

# Glorious and Brave: An American's Take on Canadian Art

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Denise Markonish, Ed. *Oh Canada: Contemporary Art from North North America*. The MIT Press, 2012. 400 pp.

From the first images and words of the *Oh, Canada* catalogue, it is evident that Denise Markonish is a curator in love with the thousands of artistic works, the 800 artists, and the dozens of critics, commentators and curators she has discovered, considered, and pulled together in a relatively idiosyncratic manner from a country abutting her own. Following a herculean research process (visiting 400 artist studios in a three-year period over many thousands of miles), Markonish has organized a compelling depiction of contemporary Canadian art around a range of histories, themes and formal, creative considerations. The effort to offer a comprehensive account necessarily introduces limits and blindspots. Markonish herself acknowledges the confines that her approach inevitably generates:

[C]learly a lot gets left out. Canada is a huge country... *Oh, Canada* attempts to...mount an exhibition hailing the creative output of Canada. But be warned, this is just a snapshot, one curator's view, ... a snapshot that will spark a dialogue continuing well after the exhibition is packed in boxes. (52)

The product of an equally ambitious exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) curated by Markonish, this edited volume follows the original curatorial aim to aggregate a comprehensive accounting of artistic works and interventions from Canada in order to make an exponentially larger intervention in the vast public space of the MASS MoCA structure, calling attention to the multi-faceted nature of Canadian artistic work, dialogues and histories within an international context. This was meant to be a grand public intervention into a substantive "terrain vague" (Sassen). Even with the gaps and omissions in the exhibition that the catalogue exemplifies, *Oh, Canada* is an intriguing stroll through the state of art in Canada and its relationship to what Canadian art critic Sarah Milroy has provocatively called a "counter-narrative to the Canadian art A-list" in her article about the exhibition in *Canadian Art* (Milroy).

This catalogue is a visually rich, if somewhat cacophonous contribution to the discus

sion of Canadian art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Using mostly accessible language, the book is organized geographically from west to east, including a few highlights from northern Canada. At 400 pages, it boasts 300 images reflecting high production values, and 62 short interviews of (and by) the artists involved, providing a recognizable rhythm to the catalogue (pp. 68-87 for British Columbia; 90-101 for Yukon-based artists; 108-139 for Alberta; etc.). Additionally, there are six literary contributions (one per *region*, spanning an immense time period and types of writing, obviously a personal selection by Markonish), and 14 commentaries (one per province and territory – almost) from individual contemporary art curators. The catalogue offers evidence of the vibrant and highly fluid network of artists and curators across the country. It suggests several points of entrée into the state of the visual arts discourse, as well as providing a richly provocative set of images, artist statements and glimpses of the present-day Canadian social imaginary concerning the visual arts. It explicitly does not set out to be a compendium of Canadian art, but to illuminate the fruits of a fascinated outsider's snowballing journey through the field.

In contrast to Markonish's express desire to spark dialogue rather than claim exhaustiveness, the blurb on The MIT Press website for the book makes a somewhat more sweeping claim: "*Oh, Canada* is an unprecedented, near-encyclopedic guide to Canadian contemporary art, and to Canada itself." Recalling tourism-generated provincial or regional studio maps, the blurb on the back of the book states this catalogue "... offer[s] a new kind of travel guide with art as the main attraction." Never mind that Windsor (Ontario) didn't make it to the frontispiece map because it was too far south to comfortably fit the illustration, that Newfoundland is spelled New Foundland, that few towns are marked, or that several of the islands north of Inuvik and Pangnirtung seem to be simply too far north to warrant inclusion. There are several other successful ways to probe the state of art in Canada today suggested in the catalogue. Like the representation of Canada on the frontispiece, some could have been much more deeply pursued, if only space had allowed.

An editorial tension between the temptation to make grand claims, and a more pragmatic awareness of the limits of the *Oh, Canada* survey is present throughout the volume. Structurally, Markonish's major curatorial essay (18-53) leads the catalogue, buttressed by an introduction and a foreword, and book-ended by two seemingly random lists of Canadian artists and/or celebrities (364-367), and two maps (one representing key cities attached to the inside front and back bindings, and another, "born in/norw reside in" trajectory map of all the artists, 368-69). Though Markonish depended on the conceit of tackling an overwhelmingly large land as her starting point, based on the final entries, she seems to have aimed for a more substantive engagement with themes other than the land. Once she lets the artists' works and words speak, the catalogue's slightly awkward reliance on geographic framing simply

falls away, and the work establishes its own rhythm, so that stronger themes and patterns can emerge.

