

***Pacific***, 1967, one of the most iconic images in Canadian art, is one of Alex Colville's most dramatic paintings in a body of work replete with powerfully compelling pictures. Colville finished this painting during a six-month teaching position in Pasadena, California, and the influence of California's coast is apparent in the composition. It is simple yet powerful: a male figure looks out over the ocean, waves breaking on the shore. In the foreground, a handgun lies on a wooden table that has a ruler embedded along one side, identifying it as a sewing table.

Colville constructed the image from his memory and experience, from sketches he brought with him to California, and perhaps even from photographs. The foreboding presence of the handgun creates most of the tension in the work. The figure seems relaxed, the ocean is not particularly menacing, and there is nothing else in the room to add to or detract from the tension. As with all of Colville's mature work, this painting is based upon a detailed skeleton of geometry, proportions and angles meticulously plotted out. The two key elements were both personally important to Colville: the sewing table had belonged to his mother, and the pistol in the foreground was his Second World War-issue service revolver.

Colville was much influenced by French Existentialism in the 1950s and 1960s, as were so many artists and thinkers of his generation. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Albert Camus (1913–1960) were particularly impactful. "It seemed enormously significant in a way I don't think anyone could comprehend today," he said of Existentialism.<sup>1</sup> Camus, in particular, addressed the absurdity at the heart of modern life, with its roots in the devastation of two world wars. "It abandons us in this contradiction," Camus wrote, "menacing and menaced, swept along with a whole generation intoxicated by nihilism, and yet lost in loneliness, with weapons in our hands and a lump in our throats."<sup>2</sup>

People struggled to formulate a moral and ethical response to the war, and post-war thought was fraught with tension and trauma. Why should one live in a world emptied of certainty and morality? In the face of manifest absurdity, suicide was presented as a supreme act of will, if ultimately a futile one. "After the war," Alex Colville once said, "I had this great desire to make sense out of life."<sup>3</sup> In ***Pacific***, Colville creates an image reflecting that desire, and the existential dilemma of whether or not, in a world buffeted by chaos and nihilism, that desire is even achievable. ***Pacific*** is an answer to that moral dilemma, albeit an ambiguous one.

*Pacific*, of course, means peaceful, and perhaps the artist is depicting a moment before a suicide, the figure at the window taking one last look at the world he is intent on leaving. But it also can be read as a rejection of the option, and a decision to continue the work of being in the world. That, too, could spark the peaceful moment of reflection depicted in the image.

Colville himself saw the painting in another light. "I don't think the painting is about suicide," he said, "I think of the gun and the table as necessary parts of human life, upon which it is possible sometimes to turn one's back."<sup>4</sup> For art historian Helen J. Dow, the gun and the table with its built-in measuring rod symbolize

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Colville, interview by David Burnett, July 28, 1982, quoted *Colville*, McClelland and Stewart, 1983, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower, Vintage Books, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Erskine, "A brush with magic", *Halifax Chronicle Herald/The Mail Star*, November 24, 1995, B1.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978, p. 140.

justice.<sup>5</sup> Hans Werner reported Colville agreeing with Dow's interpretation and further reflecting on the use of the pistol as a meditation on power: "The use of power, he says, is a key moral and philosophical problem, and that's what his paintings featuring pistols are about."<sup>6</sup> The uses of power, and the effects of its use on its wielders and victims, are perhaps the central philosophical questions of the post-war era. In *Pacific*, Colville portrays that complex search for meaning in one succinct and haunting image.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Werner, "Nothing Phoney," *Canadian Art*, Fall 1987, p. 72.