of the Pose*, in which the author argues that "portraits can be viewed as imitations of likenesses, not of individuals only but also of their acts of posing,"<sup>31</sup> informs my own investigation of the nude in modern Canadian art. Berger contends that portraits are theatrical stagings, not of individual persons, but of subjects in the act of posing. Instead of reading the faces of sitters in portraits as indexes of their mind or character, they should be seen as a "as an effect and representation—solely of the sitter's and painter's performance in the act of portrayal."<sup>32</sup> Placing his theorization within C.S. Peirce's semiotic system of the icon, the symbol, and the index, Berger states that the person represented in a portrait is "a sign that denotes its referent by resemblance; the referent it denotes is not simply a person but a person in the act of posing...a portrait [i]s a sign that denotes by resemblance, a sign whose content purports to refer to some possible state of the world that corresponds to it but is absent from it."<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, "the basic premise behind the fiction of the pose is that we can't assume the activity of posing and painting to have transpired exactly in the way it is represented...we assume in short, that the portrait is lying—is encouraging the referential fallacy—and that its claims to iconicity and indexicality are fictitious."<sup>34</sup> In Newton's nude painting, the inclusion of a portrait behind the nude woman, coupled with the

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<sup>31</sup> Berger, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Berger, "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," 89.

<sup>33</sup> Berger, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

woman's own fictive pose, remind the viewer that the model and the artist were engaged in a kind of performance in Newton's studio.

Prior to the modernist shift in representations of the nude, which can be attributed to Courbet and Manet in the nineteenth century, artists sought to idealize the female form in the repetition of similar pictorial conventions that obscured any indication that the woman represented was in fact a real woman. Modern artists in Canada explored the hermeneutic possibilities of the genre in their use of various visual strategies to transform models, sitters, and themselves (in the case of nude self-portraits) into living subjects who seem in many instances to resist or call attention to the traditional objectivity of the nude. For example, the realism of the model in Newton's *Nude* appears as an agential subject with her confident pose and stylish haircut; she is self-aware and involved in the process of her own objectification. Furthermore, the composition, use of colour, modern allusions, and the reference to portraiture in the painting behind the woman in *Nude* all operate to emphasize the fiction of the pose, the performance between artist, model, and spectator.

The fiction of the pose, by being that—a fiction of a woman undressed in a room or in a landscape—allows the viewer to move into the position of the artist, a move that cannot be done collectively. Thus the nude could not stand for something collective in the same way as landscape painting did. Landscape and the experience of being outdoors can be shared collectively, while the nude did not allow for a similar collective response. Unlike the landscapes of the Group of Seven, the nude, whether deployed in order to explore the convergence of landscape and figural painting by Edwin Holgate or in a self-aware nude portrait like MacLeod's *Descent of Lilies*, did not have a significant impact on Canadian national and cultural identity. In varying degrees, artists like Holgate, Newton

and Brooker drew attention to the act of portrayal, the fiction of the pose and the nude as a representational device at a time when Canadians were navigating deep economic, social, and cultural changes in the aftermath of the Great War and the advent of the Depression. Canadian artists struggled to express their humanitarian concerns and social consciousness as well as their own sense of the importance of artistic culture to the nation. Such endeavours led to the creation of artist communities and associations in an effort to achieve broader recognition and respect from a Canadian public increasingly concerned with Canadian sovereignty and identity. Just as Canada's role in international affairs—military and economic—was debated, artists attempted to redefine what a distinctly Canadian art might look like.

Writers and art critics in the 1930s called for a move away from landscape painting, away from “pictures of rocks and stones,”<sup>35</sup> and towards depictions of Canadian humanity. According to Barker Fairley, landscape painting had progressed creatively to encapsulate a national sentiment, while paintings of humanity had not developed from the formal academic strictures of the Group of Seven's forebears a generation ago.<sup>36</sup> As Fairley writes, landscape painting “has prevailed for twenty years—ever since Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven—and has entrenched itself deeply in the common mind, making the Canadian artist inclined to be academic in proportion as he approaches the human, and creative in proportion as he avoids it.”<sup>37</sup> Discussions about the advancement of modern art in Canada—thematic, stylistic, as well as its social and cultural status—

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<sup>35</sup> Barker Fairley, “Canadian Art: Man vs. Landscape,” *Canadian Forum*, Vol. 19, No. 227 (Dec. 1939): 284.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

continued into the 1950s and '60s.<sup>38</sup> Such debates were integral to the creation of institutions that support arts and culture in Canada, like the National Gallery and the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as for the solicitation of public financial support.

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<sup>38</sup> In 1950, the critic Graham McInnes wrote, "What perhaps does need explaining is that genre painting in Canada never developed fully as a separate and healthy strain in the broad corpus of our art, and that it degenerated much more rapidly than was the case in the United States." McInnes echoes the attitudes of others before him such as Donald W. Buchanan and Barker Fairley. Graham McInnes, "The Decline of Genre," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Autumn 1951), 10-14.

## **SOCIAL CONTEXT: THE 1930s IN CANADA**

What critics were also acknowledging in their protestation of the ubiquity of landscape painting and the entrenched connection between Canada's geography and a national art movement was the discursive production of this naturalized equation. Donald Buchanan notes in his 1938 essay "The Story of Canadian Art,"

As pioneers, the Group of Seven met with explicit opposition from the defenders of the more traditional painting. A.Y. Jackson and the others therefore took pains, both in print and in lectures and addresses, to explain what they were trying to accomplish. "Our atmosphere" said Jackson in a speech, in which he outlined the origins of the new school, "was clear and sharp, our colours bright—crude, if you will—and on top of this were four changes of scenery such as they never knew in Europe. In summer it was green, raw greens all in a tangle; in autumn it flamed with red and gold; in winter it was trapped in a blanket of dazzling snow, and in the springtime, it roared with running water and surged with life."<sup>39</sup>

In their efforts to promote an exclusively Canadian aesthetic, artists like A.Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris worked together with the support of private patrons, institutions like the National Gallery of Canada, and art critics to bind Canadian identity to a vast and empty terrain. With the help of these individuals, including Eric Brown, the first Director of the National Gallery, the Group's artworks toured the country and were included in exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Jackson and his colleagues also participated

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<sup>39</sup> Donald W. Buchanan, "The Story of Canadian Art," *Canadian Geographical Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (December 1938), 277.

in “gallery-sponsored lecture tours of Canada in an effort to bring the narrative of Canadian art to a broad public.”<sup>40</sup>

The entrenchment of the Group of Seven as Canada’s best-known and most widely recognized artists did not occur naturally, nor did it occur without controversy. The debate about the unprecedented support given to the Group was discussed in newspapers across the country, while the National Gallery felt vindicated following the praise it received from British critics following the Group of Seven’s participation in the 1924 Wembley exhibition in London.<sup>41</sup>

Integral to the establishment of the Group of Seven as the *sine qua non* of Canadian art was the Sampson-Matthews Ltd. Silkscreen project. In Joyce Zeman’s essay “Establishing the Canon: Nationhood and the National Gallery’s First Reproduction Programme of Canadian,” the author quotes Dennis Reid who writes:

A whole generation of Canadians who grew up following the Second World War learned of the Group almost entirely from reproductive silkscreen prints that seemed to hang in every school library, bank, and doctor’s waiting room in the country.<sup>42</sup>

By 1940 the Sampson-Matthews reproduction programme had placed hundreds of thousands of images in libraries, homes, classrooms, and abroad. Artists from Ontario and Quebec dominated the programme, which consisted almost exclusively of landscape

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<sup>40</sup> Jody Berland and Shelley Hornstein, ed., *Capital Culture: A Reader on Modernist Legacies, State Institutions, and the Value(s) of Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 131.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Joyce Zeman, “Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery’s First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art,” *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1995), 7. Also see Dennis Reid, *The Group of Seven: Selected Watercolours, Drawings and Prints from the Art Gallery of Ontario* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989).

paintings created by male artists prior to 1930.<sup>43</sup> However, the interwar years and the advent of the Depression began to dismantle the hold of the Group of Seven on the Canadian imagination. As Anna Hudson notes,

As the Depression deepened its grip on the economy, the search for unity in national cultural identity took a decided step towards the cause of social reform and in so doing altered the context of interpretation for the Group of Seven's unflinching optimism in humanity's ability to shape the environment according to a nationalistic ambition.<sup>44</sup>

As the writings of Buchanan and Fairley demonstrate, the separation of humanity from art and nature increasingly became the focus of critical and artistic debate. Debates about the growth and propriety of figurative painting continued into the 1930s as artists struggled to find a new way of representing a now fully autonomous and sovereign Canada.