Markonish outlines several organizing themes in her lengthy curator essay. It's evident from the over-representation within some geographic regions that Markonish's determination to include primarily mid-career artists, particularly several not already well-known in the United States, was more of an organizing principle than geography. In the essay, she starts off with geographically-based themes, then quickly moves on to non-geographic ones. First comes Canada's square miles and prairie sky (seven artists plus one Newfoundlander), then Aboriginal artists (six artists named) and one Acadian artist (20-26). This is followed by a brief consideration of a few important tropes: "the idea of North;" "the hyphenated Canadian" exemplified through the inclusion of two artists; and the stereotype of the apologizing Canadian somehow embodied by Canadians who became famous in the United States through their work on Saturday Night Live, as well as Rick Mercer's 2001 "Talking to Americans" mockumentary program (26-30). Markonish (like Simpson above) spends quite a bit of time on the primarily Ontario-centric art history usually referenced as the foundation of Canadian art, including the Group of Seven, and then moves on to the role of funding and policy in Canada. This is a richer vein for her to mine. For example, she discusses the Canada Council for the Arts as core funders of a strong studio system, "artist-run centres and collective practices" (36), gender and sexuality as sites of engagement (though not race or identity more generally) and the emergence of fine craft and artisanal work as a strength in Canadian art (though she doesn't explicitly include fine craft artists in her survey). Performance work in and outside the museum setting is highlighted as are "provincial schools" (41) (meaning the university-level art colleges) as sites of influence. More idiosyncratically, she lays out a short description of one aspect of painting-based work as a precursor to Canadian artists' evident engagement with international practices and dialogues and uses Quebec's specific mid-20<sup>th</sup> century history as the lead-in to discuss the lack of national survey shows or of Canadian artists in the American art market. Using each of these diverging lenses in turn, Markonish identifies specific *Oh, Canada* artists who fit with each theme. However, she does not provide the page numbers, provinces, territories or chapters where the work and interviews of each of the artists' mentioned can be found. Instead, the table of contents at the front must be consulted, by province or territory. More importantly, the rich themes introduced in the opening essay haven't been carried through the rest of the catalogue effectively, which was designed to reflect primarily geographic framing. Despite the commitment to less-well-known artists spread out over a vast geography, the curatorial thrust actually relies on work found in three art centres: Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary, with nods in the direction of Vancouver and Halifax.

The curatorial essays following Markonish's start with a chronology of "Canadian Art: 1847-1985" by Robin Simpson (54-61) focusing primarily on central Canada's (mostly Ontario's) canonical position in Canadian art history, and on the 1960s. This chronology ends inexplicably just before the powerful engagement with identity politics in the Canadian art world that gained prominence in the 1990s (Gagnon), and which significantly influences some of the newer work generated by the artists included in the exhibition and the catalogue. The rest of the curatorial statements seem to bear mostly incidental relationships to the artists selected by Markonish, charged as these were with expressing the implications of the geographical peculiarities of provincial or territorial "place or space" (Lemos), in response to the question asked by Markonish about "what distinguishes the art made in that place" (qtd in Markonish 236). Some curators take this opportunity to layer in additional counter-narratives while others focus on the social characteristics of people in each area. Still, they seem disconnected from the main narrative developed by Markonish, and could perhaps have benefited from a more dialogical approach similar to that employed in the artists' interviews of one another.

Finally, pointing to the paramouncy of mobility, there are three key ways in which Markonish carefully locates each artist geographically. First, artists' are presented alphabetically within province and territory chapters in the table of contents (10-11). Second, this is replicated and fleshed out with four pages dedicated to each artist in the main section of the catalogue (62-361), by province/territory, and adding details such as where the artists worked at the time of the exhibition's opening plus their birth-town. Usually, one image from each artist takes up their own introductory page, followed by a split of imagery and interview for the other three pages. Each image is carefully labeled. Each artist is interviewed by another artist (whose own page reference is included), often incorporating humour. Thirdly, in a graphic illustration near the back of the catalogue (368-69) and patently reminiscent of an airline route map, each artist is represented by a "named" arrow linking city of birth to current city of work, but not including page references or the spaces lived or worked in between. These visual and organizational cues helpfully point to the relatively mobile nature of artist work and artist gigs in Canada more readily visible in music, dance and theatre communities. It becomes evident that the modestly-sized visual arts community is stretched out over many minor centres located at extremely distant sites, one from another, and that these individuals relocate frequently, often temporarily. Regrettably, this is not fully explored or clearly elucidated in the catalogue, even though themes of geography, landscape and narrative storytelling clearly support it.

At the end of the day, there are more questions than answers: a good sign for a text that aims to generate discussion. Is there a place where this content can be linked to deeper considerations of the larger themes? Is the list of the other 340 artists con-

sidered presented elsewhere? Why so few writers (one from each region), and why these writers? How were the artists paired up to conduct the interviews of each other? Could some of the emergent or specific themes identified in the introductory essay been explored more thoroughly in the body of the catalogue, for example, by the other curators?

I clearly remember artists' and art supporters' excitement in Halifax and Montreal about the opportunities represented through participation in this exhibition, and reading similarly hopeful statements and commentaries in Canadian newspapers and art magazines at the time of installation (e.g. Adams; Helterman; Milroy). Mere inclusion held out the promise of an explicitly Canadian creative synergy in North Adams, Massachusetts in 2012. As ironic as a national Canadian meeting would have been in the U.S.A., it was a welcome opportunity to illustrate the existing modes, dialogues, and networks in which artists are engaged in both national and international environments. At a time when artists' remuneration remains woefully inadequate and arts funding has become marked by loss—including the loss of export assistance and transportation costs as well as hosting or profiling at cultural embassies—it has yet to be seen whether *Oh, Canada* will remain “only” a snapshot or celebratory event or whether (for example) the continued dissemination of the catalogue and the discussions begun there may propel the exhibition into the role of catalyst.

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