

“How am I doing?” Mrs. Nash asked.

By April Mrs. Nash had lost ten pounds. She was not strong enough to walk outside. She was too proud to use a cane or a walker. She leaned on Ann when they went out. Stairs were nearly impossible, but Mrs. Nash had a fearless determination. Despite failing strength and memory, she never gave up. Dave ordered caregivers through Miss Azziz. Few lasted more than a week; they got fed up with her racist complaints and talk of her dead husband or Benny.

One May evening, Mrs. Nash stood in her living room and called Ann on the new cordless phone.

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you,” Her words were slow. She had a bad headache. “It’s a

secret.”

Dave came on the phone. “You have to tell us, or I won’t let Ann come over.”

“I just wrote my will,” Mrs. Nash paused. It hurt to talk. “I want to show you — ”

Ann took back the phone. “Mom, I’m not interested in your will. I’m not interested in your money. Katy and Eric aren’t interested either.”

“I’ll give it all to Benny.” Mrs. Nash found the words with sudden viciousness.

“You need to be taken care of. You’re getting worse.”

Mrs. Nash pressed the off-button on the cordless. She staggered toward the sideboard, to a picture of Stewart pushing Eric, Katy and Ann on the garden swing. Ann held Benny; he was a pup. Her mind tried to recall the garden

where she had been happy and free. Her head felt weak, funny. The phone slipped from her hand.

Something had happened. The garden was gone.

She saw the ceiling. It was dark. She lay on the carpet. Blood pooled on her face. Where was her will? She tried to move; there was too much pain in her legs. Nothing moved except her thought. The hands inched along the floor, groping for the cordless phone. Ann’s number — what was it? She pressed redial.

“Ann? Ann? I’ve a bad fall. Something’s broken. You will come, won’t you?”

Ronald Ruskin
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Lifeworks

Alive in art

Pegi Nicol MacLeod: a life in art

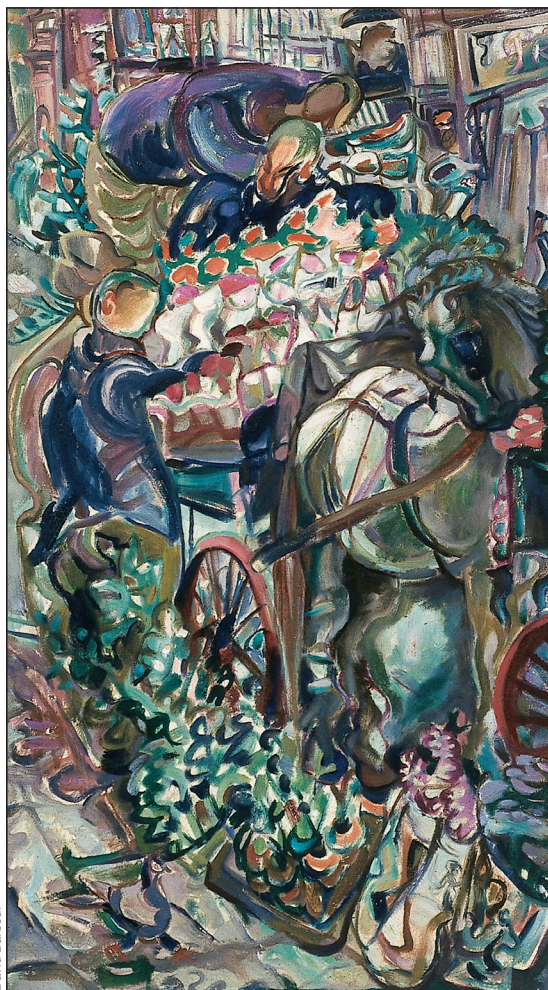
Curated by Laura Brandon
Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa
February 7 – April 17, 2005

Pegi Nicol MacLeod was among Canada’s most prominent artists during the second quarter of the twentieth century. In her short lifetime she showed her paintings extensively across the country, alongside the likes of A.Y. Jackson and the rest of the Group of Seven. She won prestigious national art prizes and received important commissions, including one for war art from the National Gallery of Canada. She was a founder of, and a respected teacher at, a summer art school at the University of New Brunswick. Although these credentials are enough to warrant the current restoration of her work to the public arena, her achieve-

ments are even more exceptional because she gained respect as an artist in an almost exclusively male milieu. As one discovers when visiting Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Life in Art, the potential for gender-based barriers to her acceptance in the art world was of no consequence to this free-spirited and determined young woman (called “Pegi” by all who knew and admired her), just as familial objections and constant financial struggles could not stop her from pursuing her vocation. Pegi was committed to being an artist above all else. That she was able to achieve her goal attests to her talent, her single-minded commitment, and the beguiling force of her personal-



Pegi Nicol MacLeod. *The Slough (verso)*, 1928. Oil on board. Collection of Marta Smith and Robert Muir.



Pegi Nicol MacLeod. *Good Friday*, undated. Oil on canvas. Art Gallery of Hamilton. Bequest of H.S. Southam, 1966.

ity, through which she easily gained friends and supporters.

All of these qualities radiate from the works that make up the first comprehensive, national exhibition of Pegi's work since her untimely death from cancer at the age of 45. Curated by Laura Brandon and scheduled for a Canada-wide tour, *Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Life in Art* collectively explodes off the walls of the Carleton University Art Gallery. These 55 oil and water-

colour paintings (selected from among hundreds in existence) swirl with colour and movement and are infused with energy and immediacy in both subject matter and approach. Pegi painted what she saw and felt in the landscapes and cityscapes, the people and objects around her. Her muses were found in whatever environment she happened to be in. Housebound with a new baby in a New York City tenement in the late 1930s, she painted her child and the changing scenes outside her window.

Wherever she was, Pegi painted constantly and almost compulsively: for her, art was equivalent to life. Whatever their subject matter, her paintings observe the immediate sensory pleasure and, occasionally, the pain of day-to-day living. Symbol-infused, highly personal self-portraits, and paintings of the activities of female WW II reservists and tenement apartment neighbours pulsate with a vitality that extends beyond the

edges of the works, almost suggesting that Pegi herself continues to be present in them. It is this sentient quality that is the most enduring achievement of her art.

Pegi died in 1949 in New York City, far from the outer reaches of the Canadian art establishment. For over half a century, her art remained almost completely hidden from the public eye but continued to be highly regarded in many private collections. Curator

Laura Brandon's tireless commitment to returning Pegi's work into the view of the public reflects the same strength of character that Pegi herself possessed. Brandon's efforts have made it possible for Pegi Nicol MacLeod's long-observed presence to be keenly felt by every visitor to the show.

Vivian Tors
Visual Artist
Ottawa, Ont.



Pegi Nicol MacLeod. *Untitled (Nude Study)*, circa 1934. Watercolour on paper. Collection of Suzanne Jackson, Toronto, Ont.

The exhibition will travel to The Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Oshawa) and The Beaverbrook Art Gallery (Fredericton). Laura Brandon's biography, *Pegi by Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), and a National Film Board documentary directed by Michael Ostroff, *Pegi Nicol, Something Dancing About Her*, have also been released in conjunction with the exhibition.