Following Anna Hudson's contestation of Hill's remark that "While the twenties are dominated by the success of the Group of Seven and the forties by the explosive development of the Automatistes, the 1930s only raise the names of a few isolated artists,"<sup>45</sup> it is clear from the number of figurative and nude representations from this period that artists were using modernist aesthetic techniques to explore different genres—including interior genre scenes, nudes, figurative representations, portraits, as well as continuing the

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<sup>43</sup> Zemans, "Establishing the Canon," 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Hudson, "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters 1933-1950," 61.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 11. Anna Hudson's doctoral thesis "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950," aims to revise the understanding articulated by Charles Hill that the visual styles and sensibilities of the post-Group of Seven painters in Toronto identify them as a group of socially-conscious artists. According to Hudson, "[They] positioned themselves as a community of like-minded individuals engaged in an international effort to recognize the modern artist's vital role in social reconstruction and reform. A self-effacing insistence on community identity, geared to collective well-being, ultimately compromised the historical recognition of these artists." Hudson, "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters 1933-1950," 6-7.

tradition of landscape painting. Paintings of the nude female form were produced by artists as a means to demonstrate their artistic abilities and knowledge of post-Impressionist techniques and to express their awareness of “international” modern art trends. Artists such as MacLeod, Brooker, Holgate, Heward, Carl Schaefer, Marion Scott, John Lyman, Paraskeva Clark, and Charles Comfort were responding to the demands of critics such as Robert Ayre, Barker Fairly, Bertram Brooker, and Louis Muhlstock who “had been calling throughout the 1930s for more representations of the contemporary human figure.”<sup>46</sup> It would not be until 1940 that John Lyman would write the following in response to a 1940 Contemporary Arts Society exhibition held at the Art Association of Montreal entitled *Art of Our Day in Canada*:

Gone are the posters, gone the “designs” of the wilderness. Landscape has lost its quasi-monopoly as a motive of free expression; not more than a quarter of the pictures belong to this class. Forty percent of the contributors are artists who deal, though not all exclusively, with the human subject.<sup>47</sup>

Paintings such as Charles Comfort’s *Young Canadian* (1932, fig. 20), Bertram Brooker’s *Figures in a Landscape*, or Edwin Holgate’s *Lumberjack* (1924, fig. 21) answered the call for an expression of “the formal potential offered by the human physique.”<sup>48</sup> However, the turn toward figurative painting in the 1930s and 1940s did not result in immediate praise from critics. Exhibitions like *Art of Our Day* were met with mixed reviews,<sup>49</sup> revealing

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<sup>46</sup> Esther Trépanier, *Jewish Painters of Montreal: Witnesses of Their Time, 1930-1948* (Montreal: Éditions de l’Homme, 2008), 153.

<sup>47</sup> John Lyman quoted in Esther Trépanier, *Jewish Painters of Montreal*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Ayre complained that *Art in Our Day* was “not a complete round-up” of Canadian art, for it “confined itself almost entirely to Montreal and Toronto...and several of the most vital producers in even this narrow, if intensively cultivated field are not represented.” Writing in *Le Quartier Latin*, the critic Jacques de Tonnancour, stated that the exhibition was weakened by the inclusion of artists who were not members of the Contemporary Arts Society. He stated: “Here we are still unable to bring together quality

that figurative and nude painting at this time could not break the hold of the Group of Seven on the Canadian imagination, nor could it form the basis of a new movement in Canadian art.

The censorship of the nude in Canada is also symptomatic of the fact that the genre could not find the same kind of universal identification that so many Canadians felt standing in front of a landscape painting like Thomson's *The West Wind* (1916, fig. 22). Moralizing discourse about the nude in Canadian is not unique to the 1930s. The display of three nude paintings at the 1927 Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto led to a lengthy debate in newspaper editorials and letters to the editor. As historian Jane Nicholas has argued, the debates were concerned not just with the paintings themselves, but "reveal concerns about being modern and negotiating cultural change in the 1920s" as perceived shifts in popular taste, moral standards, and gender norms increasingly became the focus of social unease.<sup>50</sup> This anxiety would continue into the 1930s during which time paintings like Brooker's *Figures in Landscape* and Newton's *Nude* were removed from an Ontario Society of Artists and a Canadian Group of Painters exhibition respectively. The censure of the nude during this period speaks to its volatile place in Canadian society. As Esther Trépanier notes, "Even as Canadian art was asserting its modernity, the public, art critics, gallery directors, and private patrons refused to identify with the nude, for the genre did not offer what was coming to be expected of a truly Canadian form of

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and quantity." Charles Varley, *The Contemporary Arts Society, Montreal 1939-1948* (Edmonton: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980), 16.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas, "A figure of a nude woman," 313.

expression.”<sup>51</sup> Shifts in moral standards and gender norms simultaneously evoked anxiety and pleasure in modern Canada.

The debate, therefore, was about these deeper cultural shifts and the contested nature of becoming and being modern. The nude offered an opening for discussion that revealed and crystallized already existing concerns.<sup>52</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, a key concern was that modern popular culture from Europe and especially the United States was warping the minds of Canadian youth. New and licentious forms of popular culture had come to Canada in the forms of dime novels, jazz, movies, burlesque dancing, and beauty contests that threatened to trap youth in a debauched world. Concerned citizens complained that homes and schools were no longer the moral training ground for youth. In relation to art, these tensions and anxieties were articulated in the positions and attitudes taken towards the painted nude body. With its ability to connect with tradition or overturn stylistic conventions, the nude was a site of social and artistic debate.

The nudes produced by Canadian artists at this time did not adhere to tradition but neither did they challenge the newly established visual developments of European modernist aesthetics. Of course the nude had traditionally been an image of unreal perfection since the time of the Greeks. However the avant-garde radicalism of Manet and Courbet would change this. Their nudes brought the confrontation between reality and high art into the open, and their de-idealized nude women challenged the Salon-going public of late nineteenth century Paris. Later, modern artists like Picasso and Duchamp would alter the radicalism of Manet’s *demi-monde* by rendering the nude female form in flat, angular planes of colour. In Canada, artists like Prudence Heward would hint at such

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<sup>51</sup> Esther Trépanier, “Introduction,” in *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art 1920-1950*, Michèle Grandbois, Anna Hudson and Esther Trépanier, eds. (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2009), 11.

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas, “A figure of a nude woman,” 315.

cubist motifs in her own nudes, while maintaining a connection with the idealized tradition of the nude in allusions to Titian and Giorgione. Canadian artists painting the nude were caught in a kind of liminal state between tradition and modernity. Maintaining a link with academic tradition made their work comprehensible to an emerging Canadian art-viewing public; however, by not exploring their modernist tendencies further, Canadian artists could not be touted as groundbreaking in the same manner as their modern European predecessors. The act of portraying a real nude woman is underscored by artists like MacLeod, Heward and Holgate; and this foregrounding of the figures' nakedness rather than representing an idealized Woman, produced controversies that would only wane as the genre itself disappeared in the 1950s and '60s. No doubt the nude's disappearance was also aided and abetted by the censorship it endured in galleries and exhibitions. Newton, for example, only painted one nude and its censure may very well have discouraged her from producing any more. While Newton explores portraiture in relation to the nude, Heward, MacLeod, Holgate, and Brooker employed a diversity of visual strategies in their nudes, as the examples discussed below will demonstrate.

## LILIAS TORRANCE NEWTON

In Liliat Torrance Newton's *Nude* of 1933, the social tensions around artistic expression, sexuality, and modernity were brought to the fore. The mass-produced culture that emerged in the 1920s in Canada continued into the '30s despite the economic situation. Films grew in popularity for those who could afford to attend them, while mass-circulation magazines and records promoted new kinds of popular lifestyles. While the Canadian artistic elite weighed the merits of The Group of Seven or the Montreal School in magazines like *Canadian Forum*, some of their fellow commentators continued to argue about immorality and the impropriety of young women, a social commentary that had begun with critics like Beatrice M. Shaw. In her 1919 article, "The Age of Uninnocence" in *Saturday Night* magazine. For Shaw, the moral and physical health of the nation was directly connected to the propriety of the nation's young women.<sup>53</sup> Shaw called into question the appearance of young women, which she felt was immodest and in need of reform as a result of the continued influx of American popular magazines, literature, and films pouring into Canada. The attention devoted to women's bodies, gender norms, and popular culture would continue as more casinos and burlesque theatres opened, modern dance grew in popularity, and American dime novels and jazz music were consumed by Canada's youth. Concerns about the best way to perpetuate sexual and gender norms in line with a Victorian sense of modesty, as well as ways to prevent the Americanization of Canadian culture,<sup>54</sup> carried over into debates about the nude genre in Canada. The many polemics that circulated in print support Michel Foucault's well-known argument that policing sex—or in the case of fine art in Canada, the censorship of nude painting—does

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<sup>53</sup> Jane Nicholas, "Catching the Public Eye: The Body, Space, and Social Order in 1920s Canadian Visual Culture," (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2006), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas, "A figure of a nude woman," 319.

not in fact repress sexuality but rather creates an incitement and proliferation of discourse.<sup>55</sup> Many artists and critics, including Bertram Brooker and Donald Buchanan, came to the defence of the nude genre and attacked the prurient attitudes espoused by the moralizing right.<sup>56</sup> These attitudes contributed to the board of the Toronto Art Gallery's removal of Newton's painting from the 1933 Canadian Group of Painters exhibition. Vincent Massey, later a Governor General of Canada, felt that Newton was slighted and purchased the painting, which is now in a private collection.

