

Lifeworks

The existential art of Alex Colville

If my painting is about anything," Alex Colville remarked at the preview of a retrospective of his work recently mounted at the National Gallery in Ottawa, "it is about being and time." "Being and Time" was also the title of the lecture he gave at the gallery's overflowing auditorium a few days later, in studied reference to Martin Heidegger's masterwork, *Sein und Zeit* (1926). Slowly, seriously, yet wryly acknowledging the impenetrability of Heidegger's text, he read from a passage that speaks of "pure nows" and "a mode of temporality already disclosed and ecstatically stretched out." Our sense of time, Colville explains, makes possible our sense of being. These two aspects of consciousness are inseparable.

Certainly, Colville's precise draughtsmanship and hyperreal rendering of surfaces contribute to the heightened sense of *presence* in his works. But equally important is his ordering of space, which he achieves by arcane means, using the "golden section" of classical art, Le Corbusier's "Modulor" system of proportion, and a mathemati-

cal sequence called the "Fibonacci series." The details are intimidating, the end result equally so. Not only is each element arranged in a calculated relation to every other, but the viewer is positioned in a way that, as Philip Fry comments, is deeply involving.¹ The use of perspective in *Cyclist and Crow* (1981), for example, places the viewer "a bit forward of the woman, our eyes level with her head and the bird in flight. ... We are riding along parallel ... we share her view." Following her glance, we participate in this coincidence of cyclist and crow — an arbitrary, fleeting, and yet "absolute" moment.¹

Will the cyclist catch up with the crow? Perhaps nowhere are Colville's frozen narratives so suspenseful as in *Woman with Revolver* (1987), a work inspired by an actual event. Made headless by the top of the doorway, is the subject depersonalized? Maybe, but she is also monumentalized. We do not see the anxiety in her face, only the strength of her body. By portraying her nude, Colville leaves no doubt of her potential victimization, her relative innocence; at



Alex Colville, *Cyclist and Crow*, 1981. Acrylic on hardboard, 70.6 cm x 100 cm.



Alex Colville, *Woman with Revolver*, 1987. Acrylic on hardboard, 56.5 cm x 28.2 cm

the same time, he subverts the aesthetic category of the nude by equipping his subject with a gun. The vanishing point, close to her breast, brings the viewer's eye from the complicated angles of the stairwell to the target, her bodily integrity. The only way to cope with the anxiety this painting provokes is to participate in the woman's stillness and have complete confidence in her. This must be one of the most powerful images of women in all of Canadian art.

Alex Colville: Milestones was presented at the National Gallery from June 23 to Sept. 17, to mark the artist's 80th birthday. How time flies. How it stands still.

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Reference

1. Fry P. *Alex Colville: Paintings, prints and processes 1983-1994*. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; 1994.