

Lifeworks

Modern times two in Cape Breton

The highlands of Cape Breton Island may be best known for fiddlers and coal miners, but they can also stake a claim to famous denizens of the New York art scene. Photographer Robert Frank, sculptor Richard Serra, composer Philip Glass and Canadian artists John Nesbitt and Jacques Hurtubise are but a few of the internationally renowned artists who make Cape Breton their home for at least part of the year.

June Leaf, a senior American modernist, lives in Mabou, Cape Breton, half the year with her husband, Robert Frank. Leaf is well known in the United States and Europe for her paintings and sculptures, but in Nova Scotia she is better known for her periodic stints as a visiting artist at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Her work is not often seen in Canada, but that may be changing. This fall Halifax's Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery exhibited a selection of her work under the title *Cape Breton Modern: June Leaf*. Leaf had her first solo exhibition in 1948 in Chicago, and she has been showing regularly ever since. The works in the Halifax exhibition (which was first

mounted at Toronto's Wynick/Tuck Gallery this past spring) present a tightly focused look at Leaf's current work. The three sculptures, five paintings and one drawing are all figurative, combining careful observation with cutting insights into the often unbalanced power relationships between woman and men. The most poignant of the paintings, *Pregnant with two Gentlemen*, depicts a pregnant woman flanked by two standing male figures. The scene is an interrogation: one of the men leans against a long table, the other stands behind the seated woman. The weighty solidity of the woman, who sinks into her chair as if into a feather bed, is counterbalanced by the skeletal treatment of the two male figures. The air of menace is palpable, if indefinable.

Leaf's sculptures hark back to childhood toys, fashioned — often with articulated parts — from welded and forged steel, and from wood. *Centaur Woman*, carved from wood and encased in armour fashioned from a tin can, evokes its mythical subject with an economical grace and elegance. *Figure on a Hoist*, the largest piece in this small show, is an ungainly, skeletal figure that, nonetheless, has remarkable presence. Leaf has enjoyed critical success for decades, and in her 30 years of living in Cape Breton she has maintained her career exhibiting in New York, Chicago and other centres. For the Halifax show, MSVU Art Gallery curator Ingrid Jenkner paired Leaf with another Cape Breton artist, one who, until this exhibition, had slipped off the radar screen of the art world.



Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

June Leaf, *Figure on a Hoist*, 1999–2000. Forged iron, sheet metal, tin, 58.4 × 36.8 × 53.3 cm



Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery

Terrence Syverson. *Untitled 1–26*, early 1990s–2001. Acrylic on canvas, alder twigs, found materials (paint paddles, spiralled wire, plastic jar fragments, bottle corks, cotton swabs), 45.7 × 45.7 × 7.6 cm to 114.3 × 76.2 × 53.3 cm

Terrence Syverson was born in Saskatchewan and, early on, studied with Arthur McKay. Through McKay, Syverson met American painter Barnett Newman. In 1962 Syverson moved to New York, where, as a member of Newman's inner circle, he enjoyed critical and commercial success until he moved to Cape Breton in 1976. Since then he has immersed himself in his studio practice, rarely exhibiting his work anywhere at all.

Syverson is, in many ways, a forgotten artist. However, that will soon change. The remarkable exhibition mounted at MSVU Art Gallery, featuring works from the 1970s until the present, revealed a senior painter at the height of his powers. Syverson's large, minimalist-inspired abstracts are a revelation: it is amazing that an artist could remain so focused, for so long, in near-total, albeit self-imposed, isolation. The show could be loosely divided into four parts: large, oval paintings dating from 1971 until the late 80s; smaller, square paintings from the 90s; a series of elliptical drawings; and a huge sculptural installation, which is constantly being re-fashioned, made from stones and other

objects. Jenkner describes Syverson's large paintings as resembling mandalas, although I would liken them to cross-sections of stones, akin to geodes revealing crystalline treasures. Each painting has one prime hue, built up in hundreds of translucent layers of acrylic paint.

Syverson uses alder twigs to create areas of openness in many of his works, rings within rings that create distinct textures and areas of depth. The use of thickly woven twigs is taken to great lengths in his most recent paintings. In these, Syverson wraps twigs in canvas,

building up surfaces that are inches thick, adding paint and found objects to create dynamic and engaging works. The middle of the gallery was taken up by his untitled sculpture, a huge work that comprises beach stones, varying sizes of soapstone blocks and egg-like forms made from masking tape. Each object perches on a piece of clear Plexiglas tubing, seemingly hovering a few inches over the white "base" of the sculpture.

Syverson's works are intense and very physical. He eschews representation, choosing to concentrate on the

work as an *object* rather than as a depiction of any specific *subject*. The viewer cannot help but feel overwhelmed in the face of these works, dwarfed by the sheer power of their presence.

Cape Breton Modern: Terrence Syverson will travel to Regina where it opens at the Dunlop Gallery on Nov. 10. In February 2002, it will open at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown.

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