Lilias Torrance Newton studied at the Art Association of Montreal with William Brymner in 1914. Following the First World War, she studied in London and later went to Paris where she exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1923, receiving *Premier Mention d'Honneur* for her painting *Denise* (1923). Newton returned to Canada shortly thereafter and is today best known as one of Canada's most prolific portraitists, though she executed a number of landscapes and still lifes, and one, somewhat infamous, nude. The painting of a confident, lithe-bodied young woman was scandalous in part because of her green sandals, which underscore her nakedness. She is superimposed onto the representation of a painted portrait on an easel. The details of a large Russian-style Orthodox church with onion domes in a snowy landscape visible behind the portrait of a man in a heavy fur-trimmed jacket suggest that the portrait on the easel is of the Russian composer and

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault writes, "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret." *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 35.

<sup>56</sup> See Donald W. Buchanan, "Naked Ladies," *Canadian Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 175 (April 1935): 273-74; Paul Duval, "Human Form More Inspiring Than Landscape," *Saturday Night*, Vol. 13 (Sept. 13 1947); Bertram Brooker, "Nudes and Prudes," in *Open House*, ed. William Arthur Deacon and Wilfred Reeves (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers Ltd., 1931), 93-106; and Louis Muhlstock "An Excess of Prudery," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (1947), 75-79.

musician Andre Illiashenko—a painting that Newton exhibited with the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1932.<sup>57</sup>

The model stands with unbridled self-awareness in an artist's studio that is no doubt Newton's own, "thereby providing an intimate view into the artist's practice."<sup>58</sup> The woman's confidence in her own body is captured in the strength of her pose and the display of her naked form. According to critic Donald W. Buchanan, this self-possession was precisely what created such controversy about the artwork. In his 1935 essay "Naked Ladies," Buchanan argued that a nude reclining in the landscape remained a nude:

But to sit in a city studio and do a Russian model, surrounded with a formal, subjective pattern of objects, is heresy. The Montreal painter, Liliash Torrance Newton it will be remembered, committed this sin last year. The board of the Toronto Art Gallery refused to hang her painting in the show of the Canadian Group of Painters. They called the model a naked lady, not a nude, you see, for she wore green slippers.<sup>59</sup>

The figure's realism challenged commentators of the day: with her shoes, painted nails and bobbed hair, the nude appeared immodest, her bearing too confident, as if she were a dancer performing her body. To record this performance in a work of art could warrant the serious charge of being "a showman's trick of the first magnitude," to cite Buchanan again.<sup>60</sup>

In Newton's painting, the discarded robe on the arm of the chair helps to heighten the model's eroticism, already underscored by her modern shoes and her pubic hair. The

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<sup>57</sup> Hudson, "Disarming the Conventions of Nudity in Canadian Art," 105.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Donald W. Buchanan quoted in Brian Foss, "Living Landscape," in *Edwin Holgate*, ed. Rosalind Pepall and Brian Foss (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2005), 19.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

prosperity of the 1920s had given way to the Depression and the pleasures and perils of the past two decades intensified debates about what exactly it meant to be modern.

Newton's painting, here, was seen as being perhaps too modern. Canadians could accept a modernity in dialogue with the past, but not one which sought a clean break from it. The painting's removal from the Canadian Group of Painters exhibition signals the way in which the artwork provoked viewers at the time, invoking the tensions around sexuality and popular culture, while, as I will demonstrate, the painting's formal qualities also signalled a break with tradition.

The pink armchair behind the figure in *Nude* acts as visual support to the figure's tall, svelte body, while the artwork's flatness works to emphasize the proximity of the figure to the picture plane, cancelling any sense of a body in physical space. Newton's interest in the figure's relationship to space is called up by the snowy landscape behind the darkened portrait, one of the few portraits Newton painted with an outdoor background. The superimposition of the nude model onto the portrait makes for an odd composition. The dark outline of Illiashenko behind the woman appears almost like a shadow cast by the model's head and shoulders, as if she is *in* the snowy landscape herself. The dark silhouette of her head and shoulders evokes the strong outline of a Lawren Harris mountain or iceberg. This is, perhaps, an ironic comment on the woman's relationship to the landscape: she is both inside and outside of it. Newton demands that the viewer question the relationship of the human to nature as she calls into question the tradition of the nude set in landscape such as that in Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, a reproduction of which had recently been removed from the walls of the print room of the Toronto Art

Gallery.<sup>61</sup> The pop of blue sky in the portrait of Illiashenko immediately draws the viewer into the painting and contrasts with the grey hues of the artist's studio and the muted yellowy pink tones of the woman's flesh. The soft dark mound of the figure's pubic hair mimics the fine hairs on Illiashenko's jacket, while the grey triangles of snowy hills and farmland in the background of the portrait are echoed in the geometric patterns of the floor, in the lines cut by the easel against the wall and by the large canvas that leans against the studio wall behind it. The wooden frame of the blank canvas is visible to the observer and calls up the artist's labour and the nude's status as representation. The canvas and its support remind viewers that the representation before them is the product of Newton and this woman or model coming together in Newton's studio to produce the nude image before them.

Newton, like other artists in Canada and elsewhere, was required to undertake rigorous academic training to develop her command of intellectual abstraction and an ability to see beyond the immediate visceral body of the nude model. However, here Newton chooses not to paint an idealized woman, a body abstracted from that of some anonymous hired model. She has captured the figure's likeness with a verisimilitude not usually associated with the genre: the woman's bright red lips, long-lashes and pink-tinged cheeks are clearly those of a specific and real woman. The formal treatment of the woman's face here is reminiscent of many of Newton's portraits including her own *Self-Portrait* (c.1929, fig. 23). Portraiture is also alluded to by the painting on the easel behind the nude woman. The artist's reference to portraiture and her use of realism to depict the model disrupt the conventions of the nude genre, a genre whose status until the nineteenth

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<sup>61</sup> Bertram Brooker, "Nudes and Prudes," in *Open House*, ed. William Arthur Deacon and Wilfred Reeves, (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers Ltd., 1931), 93-94.

century was predicated on distancing itself from the reality it claimed to represent. Newton's painting stresses its status as representation and, thus, as Harry Berger argues, it "calls up and evokes as something absent the truthful presentation it confesses truly it is not."<sup>62</sup> The absent referent (the real woman used as model) that was historically distanced from the representation is here presented to the viewer in a manner that belies her status as everywoman or abstracted nude body for the "possession" of the male gaze. This woman stood in Newton's studio in her green sandals with her painted nails and exposed pubic hair and is depicted with a clear sense of reflexivity on the part of the artist. The ways in which the agency and subjectivity of women have historically been effaced in the tradition of the genre are troubled here; this woman has agency and a very real presence in front of the viewer. Where the nude had previously been a representation of the fantasy of another human being, typically female, fabricated by a process of subtractions and additions, the nude in Canadian modern art brought those specificities—her appearance and fleshy materiality—to the forefront. In Newton's *Nude* the signifiers of modernity—the woman's shoes and fashionable haircut, for example—work to underscore that this is in fact a representation of a real and modern woman. This was a woman who removed her clothes, stood in this position, with these shoes on, in Newton's studio and had her likeness painted by the artist on a large canvas.

Many of the more contentious nudes painted in Canada during this same period were faulted for their supposed realism, and, while the figure in Newton's painting is representative of a modern woman, the two-dimensionality of the armchair and the darkened halo of the portrait behind her flatten the figure and thereby undermine any sense of realism. She is more like the head of Illiashenko, compositionally locked into her

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<sup>62</sup> Berger, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, 17.

surroundings, and superimposed on top of them. She appears flattened by the interior space onto which she is painted rather than a material body in three-dimensional space. Newton's nude is neither an idealization of the female form nor physical body made tangible. Turning again to Berger, this is a painting in which the nude operates instead as "an index—an effect and representation—solely of the sitter's and painter's performance in the act of portrayal."<sup>63</sup> The act of a nude model posing and being posed by the artist here becomes both the referent of the image and its cause. The viewer is aware that she is looking at a flat canvas upon which Newton has represented the very act of representation itself. The presence of the landscape in the portrait suggests Newton was intent on exploring the connection between land and figure; however, this relationship remains unsuccessful, more disjunctive than an enmeshing of body and landscape.

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<sup>63</sup> Berger, "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," 88.

