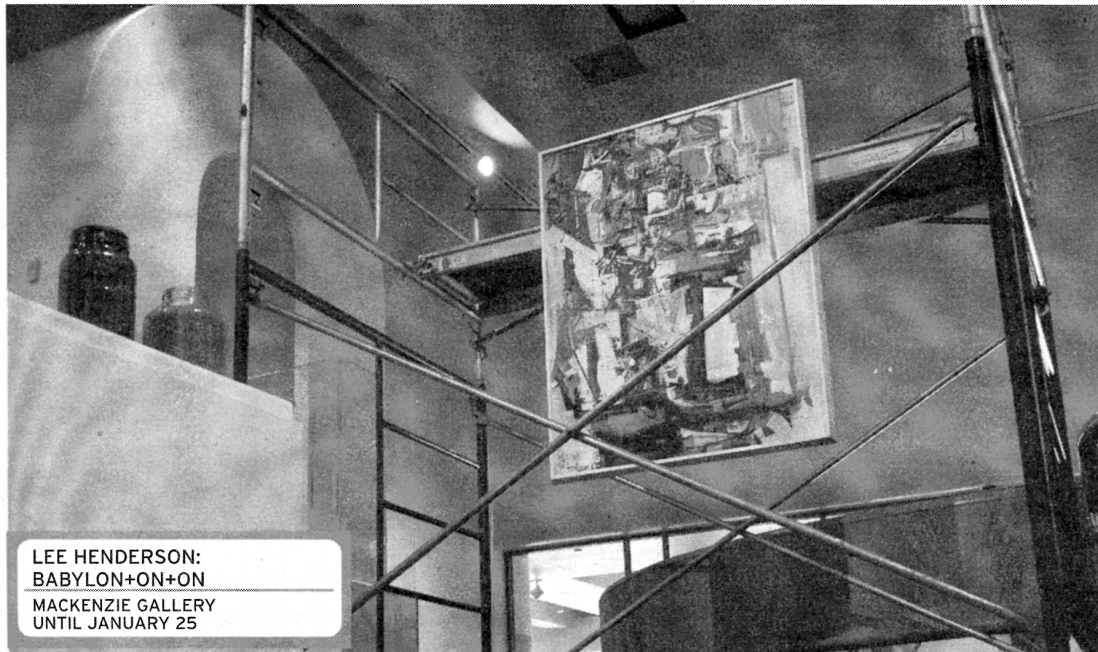


afterhours

The Prairie Dog
Week of January 20th,
2009



LEE HENDERSON:
BABYLON+ON+ON
MACKENZIE GALLERY
UNTIL JANUARY 25

TOWER POWER Harold Town's stupendous abstract is the inspiration for this installation.

Reconstructed Cacophony

Town's recontextualized abstract is a media primer

by Gregory Beatty

Babylon+On+On by U of R Fine Art prof Lee Henderson is the third in a series of shows where the MacKenzie invites a local artist to delve into its permanent collection and pick one or more art works around which to create a show.

In April 2007, Seema Goel presented *Cannon Fodder* where she installed traditional Western landscape paintings and Inuit prints opposite each other in the expansive Kenderdine gallery to explore differing aesthetic, socio-cultural and ideological attitudes toward nature. Later that year, Sarah Abbott did an installation called *The Last Fish* with an aquatic/environmental theme.

Now, the series continues with Henderson's curatorial effort.

Henderson builds *Babylon+On+On* around artist Harold Town's 1955 painting, "The Tower of Babbling," which Town was inspired to create after the CBC built a TV station near his Toronto studio.

The painting is an abstract depiction of the furious cacophony of the building's construction, but it also conveys an awareness of the surging power of

the post-war broadcast media.

Town painted the work at a time when he was beginning to attract attention as arguably the leading member of the Toronto-based group of abstract expressionists known as Painters Eleven. The painting was purchased by the MacKenzie in 1957. (The gallery's director at the time was Ron Bloore — a member of the internationally acclaimed Regina Five.) Along with Edmonton, Vancouver and Montreal, with the Paul-Émile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle-led Automatistes, Toronto and Regina were hotbeds for abstract art in Canada in the '50s.

Vibrant, yet criticized. In the nationalist '60s and early '70s some critics and artists dismissed the work of Town and his contemporaries as a "branch plant" form of abstract expressionism imported from New York. The charge has some legitimacy as New York, aided by an influx of European painters fleeing the tumult of WWII, was the birthplace of abstract expressionism in the 1940s. Not only did young Canadian artists of that era regard New York as a Mecca to visit, in Saskatchewan, several high-profile New York artists and

one critic participated in a series of famous workshops at Emma Lake that helped spread the abstract expressionist gospel.

Still, to cavalierly dismiss the work produced by Canadian abstractionists would be a mistake. Not *all* of it was good, admittedly. I learned that in 1993 when the MacKenzie hosted the ambitious National Gallery-curated *Crisis of Abstraction* that showcased dozens of masterworks from that era. The Painters Eleven left me cold. Viewing their work I got a real "Little Apple" vibe related to Toronto's longstanding desire to emulate New York.

(Perhaps it was hometown bias on my part, but I thought the Regina Five rocked in that show.)

Regardless, Town's choice of subject matter for "The Tower of Babbling" is a good rebuttal to criticism that these Canadian abstract painters were a bunch of New York wannabes. Town's subject is a new CBC building, after all. When he did the painting, one would be hard-pressed to find a timelier or more potent symbol for all things "Canadian" than the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Writing to the MacKenzie following the painting's acquisition, Town noted he'd worked on the painting for the same length of time as it took contractors to build the station. "When I started... I determined to paint it in definite stages as the work progressed. I worked on the picture only when I felt a real change in the building."

Aside from the visual stimulus provided by the construction activity, he added, "I became very much taken with the thought of... what would finally issue from the building [and how great its influence would be]."

Compare this to our depressing present day, when, thanks to repeated budget cuts and a much-altered media landscape, the CBC plays a much smaller role in the lives of Canadians than it once did. Which is a little hard to take since for most of its 72-year history it's served as a beacon of Canadian sovereignty and identity.

Henderson addresses both facets of the painting in his installation. Walking up the staircase to the gallery's second floor, your eye is caught by a five-metre scaffold. Evocative of a construction site, the scaffold, upon closer inspection, is found to hold Town's painting.

Pictorially, the painting resembles a cross between a tower and an aerial view of a construction site. As related in Genesis, the Biblical legend of the Tower of Babel that Town alludes to in the title refers to the city of Babel where everyone spoke the same language. But when residents started to get too big for their britches, in God's mind anyway, He caused them to all start speaking different languages to hinder their ability to communicate (and conspire) with each other.

(There's no mention in the Bible of God gutting the Tower's funding over a couple of decades, but those were different times.)

Situated in front of the scaffold is a stand with three empty paint containers and a four-pronged "brush". Point the brush toward different areas of the painting, and you activate over two dozen audio loops that were recorded by Henderson and students at the university, some in the vicinity of Regina's CBC headquarters at Broad & College.

At their best, media outlets are a valuable tool to promote communication. But as even Town was savvy enough to realize in his relatively barren — by modern standards anyway — media environment, because of the potential for ideological bias and slavish commercialization, media proliferation doesn't automatically guarantee improved communication. A louder cacophony of babbling chatter does not make for better news reporting. **PD**

Darrol Hofmeister, sharpshooter photography