

It can be said that things begin at their edges, for it is only at the edges that we perceive (or can be perceived by) anything else. As physically true as this may be, the psychic truth of inner depths persists. We persist in knowing that things are deeper than their surfaces, are more than the sum of their parts. This is part of being human. The evolutionary biologist Ellen Dissanayake sees art as based in the evolution of the human species, specifically in the need to “make special,” that is to place an “artifact or activity in a ‘realm’ different from the everyday.”<sup>1</sup> Art, she contends, is for that making special, and it comes from the same biological drives that created play, language, and ritual. Art strives to bring the depths to the surface.

The specialness of art is often tied up with place—with creating objects that, in rendering the ordinary special, make *places* out of what were formally mere things or sites. As has been said many times before, art can transcend time and space, can create a world for those who choose to experience it. In *The Outermost House*, Jean Paul Lemieux, a master of painting place, transports us to the edge of a settlement—right to that point where the human place ends and the world begins. There, as both Lemieux and the New Brunswick poet John Thompson knew so well, “At the edge of the chopping, there are no secrets.”<sup>2</sup>

On the right of the canvas we see a sliver of house, perched on a grassy ridge looking out over the vast expanse of the St. Lawrence River, choppy water leading the eye to the misty and distant far shore. This work, like so many of Lemieux’s landscapes from what has come to be called his “classic period” (from 1956 to 1970, according to Michèle Grandbois<sup>3</sup>), features “empty spaces and a bare horizon line crossing a plastic, flat field.”<sup>4</sup>

Lemieux’s work from this period often depicts lone figures, highlighting what Grandbois, among others, have identified as an existential sense of the “loneliness and smallness of human beings before the infinite horizons of the vast landscapes of Canada.”<sup>5</sup> Here, though, the house stands in for the figure, and while it is certainly dwarfed by the expanse of the St. Lawrence and the mountains on the other side, this work depicts another of Lemieux’s preoccupations, and arguably his main theme: the persistence of human presence in the vast land of Quebec (and Canada). Specifically, his work, as profoundly and thoughtfully local as that of his great peer Alex Coville, is about Québécois culture and its persistence. This persistence is in the face of harshness of the land, certainly, but more importantly, the vastness that most threatens is not the land, but English North American culture with its “made in USA” ubiquity. Lemieux’s work is less about loneliness and isolation than it is about endurance, about perseverance. About making special places. It is not despairing, but optimistic. “Here we are,” his paintings assert, “and here we will stay.”

We are only really alone inside our heads—in the landscape there is always another, even if it is just the horizon, the earth beneath our feet, or the vastness of the sky. The outermost house of a settlement and the edge of the chopping are both the beginning and the end of a place, a place carved out of the world by human effort, a place for human dwelling. Indeed, *The Outermost House* is welcoming; it offers the possibility of gathering us up, of shelter, and reminds us that while we may be fundamentally alone, we need not be lonely. The local can speak to us whether or not it is our locale. *The Outermost House* evokes an

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* University of Washington Press, 1988, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> John Thompson, “Down Below,” *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*, edited by Peter Sanger Goose Lane Editions, 1995, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Michèle Grandbois, *Jean-Paul Lemieux: Life & Work* Art Canada Institute, 2016, e-book.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

enduring human presence amidst the immensity of the world, poised between earth and sky, making the landscape more than just a site, but turning it into a special place, where we can see that our limits are really our beginnings.

Ray Cronin