## PEGI NICOL MACLEOD

Over the course of her career, Pegi Nicol MacLeod's paintings of genre scenes, still lifes, landscapes, and portraits were praised by critics and she received a great deal of support from the director of the National Gallery, Eric Brown. Despite her critical success, MacLeod remains marginalized in the annals of Canadian art history, although Laura Brandon's recent biography of this artist does, I hope, signal the beginning of a renewed interest in her exceptional watercolours and paintings. An examination of two of MacLeod's nude self-portraits, *Descent of Lilies*, and *Torso and Plants*, demonstrates the artist's interplay of the genres of portraiture, still life and the nude, while their formal aesthetic qualities indicate MacLeod's understanding of modern and surrealist painting.

Born in Listowel, Ontario in 1904, MacLeod was educated in Ottawa and studied painting under Franklin Brownell, R.C.A. before moving on to the École des Beaux-Arts, Montreal. She travelled, painting in Ottawa and the area around Gatineau and Montreal. In 1927, she painted for a time in Alberta, and in 1928 she travelled to the Skeena River in British Columbia to paint the life of the west coast Indians.<sup>64</sup> In 1931 MacLeod was awarded first prize for painting in the Willingdon Arts Competition for her canvas, *Log Run* (1931, fig. 24). In 1934 she moved to Toronto where she continued to paint and to work on theatre and stage designs, as well as on window displays for Eaton's department store. Her marriage to Norman MacLeod took the couple to New York where MacLeod painted scenes of Manhattan life she saw from her apartment window. She also created a number of self-portraits and many paintings of her daughter Jane. MacLeod returned frequently to Canada. She ran a summer art school at the University of New Brunswick in

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<sup>64</sup> Donald W. Buchanan, *Memorial Exhibition: Pegi Nicol MacLeod 1904-1949* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1949), 16.

Fredericton and was commissioned in 1944 to paint the women's divisions of the Canadian armed forces. She did not break into the art circles of New York and the couple were financially strapped during their time there. The absence of support from the art community and the financial difficulties made her pursuit of her art a difficult endeavour. MacLeod's life was cut short by cancer, and she died in 1949 at the age of 45.

MacLeod's nude self-portraits, like her scenes of rivers, children playing, or still life flowers, are characterized by a fluidity of form and vibrant colour. Her works have an extreme individuality about them and are often full of what critic Graham McInnes has described as a "turbulent waywardness" and "a violent frenzy [of] movement."<sup>65</sup> This frenzy of movement is strikingly conveyed in her large scale painting *Descent of Lilies*.

*Descent of Lilies* is a fantastical scene of flowers, horses, and a central nude representation of the artist. She is draped in vibrant pink fabric from the waist down and her body turns so that she looks back toward the viewer. Her torso is repeated in the background behind a bucking horse and large lily petals in the top left corner. She is surrounded by white lily blossoms that seem to float and open up in various stages of bloom. A large hand with painted red nails is rendered with the same soft curves in ochre and pale pink hues as the flowers around it, making it difficult to pick out at first glance. In the bottom left hand corner are two figures on horseback, their faces represented as blocks of colour and flecks of paint, while the horses they ride blend seamlessly into their surroundings. MacLeod's use of colour works to make all the elements on the canvas almost indistinguishable from one another, giving them, as Laura Brandon has noted, a dreamlike quality.<sup>66</sup> Clouds, flowers, figures, horses, hands, and cloth seem to emerge out

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<sup>65</sup> McInnes, "The Decline of Genre," 14.

<sup>66</sup> Brandon, *Pegi By Herself*, 85.

of and into each other. But the viewer's eye is continually drawn back down to the presence of the hand in the bottom right of the painting. This is no ordinary surrealist-inflected nude. The artist makes visible the hand that produced the painting before us. The hand is grasping a paintbrush (which is both paintbrush and flower), which reminds the viewer of the labour involved in the artwork's creation, while the fluid lines of paint on the canvas are indexical of the movement of the artist's paintbrush across the canvas. MacLeod's painting foregrounds the representational act of the artist having sat in front of a mirror to produce the painted image, a similar reflexivity to that described by Joseph Koerner about Dürer's self-portraits. Koerner, in arguing for the advent of the genre of self-portraiture in the work of Dürer, begins with his *Erlangen Self-Portrait* and charts a progression to Dürer's *Self-Portrait* of 1500. Koerner asserts that Dürer's self-portraits offer moments of self-aware contemplation in which the artist celebrates the moment and conditions of the work's making.<sup>67</sup> MacLeod's *Lilies* is similar, for she too, connects the hand and artist in such a way as to recall the tension at work between the artist's labour and the embodied subjectivity of both the spectator and the artist herself. MacLeod is both maker and model and in so doing, the hand coupled with her own nude body in the painting attests, to use Koerner's words, "to the authentic presence of the artist in the work of art."<sup>68</sup> Her reinterpretation of the genre of the nude is self-reflexive. As spectators, we are made aware of the fiction of the artist's pose and the de-idealized woman represented.

In *Torso and Plants* MacLeod uses short angular brushstrokes of greens, yellows, blues and pinks to represent her own torso, her head cut off at the neck by the top of the painting's frame. She is seated with a large assemblage of flowers on her cloth-draped lap

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

that seem to explode and take over her body. The artist places herself, nude, in what could be any generic still life composition of a flowering plant or vase of flowers. As Anna Hudson writes, “[s]he presents herself as a studio nude and, in so doing, includes the artist among the still life objects arranged for aesthetic contemplation.”<sup>69</sup> She combines the genres of still life, portraiture and the nude in a painting, challenging the parameters of all three genres. MacLeod’s investigation of the interrelationship between nature and humanity calls attention to the representational process undertaken by the artist in the production of the artwork. The image cannot be read as an erotic idealized nude, or an easily identifiable self-portraiture of the artist, or a simple genre scene of lilacs and daffodils. The intrusion of the artist onto the representational field calls attention once again to the artifice of production while the absence of her head and face challenge the viewer’s understanding of the work as a self-portrait. MacLeod’s nude portraits are ambiguous. They are neither genre scenes with easily comprehensible narratives, nor self-portraits in the true sense of representing a likeness of the artist, nor still lifes, nor traditional nudes of an idealized figure. MacLeod’s nude self-portraits are reflexive about their own production and ambiguous in their combination of genres, as in *Torso and Plants*. MacLeod’s painting is evidence of the ways in which artists were experimenting with the genre and the ambiguity evident in her paintings attests to the struggle of artists who were turning to the nude to work against the landscape tradition.

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<sup>69</sup> Hudson, “Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950,” 99.

## PRUDENCE HEWARD

Newton and MacLeod's references to, and exploration of, portraiture in their nude paintings was but one approach taken to the genre by artists in Canada. Still others, like Prudence Heward, chose to push the possibilities of the genre through the relationship of figure and landscape. Prudence Heward's oeuvre is replete with paintings of figures in landscape. She offered landscape views of rural areas of Canada with the human inhabitants who had "tamed" and cultivated those landscapes. Heward's paintings, while critically lauded<sup>70</sup> were not claimed as distinctly Canadian in part because the artist chose to portray the human subject in the landscape, rather than the landscape on its own. As I have noted, the Group of Seven answered the call for a national art which would mediate what author and critic Northrop Frye termed the "unrest and dissatisfaction one feels about a country which has not been lived in: the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it."<sup>71</sup> The tranquil and serene landscapes of Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park painted by the Group of Seven came to be championed as mediating the tension between the human mind and the vast land around it. By contrast, artists such as Heward who concentrated on figurative painting were marginalized in favour of artists who concentrated on landscape painting. While Heward was much praised over the course of her career, by critics and fellow artist such as A.Y. Jackson, knowledge of her work waned

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<sup>70</sup> Heward's *Girl on a Hill* won the inaugural Willingdon Arts Competition in 1928 and her painting *Rollande* (1929) won international praise in travelling exhibitions in Europe and the United States.

<sup>71</sup> Northrop Frye, "Canadian Colonial Painting," in *Documents in Canadian Art*, ed. Douglas Fetherling, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1987), 90. Many critics have pointed out that Frye was mistaken in his description of Canada as a country that had not been lived in. Canada had been inhabited by First Nations and Inuit peoples long before the arrival of European explorers and colonial settlers in the fifteenth century.

until Natalie Luckyj's exhibition and catalogue *Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward* in 1986.<sup>72</sup>

Prudence Heward was born in Montreal in 1896 and studied art in her hometown. She spent several years in England during the First World War before returning home where she joined the Art Association of Montreal School. There she studied under the tutelage of Randolph Hewton and William Brymner, followed by summer sketching classes with Maurice Cullen.<sup>73</sup> In 1920 she joined a number of her fellow students, most notably Anne Savage, Edwin Holgate, and Liliás Torrance Newton, in forming the short-lived Beaver Hall Hill Group. From 1925 to 1926 Heward lived in Montparnasse in Paris where she studied at the Académie Colarossi with Charles Geurin. Returning to Canada, she worked in her studio at her home on Peel Street in Montreal, enlisting friends and relatives as portrait models and travelling outside the city on sketching trips to her family's summer home at Fernbank near Brockville, Ontario. Heward incorporated this particular landscape into the backgrounds of many of her paintings. In 1933 she became, along with Edwin Holgate, a founding member of the Canadian Group of Painters.

