

# Defining the abstract

By Philip Monk

It is a frustrating reality that public taste in Canada is generally out of sync with the work of contemporary artists: the nation's heart lies with the landscapes of painters long dead. How we got from there to here—from the beloved Group of Seven to abstract art—is a major question in Canadian art history and the answer lies in part in *Jock Macdonald: The Inner Landscape*. This retrospective, which opened earlier this month at the Art Gallery of Ontario and travels to Windsor, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Vancouver during the next year, shows that the odd turns painting took toward abstraction are not so illogical.

In English Canada, abstraction had its sources in a nationalist spiritualism based on the Group of Seven's reverence of the North and the Theosophical religious beliefs shared by many artists of the time, notably Lawren Harris. As a bridge from the representational, Macdonald helped bring Canadian painting to the edge of abstraction, but he never turned from nature. While the exhibition highlights three periods of abstracting—the semiabstract art deco of 1935 to 1941, the surrealist automatism of 1945 to 1950 and the fully abstract

**'The Black Tusk, Garibaldi Park': painting reduced to abstract shapes**



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**'Petit Landscape': subconscious thought freed from moral or esthetic fetters**

inner landscapes of 1956 to 1960—a viewer could easily mistake his early paintings for those of the Group. The early '30s landscapes, such as *The Black Tusk, Garibaldi Park* with its undulating swirls of pastel color, show Macdonald's debt to his friend and colleague Fred Varley, as do the snow-laden stumps of *In the White Forest* to Lawren Harris' heavy art nouveau-like

snowscapes of two decades earlier. The mountain, more than a natural form in the world, was the elemental shape of a Theosophical spiritual triangle and symbolized a holy form for Macdonald, as it did for Harris. With painting reduced to abstract shapes, the artist could compose and harmonize forms as a musician weaves melodies.

Macdonald immediately translated this artistic credo into the cacophonous symphony of *Flight* or the jazz fluorescent fecundity of *The Wave*. These deco-like designs, which he called modalities or thought forms in the turn-of-the-century Theosophical jargon, were not accurate likenesses of the visual effects of sun, wind or rain as much as the artist's feeling about them. Even the best European abstractionists, such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, couched their paintings in this language in their esthetic and spiritual search for the fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions. Unfortunately, in their quest for modernity these paintings have an overwrought decorativeness and sometimes look like bad cocktail lounge murals.

What led Macdonald away from this rigid symbolism toward a freer painting style was his discovery of automatism, an attempt to reveal subconscious thought freed from understood moral or esthetic fetters. Macdonald loosely laid watercolor onto the

paper with no aim or subject in mind. Line came later to interpret the forms and create the suggested fantasy landscapes, with comic behemoths in *Arctic Vibrations*, dinosaurs in *Prehistoric World*, dancing skirts, cartoon fish and stick birds in *Russian Fantasy*. Two constant themes were sea and sky; regenerative nature was metaphoric of the artist's creative act. *Petit Landscape*, based in part on Kandinsky's early automatic watercolors, creates an anchorless space through jagged blood red and cool blue color planes while still reminiscent of an exploding world or a wild bouquet of flowers.

Macdonald was not able to abandon the cramped linearity and translate the loose freedom of the automatics into oil until late in life. While teaching at the Ontario College of Art he found the conservative faculty hostile—tearing down his posters for contemporary exhibitions—but there was enthusiastic support from a small group of students and fellow painters. In 1953, after the group exhibition *Abstracts at Home*, a display of paintings in the furniture showrooms of Simpsons, several painters banded together as the Painters Eleven, including Harold Town, William Ronald and the late Jack Bush. Macdonald was de facto leader of Toronto's first abstractionists, and after one of their exhibitions he wrote, "The Group of Seven is all but dead." His bravado was premature: in spite of exhibitions and acclaim outside Canada by eminent critics such as Sir Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg, local interest, weaned on landscape and academic portrait painting, was not overwhelming.

But Macdonald had found his stride and his paintings were in demand; after seeing his 1957 Hart House exhibition Robert Fulford wrote that he was "without question the best young painter in Canada even though he was born in 1897." With the discovery of a plastic-based paint that he mixed with oils, he was able to work with the speed and fluidity of watercolor, but on a larger scale. The images in his paintings no longer recede into space as in a Renaissance painting. With no ground reference, the overlapping transparent planes hover and fluctuate in their own space; the soft, impressionistically brushed organic forms of *Young Summer* create their own Eden-like floating world of languid yellow light. In 1960, the last year of his life, titles ranged from *Growing Serenity* to *Elemental Fury*, the latter with its sombre blues and autumnal browns as natural in feeling in its flight to abstraction as a stormy Georgian Bay by Varley. By following the currents and inner sources of his art, this pioneer brought a generation of artists to the birth of abstraction. ☘

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