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SMART: Alex Colville and Henry Moore



Alex Colville's Infantry, near Nijmegen, Holland
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Tom Smart | The curator

The persistent image of an artist working alone in the studio without being hindered by the noises and distractions of the outside world is a stubborn one to erase. We want to believe that creativity emerges fully formed from an artist's imagination and talents. Genius is supposed to be an innate quality that uniquely qualifies an artist to be judged as an innovator whose vision is pure, untainted by influences from external sources or by other artists.

The opposite is closer to the truth. Artists are affected by what goes on around them and by the work of their contemporaries or historical sources. They draw upon other art, whether consciously or not, blending it with their own ideas and styles. By comparing a work of art to its influential source, it often illuminates much about the mysteries of the creative process. A turn of a line, a particular use of a colour, the echoing of shape and form, all of these can tell us about an artist's virtuosity as they move among sources and influences. Knowing how an artist interprets past art, contemporary idioms or pays homage to their influential peers can reveal thought processes and the nature of a creative process.

A tightly focused exhibition that recently opened at Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery entitled "Alex Colville and Henry Moore" sheds new light on the work of one of Canada's more revered and inscrutable artists whose work is called both magical and real. In Ray Cronin's essay published in exhibition catalogue, Cronin takes us on a journey of discovery about Colville's enigmatic art by showing how he drew inspiration from his near contemporary, British sculptor Henry Moore.

Moore's reputation in Great Britain is much like Colville's in Canada. He is seen as capturing a fundamental truth about his country's collective spirit. Moore worked in many media. His large format abstract sculptures take their cues from a variety of different sources in art history and from the natural world. He found in animal bones, particularly elephant skulls, an endlessly interesting lexicon about how shapes and masses flow into one another.

In his hands, this transformation of forms is rendered in the most lyrical of terms. There is a deep sensuality in his surfaces that makes you want to reach out and caress his sculptures. In the way he draws the human figure, you can see that, while his eye was trained by drawing from animal and human anatomy, he was also skilled at imbuing his images with impenetrable mysteries that prevent you from looking away.

Colville fell under Moore's spell when the young Canadian war artist was stationed in England in the mid 1940s. At the time, Moore's art was everywhere. For the young Colville, Moore's shadow fell over much of British modern art, affecting its course and inspiring many of his followers.

Cronin's pairing of drawings and prints by both artists casts many interesting similarities and differences between the two. Colville's art is characterized by the analysis that he puts into his preparatory studies that led to his finished paintings. His compositions were always established to conform with some invisible truth as established by a mathematical ratio. These ratios were, for Colville, metaphors of fundamental truths that could not be altered by chaotic forces.

When he placed people in his compositions, Colville wanted them to establish the idea that the perfection of the mathematical order was either reinforced by the human presence or cast in doubt. Colville saw in Moore's abstract figures an innate humanity. They embodied anonymous presences, hybrid models came to life because they were molded and sculpted from a variety of materials. For Colville, Moore's people expressed abstract messages that were as true as unseen perfect mathematical relationships. But, in their humanity, they also held out the prospect of being imperfect, unpredictable, and disorderly.

Tension in Colville's art extends from this ever-present collision between what is immutable, unchanging, fundamentally truthful, and what is chaotic, prone to change, unpredictable. Order versus disorder, Colville represented this struggle in every one of his paintings. Moore, his mentor and early muse, gave him a meaningful vocabulary for depicting human beings. In the shifting of form and mass, Colville found ample room to suggest the variability of emotions that lay in the hearts and minds of his subjects, and the impulsive nature of world events that could change irrevocably in the matter of a few seconds, upsetting the political order and status quo, and affecting the freedoms that can



seconds, upsetting the political order and status quo, and affecting the freedoms that can be taken for granted. Colville regarded the negotiation of this tension as the inevitable fate of humanity, a principle that Moore captures in his work as well.

The artistic conversations between Colville and Moore can tell us much in these highly charged times if we listen with our eyes.

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