Heward's oeuvre is comprised of a number of nudes, portraits and figure studies of women. Along with *Girl Under a Tree* from 1931, Heward also painted a number of striking black nudes from the same period. Heward was a great admirer of Cézanne, Renoir, Derain, Picasso, Modigliani, and Matisse. Their influence, coupled with the time she spent in Europe, can be seen in the strong lines and modernist blocks of colour for the buildings in the background of *Girl Under a Tree*. Speculation existed that the painting is

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<sup>72</sup> Natalie Luckyj, *Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward* (Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1986).

<sup>73</sup> Marielle Ayles, "Interfaces of the Portrait: Liminality and Dialogism in Canadian Women's Portraiture Between the Wars," (MA diss., Carleton University, 1996): 180.

a self-portrait; however, the artist's nephew, Ross Heward, has provided evidence that it is in fact of a model.<sup>74</sup>

Rendered in brilliant colour, *Girl Under a Tree* depicts a recumbent nude in a somewhat abstracted modernist landscape. The large figure occupies the entire foreground of the picture plane, dominating the surrounding landscape. The model's taut, muscular body lies across a verdant hill in front of a series of urban buildings represented with strong blocks of purple, white, pink, green and blue. The woman gazes out in a relaxed pose, one hand resting behind her head and the other lying flat by her side. While her pose calls up that of the prostitute in *Olympia*, the woman's gaze here travels off into the distance and the spectator is unable to connect with her or to fix her in place as an object of desire. The strong contrast of the flesh tones against the rich blues, greens, and purples of the landscape around her disrupts any semblance of the figure converging with her surroundings. As critic James Campbell notes, "Heward's oeuvre is characterized by her use of modernist blocks of colour and bold lines, but the influence of her training in Paris seems to pervade *Girl Under a Tree* in its quotation of Cézannesque landscape in a most striking way."<sup>75</sup> This comparison was first articulated by John Lyman in 1932 when he described Heward's "unmodulated and cloisonné-treatment of [the] background without

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<sup>74</sup> The painting has been described by some critics as a self-portrait, however Prudence Heward's uncle, Ross Heward recalls that art historian Barbara Meadowcroft was told by a retired Director of the Art Gallery of Hamilton that the woman in *Girl Under a Tree* is a model who had also posed for him. Ross contends that Prudence Heward never painted an overt self-portrait. (She did, however, execute a few drawings and sketches that were self-portraits). Heward Grafftey, "Prudence Heward," in *Portraits of a Life* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1996).

<sup>75</sup> James Campbell, "Young Girls and Old Boys: The Art of Prudence Heward and Edwin Holgate," *Border Crossings* Vol. 25, No.2, Issue 98 (June 2006): 74.

interrelation” and the woman in the painting as a “Bouguereau nude against Cézanne background.”<sup>76</sup>

In *Girl Under a Tree*, Heward repeats the trope of the nude in landscape, but her use of modernist technique does not go far enough in pushing the genre’s aesthetic possibilities. This is a nude woman depicted with enough realism to suggest that she could be a real woman or even the artist herself. As Charles Hill has noted, she is a woman posed against a studio backdrop,<sup>77</sup> rather than an idealized female form or the modernist abstract nudes of Picasso or Duchamp. In the awkward pose of the recumbent nude in Heward’s painting and in the model’s formal dislocation from her surroundings, Heward’s painting—as with so many by her contemporaries—fails to integrate successfully her subject with the wild landscape around her. The naturalized placement of Giorgione’s nude is rendered a fallacy here. There is nothing natural about a nude woman lying on a green hill and, despite its classical lineage, Heward’s painting demonstrates that to paint a nude woman out-of-doors is an imagined fantasy. I will return to a discussion of the nude and landscape in Canada later on. While more successful in her integration of figure and landscape than some of her contemporaries such as Edwin Holgate, Heward’s series of black nudes earned negative as well as racist criticism and were much more controversial than *Girl Under a Tree*.

In 1935, Heward produced a series of paintings of young nude or semi-clad black women. This series is often discussed by scholars as something outside of or aberrant to the artist’s whole body of work. However, Heward’s black nudes should be considered alongside *Girl Under a Tree* as they underscore her interest in humanity, female

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<sup>76</sup> John Lyman, “Journal,” vol. II, entry for 28 April 1932; in the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, Montreal.

<sup>77</sup> Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, 42.

subjectivity, and landscape. These works, including *Hester*, (1937, fig. 25), *Dark Girl*, (1935, fig 26), *Negress with Sunflowers* (1936, fig. 27) and *Girl in the Window* (1941, fig. 28) generated controversy and challenged the conventions of the genre. From the sitters' modern unwrapped hairstyles, their weary postures and averted gazes, to the Canadian landscapes in which their bodies are embedded, Heward's paintings were unsettling to white spectators who would have formed the majority of viewers in the 1930s. The averted eyes, weary poses, and the hairs of the figures in *Hester*, *Dark Girl* and *Girl in a Window* do not conform to the cultural and historical norms for representing black women. They defy both the tradition of the white and the black female nude and were therefore ambiguous and troubling to many Canadian viewers.

It is noteworthy that Heward's paintings were never censored from their exhibition spaces, no doubt in part because the figure's blackness allowed for figurative elements otherwise denied the white nude. However, the paintings clearly incited deep anxiety on the part of the white viewer who, while able to see the strength and maturity of the artist's hand, could not reconcile it with the "masterfully ugly figure" represented.<sup>78</sup> The normative association of black skin with sexual deviancy is not so obviously fixed upon Heward's canvases: nor do the bodies of *Hester* or *Dark Girl* conform to the academic tradition of the sentimental abstract nude.

Art historian Charmaine Nelson argues that Canadian artist Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude* (1933, fig. 29) was an "overtly sexualized representation of the female body [which] was praised rather than censored [because of] the nude's blackness."<sup>79</sup> Nelson argues that the painting received wide acclaim simply because Stevens' nude body

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<sup>78</sup> Luckyj, *Expressions of Will*, 47.

<sup>79</sup> Charmaine Nelson, "Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy," *RACAR: Revue d'Art Canadienne* Vol. 22, No. 1-2 (1995): 99.

is a black one. If the same stylistic conventions – raised open arms, visible breasts, headdress, and jungle foliage – were used at the time to represent a white female nude body, critics might have been outraged. It is perfectly acceptable for black women to be represented as “overtly sexualized,” to be the object or fetish for a male viewer, whereas representations of sexualized white women were often met with criticism and censorship in the early decades of the twentieth century in Canada.

It is clear that *Hester*, *Dark Girl*, and *Girl in the Window* represent black women who are far removed from Prudence Heward’s own social station. However, this does not mean that she conforms to the established European artistic conventions for painting the nude, let alone the black nude. By contravening the stereotypical imagery of black women at the time, Heward’s black nudes express the illusory power and authority of the white male subject.

Heward defied the established European model for the female nude, calling into question the essential difference supposedly inherent in the black female body. Indeed, the contravention of normative aesthetic and ideological conventions in *Dark Girl* and *Hester* outraged many critics. One critic wrote of Heward’s painting *Hester* in 1938:

...far from pleasing, Why oh why, take the trouble to paint – and paint well – a hideous, fat, naked negress, with thighs like a prize-fighter and a loose-lipped, learing [sic] face? Obesity and ugliness in the nude were even banned from the old time barroom.<sup>80</sup>

A Montreal reviewer took note of her “very good study of a head of a coloured girl” but found *Hester* “though clever” to be “exceedingly ugly.”<sup>81</sup> *Dark Girl* also polarized critical

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<sup>80</sup> R.B.F., “Canadian Group of Painters Exhibition at Gallery,” *Ottawa Journal*, February 15, 1938.

<sup>81</sup> Luckyj, *Expressions of Will*, 47.

opinion. It was referred to by one critic as “a masterfully ugly figure, semi-nude.”<sup>82</sup> In contrast, a critic from the *Toronto Telegram* saw instead, “a great beauty of line and singularly luminous flesh-tones.” Arthur Lismer was also positive, noting Heward’s landscapes and her “‘Coloured girl’ [as] fine and dignified manifestations of unity of design and purpose.”<sup>83</sup>

It is clear from the heated, often racist, and conflicting response from critics that Heward’s black female nudes troubled many viewers. By not representing the black female body as overly sexualized or naturalized, Heward defied a variety of academic conventions. Art historian Charmaine Nelson points out that Western artists have employed a number of tropes to represent the female body: the manipulation of body hair, the arrangement of the body within its environment, and the positioning of the body, face, and gaze.<sup>84</sup> *Hester*, *Dark Girl* and *Girl in the Window* contravene the academic artistic tropes previously established in Western art for representing the black nude body.

*Hester* sits at the base of a tree, her slender torso echoing its trunk as its branches shoot off outside the picture plane. In *Dark Girl*, the sitter is nestled in amongst a jungle-like backdrop of Canadian sumac. In both images Heward paints the women’s bodies such that they mirror the landscape into which they have been placed – a device usually reserved for the white female nude. White female nudes have been historically represented harmoniously within the landscape as *Woman in Nature*, whereas black nudes were historically placed *on* the landscape – indicative of the sitter’s uncontrolled, transgressive and sublime nature.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Even with her “thighs like a prizefighter,” there is a sense of balance to *Hester* as she sits reflecting the landscape around her. Hester’s thighs merge with the base of the tree under which she sits. Her arms, crossed delicately across her lap, emulate the slender branches of the tree and the undulating hills in the distance echo the wave of her exposed hair. In *Dark Girl*, the young woman sits slightly slouched, her head tilted as her body appears to almost merge with the sumac behind her. The branches on either side of her echo the curve of her arms and the bend in her back and neck. Nature has historically been constituted as feminine in Western thought as part of an effort to align women with irrationality, emotion, corporeality, and instinctive purity, while men are aligned with their opposites qualities. Placing the nude white woman *within* the landscape, as sexualized extension of the natural world, both reinforced her natural purity and placed her within the control of the civilizing white man.<sup>86</sup> *Hester* and *Dark Girl* are not white, as one of the artwork’s titles so obviously points out. The sitters are represented as the white female body conventionally had been, as an extension of the landscape, but the colour of their skin points to the women’s “otherness.” Heward’s paintings hover in a liminal space between idealized and de-idealized nude. This ambiguity confounded art critics and the Canadian public in the 1930s.

Heward’s black women form part of a slowly emerging multicultural society, and the way in which they mirror their environment works to underscore this. Heward’s choice to situate *Dark Girl* within a backdrop of Canadian sumac argues for the black woman’s place within the Canadian landscape. Having chosen a native Canadian plant as her backdrop and by painting a sitter whose own body emulates her natural environment,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Heward seems to suggest that *Dark Girl* and women like her are reflections of Heward's Canada.

The idealized open body of the traditional nude worked to signal her sexual availability. With soft fleshy curves, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, with her arms at her sides, her body open and on full display, gazes seductively toward the viewer. *Dark Girl* does not possess any of the fleshiness of Titian's work or the excessive fat of Sara Baartman's, (more commonly known as the Hottentot Venus)<sup>87</sup> overly sexualized corpus. The body in *Dark Girl* is comprised mostly of muscle that is here slackened under drooped shoulders that combine to create a posture at once weary and disheartened. Her body, similar to that of Hester's, signals the woman's labour and exhaustion rather than her sexuality.

The exhaustion and numbness of Heward's three sitters is signalled by their averted gazes and slumped postures. The bodies of the women in *Hester* and *Dark Girl* are closed off and restricted from the viewer. Their arms deny access to their sex, and their breasts sag low under the weight of their social and psychic conditions as racially inferior others in a white patriarchal Canadian society. They are not on display for the pleasure of the spectator. Rather, they seem reluctant to be imaged, resigned to their positions at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But Heward has not painted a generalized or universalized black woman who stands in metonymically for "Black Woman." She has afforded Hester a kind of agency in granting her a name, and all three figures have clearly individualized features, granting them a specificity normally denied the nude body.

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<sup>87</sup> Sarah Baartman (or Saartjie Baartman), who is more commonly known as the Hottentot Venus, was a Khoikhoi woman taken as a slave from Cape Town in 1810. She was exhibited in England as a kind of circus or ethnographic exhibit. She was eventually sold to a French animal trainer and was exhibited in France where she drew the interest of naturalists and scientists. She died in 1814 at the age of 25. See Clifton C. Crais, and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007).

Operating outside the artistic and ideological conventions that governed the representation of black women at the time, Heward's black nudes offer contradictory visual elements that contravene the stereotypical representations of black women to produce ambiguous images. By virtue of their race, the women that Heward chose to paint most certainly did offer a new image of Canada for the country. By altering the traditional representation of black women, by giving these women an agency otherwise denied similar subjects in art history, Heward defied the traditions of the genre and unsettled gallery spectators.

## EDWIN HOLGATE

The social tension that characterizes Heward's paintings is replaced in Edwin Holgate's nudes by a much more subtle disjuncture of figure and landscape. Holgate, like many artists during the interwar period, also attempted to unify his figures into their surroundings, concomitantly exercising his abilities as a landscape painter and portraitist. Holgate's portrait studies such as *The Lumberjack* (1924), *Fire Ranger* (1926, fig. 30), and *Paul, Trapper* (c.1929, fig. 31) demonstrate a concern for form which preoccupied the artist throughout his career.<sup>88</sup> The strong outlines of the sitters' bodies and the textural short brushstrokes that give vitality and warmth to a painting like *The Cellist* (1924, fig. 32) are also used by Holgate in many of the nudes he painted.

Holgate was an esteemed draughtsman who studied at the Art Association of Montreal. He studied with Maurice Cullen and William Brymner in Montreal before moving to Paris to further his studies, returning to Montreal in 1914. In 1920, Holgate was a founding member of the short-lived Beaver Hall Group along with Randolph Hewton, Mabel May, Liliias Torrance Newton, and Prudence Heward. The eighth member of the Group of Seven, Holgate later joined the Group at the behest of A.Y. Jackson in 1929. Though he acted as an official war artist during World War II, when Holgate returned home, he felt left out of a post-war art world that had progressed without him.<sup>89</sup> He decided to withdraw from the urban bustle and moved to Morin Heights in the Laurentians north of Montreal where he continued to paint. In the 1960s, as interest and admiration of the Group of Seven's work grew, scholars turned a fresh eye to Holgate's own contributions to Canadian art.

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<sup>88</sup> Rosalind Pepall, "The Portraits: Reaching Beyond Form," in *Edwin Holgate*, ed. Rosalind Pepall and Brian Foss, (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005): 82.

<sup>89</sup> Campbell, "Young Girls and Old Boys," 84.

Unlike similar works by Newton or Brooker, Holgate's *Nude in the Open* from 1930 was praised by critics for his successful integration of the nude model and her surroundings. The painting is of a nude woman reclining on a white cloth atop a rocky outcropping at the edge of a pristine blue body of water. The viewer is positioned above the woman whose eyes appear closed, thus alluding to the academic trope of the sleeping Venus in the countryside. The tonality of the woman's skin repeats that of the boulders that surround her, while the shadows of her bent legs echo those of the strong outlines of the bluff on which she lounges. The lone tree in the top left hand corner calls up similar 'lone tree' paintings by the Group of Seven such as *Jack Pine* and *The West Wind*, and its curved trunk emulates the wavy lines woman's dark brown hair. Brian Foss reads Holgate's nude as a successful integration of the figure into the landscape, one in which the metaphor of woman as nature is reaffirmed by the way in which the nude body is simply an extension of her surroundings.<sup>90</sup> They are literally, according to Foss, "living landscapes" in which Holgate's nude women visually meld with their environments.<sup>91</sup> Holgate maintains a connection with the conventions of the genre set out by Giorgione and Titian; however Holgate employs a modernist aesthetic of bold blocks of colour and strong lines with unorthodox framing and perspective in his execution of the sleeping Venus trope.

Despite the praise he received and the integration of the woman with her natural surroundings, there is still a disconnect between the woman's body and the water and rocks behind her. For example, the figure's head and arm are cut off slightly at the bottom of the picture plane. This, combined with the deep bend in the woman's right knee, work

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<sup>90</sup> Brian Foss, "Living Landscape," in *Edwin Holgate*, eds. Rosalind Pepall and Brian Foss (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2005).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

to push the figure out from the picture plane's surface. She seems to protrude from the canvas while the rocks and tree in the distance act as a flat, one-dimensional backdrop to her seemingly three-dimensional body—a body made more real and tangible by the folds in the fabric upon which she lounges. The woman's right hand is almost nestled into the folds of the white drapery underneath her, a touch that evokes corporeal desire in the viewer. The materiality of the drapery further suggests that the woman represented is a real, warm, fleshy body; however, the flatness of the wilderness behind her troubles the beholder's sense of pleasurable touch. Rather than becoming an extension of the landscape (or vice versa), the woman seems to intrude into the space of the beholder while the painted landscape acts as a flat scrim, reinforcing the reality of the representation at hand.

Unable to take pleasure in an erotic encounter with an idealized nude figure, the viewer is reminded of what Berger terms the “three-way diachronic transaction between painter, sitter, and observer, in a purely fictional field.”<sup>92</sup> Holgate's nudes, despite their warm critical reception, remind the beholder of the fiction of their creation. Holgate navigated the difficult terrain between artistic tradition and modernity more successfully than some of his peers; however, his nudes are not entirely cohesive or without problem. The materiality of the woman's body defies the tradition of the idealized woman. The disjuncture between her body and the surrounding landscape further underscores for the viewer that a woman posed for the artist in a studio on a draped drop cloth. The flat Group of Seven background also suggests that Holgate was working with a posed model in a studio and no doubt added the background based on his own landscape paintings such as *Old Pine Root, Mont-Tremblant* (1927) or *Baie-des-Moutons, Looking Northward* (c.1930). The reminder of the reality of the theatrical encounter between artist, model and

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<sup>92</sup> Berger, “Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture,” 99.

spectator in Holgate's nude representations, coupled with their liminal position between tradition and modern art, has seen paintings like *Nude in the Open* disappear from the canon of Canadian art history. Despite the praise that Holgate's nudes received, he is best remembered as a landscape painter, member of the Group of Seven, and for his striking portraits.

Critics were clearly more comfortable with paintings—and this is crucial to my argument as a whole—that seemed to explore allegories of nation and land. When nudes were presented discreetly and avoided any connection with sexuality, or when women's bodies stood in allegorically for the empty wilderness tamed by colonial forces, such paintings were able to avoid moral censure. Holgate did not avoid criticism altogether, but he did evade censure largely because the settings of his paintings allude to the rugged rocks of the Canadian Shield and to the landscape with which the nation had recently come to identify. Despite the perception that *Nude in the Open* or Holgate's *The Bathers* (1937, fig. 33) adhered to what Donald W. Buchanan describes as a “more transcendent thematic context,” Holgate noted that *Nude in the Open* “brought some irate letters from very right-minded Methodist fathers in Toronto.”<sup>93</sup> Holgate's adherence to landscape painting and its presence in virtually all of his nudes meant that his works were accepted while those of his colleagues were often the subject of negative criticism. As Brian Foss notes, “[t]his was a key factor in their acceptance, as it enabled viewers to locate the images within the time-honoured fine art tradition of the female nude portrayed in the open air.”<sup>94</sup> However, this is not to suggest that they are entirely successful in their convergence of environment and human form.

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<sup>93</sup> Edwin Holgate quoted by Brian Foss, “Living Landscape,” 48.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

The recumbent nude in *Nude in a Landscape* (c. 1930, fig. 34), like the woman in *Nude in the Open*, looks as though she too, is painted against a scrim of calm blue water and rocky outcroppings. The same disconnect plagues *The Bather* (c.1930s, fig. 35) and *Early Autumn* (1938, fig. 36). The disjuncture between figure and landscape is particularly acute in *Early Autumn*. A nude woman, whose flesh tones echo those of the trees in the background, is posed awkwardly on a large bleached tree branch that juts out over a large rock. The torsion of her body is at odds with the tranquillity of her surroundings, and she looks as if she is about to fall from her perch. She is not anchored in nature but rather, seems placed onto the scene with an artifice that signals danger instead of eroticism or harmony. Holgate appealed to critics in his adherence to tradition, but he also edged closer to modernist abstraction, in the use of bold colours and strong forms in paintings like *Early Autumn* and *Nude in the Open*. However, Holgate does not push his modernist aesthetic quite far enough. Certainly Picasso did more to challenge the conventions and aesthetic parameters of the nude genre with works like *Desmoiselles D'Avignon* (1907) or *Nude in a Black Armchair* (1932). Because Holgate does not push the modernist aspects of his nudes, they are neither fully integrated with the surrounding Canadian Shield nor can they be classified as avant-garde. His works underline, once again, how artists were experimenting with the boundaries of both the landscape and nude genres; and demonstrate the mixed success these experiments were met with.

## **BERTRAM BROOKER**

Brooker painted one of the most controversial nudes of the 1930s, but his interest in figurative painting came only after his foray into abstract art was met with miscomprehension and derision from critics. Canadian art critics were slow to accept abstraction and non-objective art in their own country as the case of Bertram Brooker illustrates.

A journalist, critic, illustrator, businessman, sculptor, painter, and novelist, Bertram Brooker created a handful of nude paintings including *Figures in Landscape*, *Seated Figure* (1935), *Pygmalion's Miracle* (1940, fig. 37), and *Torso* (1937, fig. 38). Born in Croydon, England in 1888, Brooker emigrated to Canada with his family early in 1905 and settled in Portage-la-Prairie at the age of seventeen. Brooker worked for Grand Trunk Pacific Railway for many years before buying a movie theatre with his brother in Neepawa, Manitoba. At the same time Brooker wrote and sold a number of detective-thriller movie scripts to the American movie studio Vitagraph. While his interest in film and advertising remained strong throughout his career, he could see that there was little money to be made in the moving picture industry in small town Manitoba and returned to Portage-la-Prairie to work as a journalist. He would eventually make his way to Toronto in the early 1920s where he worked as the editor of *Marketing* magazine, later becoming the magazine's owner in 1924. Two years later, he sold the magazine and moved on to pursue his artistic ambitions and freelance journalism.

Brooker had no formal art training and was inspired by the art and writings of Lawren Harris and Wassily Kandinsky, which influenced his early experimentations with abstraction. By 1927 he had held his first solo exhibition of abstract works and, in 1928,

he exhibited with the Group of Seven. Brooker held a few more exhibitions following this period, including a 'retrospective' exhibition in 1931. However, his early abstractions were the subject of considerable criticism and Brooker chose not to exhibit any of his abstract paintings for another sixteen years. He moved away from non-representational painting to produce images of landscapes, people, still lifes and nudes. A founding member of the post-Group of Seven Canadian Group of Painters, founded in 1933, Brooker also edited, in 1929, the first issue of the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* and was awarded the first Governor General's Literary Award for his 1936 novel, *Think of the Earth*.

Brooker is another example of an artist caught between the pull of tradition and the push toward more developed modernist techniques in Europe in hopes of producing a national visual culture. With his early works like *Sounds Assembling* (1928, fig. 39), Brooker demonstrates a penchant for a fully abstracted modernism. Sadly, critics did not understand how to read such artwork and were unable to situate the works next to the rolling topography of the Group of Seven. Brooker's move away from non-objective painting took him back to more traditional subject matter, including the nude. In his controversial *Figures in a Landscape*, Brooker approached the genre in a similar manner to his contemporary Edwin Holgate, placing his figures in a stylized landscape setting. Given that Holgate exhibited his *Nude in a Landscape* to great acclaim a year before Brooker's painting, Brooker was no doubt shocked at the removal his own painting from the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition. Brooker admired Holgate's nudes and, in a review of the 1930 Group of Seven exhibition, wrote of the two nudes Holgate had submitted that figurative painting "which has so long languished in neglect, has at last

emerged and takes its place authoritatively beside the landscape painting that has for years been accepted as something distinctively Canadian.”<sup>95</sup>

Painted with fine attention to realistic detail, Brooker’s *Figures in Landscape* shows the back of a recumbent nude in close-up detail, the folds and puckered skin of her buttocks and thighs reminiscent of the plump model in Courbet’s challenge to the nude genre in *Source*. However, in Brooker’s painting the figures are depicted with even more veracity. The foreground of the painting is taken up almost entirely by the nude woman lying on her side atop a large piece of cloth, her head and legs cut off on either side by the picture’s frame. Another nude woman sits on the in front of the woman in the foreground, her face obscured by long hair painted in several clumps like the leaves or branches of a weeping willow. Her stooped back, right breast, and arm are all that is visible of her nude form. A dark block of colour next to the figures suggests the trunk of a tree and three mounds of colour in the background stand in for hills. These are the only indications of landscape here: ultimately the two nude figures resemble models posed in a studio rather than two women lounging on the rocks of Lake Algonquin. As already noted, Holgate’s paintings are, at first glance, more suggestive of a scenario in which the artist sketched a nude woman lounging lake-side on a breezy summer’s day. The integration of figure and landscape in Holgate’s *Nude in the Open*, for example, led to critical praise while Brooker’s painting was censored. Like Newton, Brooker would continue to produce realistic nudes that represented real women who had almost certainly posed for the artist in his studio. While many artists including Holgate and MacLeod avoided controversy, many others such as Brooker and Newton, were not as lucky. Brooker would take such

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<sup>95</sup> Foss, “Living Landscapes,” 48.

offence at the censorship of one of his paintings that he was prompted to write a scathing response to the episode in his essay, “Nudes and Prudes.”<sup>96</sup>

As I noted earlier, Brooker’s bitter response to his critics foreshadows Foucault’s critical theorization of the historical discourse on sexuality. Brooker writes in his 1931 essay that the real problem highlighted by the censorship of nude paintings is a lack of education about art. He writes:

To withhold knowledge of the human form and its functions and to discourage appreciation of its beauty at an early age is to bring up a child with a sneaking curiosity in respect to that unity which of all unities is perhaps the most mysterious and the most important for men and women. It is to implant in his mind the feeling that natural admiration for bodily beauty is sheer animalism, and something to be ashamed of. Appreciation of the beauties of the nude figure is not altogether due to the impulses of sex, and...surely it is better to shape such impulses openly into channels of decency and open-eyed admiration, than to let them smirkingly fester in secretive foulness of mind.<sup>97</sup>

This “secretive foulness of mind” was precisely what the jurors and art gallery associations were reacting to when they decided to remove and censor paintings. The promised progress of modernity brought new kinds of fears and demands for stricter moral standards that were often mediated at the intersection of class, gender, and youth.

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<sup>96</sup> Brooker, “Nudes and Prudes,” in *Open House*, ed. William Arthur Deacon and Wilfred Reeves, (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers Ltd., 1931), 93-106.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 104. Foucault echoes Brooker’s sentiment about the connection of censorship and sexuality. He writes, “[w]hen one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion... There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex—specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and by their object: a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 17-18.

Brooker's *Seated Figure* redefines the genre of the studio nude in its honest depiction of a modern woman. The woman's humanity has a striking presence in this large-scale painting. As Anna Hudson writes, it is a "monumental studio nude whose humanity is profoundly felt in the fleshiness of the model's abdomen and her fashionably bobbed hair, rouged cheeks and tanned neckline."<sup>98</sup> There are myriad idiosyncrasies that belie the tradition of the genre in *Seated Figure*. The detailed folds and pleats of the white drapery upon which the woman is posed draw attention to the folds of the skin around her stomach; flesh and fabric call up the body's materiality. The flat, art-deco modelling of the woman's modern haircut is at odds with her embodied subjectivity, although the dark folds of the curtains behind her suggest a depth to her hair that at first glance seems implausible. With her folds of flesh and the naturalism of her skin tone, eyelashes, and fingernails, Brooker's nude is clearly a representation of a real woman rather than an abstracted studio model. Her dignified pose and strong gaze, which we see in profile, suggest the woman's self-conscious participation in the representation of her nude body by the artist. The stoic stillness of the woman's head and shoulders evoke that of a sculptural bust and suggest a model who is conscious of performing her role as model. Meanwhile, Brooker's choice to render the woman in such detail contradicts her theatrical attempt to perform as a studio model hired for the day. The studio model, who is conventionally rendered in an idealized and abstracted manner, is here rendered with a veracity that belies her status as model, she becomes instead a real and embodied woman. The painting oscillates between tradition and modernity with the juxtaposition of her frozen studio pose with her soft hair, warm pink body, and fleshy hips. Brooker's attention to naturalistic detail, the scale of his figures, and their references to sculpture, all call

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<sup>98</sup> Hudson, "Disarming Conventions of Nudity in Canadian Art," 103.

attention to the theatrical encounter of artist and model. The reminder of this performative encounter—the woman performs her body as a model, directed by the artist—unsettled a Canadian public who preferred nudes that adhered to a tradition sanctioned by academic conventions.

## CONCLUSION

In their unwillingness to fully assimilate or relate the human body to its surroundings, to reconcile the relationship between figure and ground, many artists who painted nudes in the 1930s in Canada found their works the subject of moral debate. Rather than becoming the site of praise for a new Canadian sensibility in the visual arts, the nudes from this period would not come to be associated with a uniquely Canadian artistic practice, nor would they assume a pivotal place within the canon of Canadian art history. Viewers could not imagine themselves as “heroic” pioneers in front of a painting like Lilius Torrance Newton’s *Nude*, nor could they see anything distinctly modern and revolutionary in its execution that would allow them to hold up such images as examples of an inherently Canadian art. The nude in Canada did not incite the admiration of an art-going public who instead came to associate a national art movement with the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven. Censored, debated, praised, and criticized, the nude genre ultimately failed to have the same impact as landscape painting on the visual arts in Canada.

Landscape continues to pervade the Canadian imaginary. As John O’Brian writes, “[landscape] has functioned more like an active verb than a descriptive noun, mediating not only between the land and its representations but also between nature and culture in a broader sense.”<sup>99</sup> While, as Joyce Zemans has noted, the validity of the Group of Seven’s meta-narrative has been rejected and much criticized, it is important to examine how it became hegemonic in Canada and how the Group’s discursive position at the apex of

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<sup>99</sup> John O’Brian, “Wild Art History,” in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O’Brian and Peter White (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 31.

Canadian visual art was at the expense of other artists and other artworks.<sup>100</sup> Landscape painting was able to mediate the relationship between the natural world and its human inhabitants in a way not offered by the nude or figurative painting. In 1916, *Saturday Night* magazine published an article jocularly recounting how the typical Canadian artist was a “husky beggar” who pulled on a pair of Strathcona boots and set off into the woods with a rifle, a paddle, and enough baked beans for three months. Such assertions would lead a critic like Barker Fairley to complain later that, “[N]ot one Canadian in a hundred goes into an art gallery looking for anything but hills and trees and lakes and clouds and flowers and fruit.”<sup>101</sup>

Canadian artists approached the nude in a multitude of ways. They experimented with different artistic possibilities for the genre using portraiture and self-portraiture, as well as intervening into traditional tropes like the sleeping figure in the landscape and the studio nude. Artists like Newton and Heward also resisted academic tradition. Newton, for example, resists the conventions of the genre with her standing figure of a nude woman posed with confidence and the allusions to portraiture in the work. Maligned, censured, and dismissed, artists like Heward demonstrate how the nude could be a threat to emerging Canadian values with the complex racial and sexual tensions associated with them. My examination of a few select nudes also suggests that artists were consciously attempting to find ways, through their experimentations with the genre, of articulating something about modernity in Canada. Artists used a variety of visual strategies in their nudes: the intermixing of genres by Newton and MacLeod; style in Holgate and Brooker;

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<sup>100</sup> Zemans, Joyce. “Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery’s First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art,” *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1995): 6-40.

<sup>101</sup> Fairley, Barker, “Canadian Art: Man vs. Landscape,” *Canadian Forum*, Vol. 19, No.227 (Dec. 1939): 286.

and subject matter in Newton and Heward. Above all, the nude reveals the inability of the nude to provide a collective viewing position that could embody a national sentiment. It was unable to penetrate the Canadian consciousness in a way that would win it a place alongside “hills and trees and lakes and clouds.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

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## APPENDIX: LIST OF DISCUSSED ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Liliás Torrance Newton, *Nude*, 1933, oil on canvas. Private Collection.
2. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
3. François Boucher, *Triumph of Venus*, 1740, oil on canvas. The National Museum of Fine Art, Stockholm.
4. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summarizing Seven Years of My Life as an Artist*, 1855, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
5. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Source*, 1856, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
6. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863-65, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
7. Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas. Estate of M.A. Brooker.
8. Edwin Holgate, *Nude in the Open*, 1930, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
9. Prudence Heward, *Girl Under a Tree*, 1931, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Hamilton.
10. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Descent of Lilies*, 1935, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
11. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Torso and Plants*, 1935, oil on canvas. The Robert McLaughlin Art Gallery, Oshawa.
12. Bertram Brooker, *Seated Figure*, 1935, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Hamilton.
13. Kathleen Munn, *The Dance*, 1923, oil on canvas. Lenore Richards Collection.
14. Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*, c.1510, oil on canvas. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.
15. Edouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
16. Gustave Courbet, *Source*, 1868, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
17. Tom Thomson, *Jack Pine*, 1916-1917, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
18. Lawren Harris, *Maligne Lake, Jasper Park*, 1924, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

19. Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Recumbent Woman*, 1525, etching. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
20. Charles Comfort, *Young Canadian* 1932, oil on canvas. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto.
21. Edwin Holgate, *The Lumberjack*, 1924, oil on canvas. Lambton Gallery, Sarnia.
22. Tom Thomson, *The West Wind*, 1916, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
23. Liliás Torrance Newton, *Self-Portrait*, c.1929, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
24. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *The Log Run*, 1931, oil on board. Collection of Laura and Byrne Harper, Moncton.
25. Prudence Heward, *Hester*, 1937, oil on canvas. Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston.
26. Prudence Heward, *Dark Girl*, 1935, oil on canvas. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto.
27. Prudence Heward, *Negress with Sunflowers*, 1937, oil on canvas. Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.
28. Prudence Heward, *Girl in the Window*, 1941, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Windsor.
29. Dorothy Stevens, *Coloured Nude*, 1933, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
30. Edwin Holgate, *Fire Ranger*, 1926, oil on canvas. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto.
31. Edwin Holgate, *Paul, Trapper*, c.1929, oil on canvas. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City.
32. Edwin Holgate, *The Cellist*, 1924, oil on canvas. The McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.
33. Edwin Holgate, *The Bathers*, 1937, oil on canvas. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal.
34. Edwin Holgate, *Nude in a Landscape*, c.1930, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
35. Edwin Holgate, *The Bather*, c.1930s, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

36. Edwin Holgate, *Early Autumn*, 1938, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON.

37. Bertram Brooker, *Pygmalion's Miracle*, 1940, oil on canvas. Collection of Lynn and Ken Martens.

38. Bertram Brooker, *Torso*, 1937, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

39. Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, oil on canvas. Winnipeg Art Gallery.