

Alex Colville (1920-2013)

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Like many of his generation, he came of age during the Second World War, and post-war he was strongly influenced by existentialism. For many survivors of that cataclysmic conflict, questions about the meaning of life were neither trivial nor self-indulgent. Instead, they spoke to a deep need to make sense of the world and its seeming indifference to humanity. “After the War,” Colville once told an interviewer, “I had this great desire to make sense out of life.” To make sense, he sought order.

For Colville, that order was to be found in the people, places, and animals that made up his day-to-day life. Balanced and cohesive in their compositions, his images feel both solid and contingent at once. Order’s opposite, chaos, always lurks at the edges of his images. Colville’s images were constructed on a carefully crafted geometric foundation, often based on the golden section so beloved of Renaissance painters. Each element in a painting is carefully and deliberately plotted, which can be seen in the numerous studies he would make for each image.

“My work is pessimistic, but my life is happy,” Colville told the National Gallery of Canada magazine, “I see the human condition as tragic.” Personally optimistic yet wary of the human project, Colville painted shadows in every scene. But for every *Pacific*, *Horse and Church*, or *Man with a Target Pistol*, images that appear brooding and sombre, there are paintings such as *Refrigerator*, *Dog in Car*, *Dog and Groom*, or *Kiss and Honda*, that show relationships between people, often couples, and between people and animals, that exude not a sense of tragedy but instead a certain poignant optimism.

Colville early on decided to make his life—personal as well as professional—in the small towns of the Maritimes. As he wrote in 1951, he was looking for “the time, the feeling of belonging, the solitude, and, above all, the freedom from distraction which I needed to become oriented as an artist.” After serving as an artillery officer and then an Official War Artist during the Second World War, he returned to Sackville, New Brunswick, taking up a teaching position at Mount Allison University, from which he had graduated in 1942. Sackville was just across the Tantramar Marshes from Amherst where Colville grew up (he was born in Toronto in 1920 and his family moved to Nova Scotia in 1929) and would be home until 1973, when the Colvilles moved to Wolfville, Nova Scotia, another small university town, this one the birthplace of

Colville's wife, Rhoda. Colville had quit teaching in 1963, and for the rest of his life he would make his living as an artist.

Once he had retired from teaching his career began to accelerate. In 1966 Colville was included in the Canadian contingent at the 33rd Venice Biennale. Art dealer Harry Fischer saw his work there and began to represent him in his London gallery. In 1965 the Canadian Mint held a competition to for artists to design a set of coins celebrating Canada's centennial. Colville's submission was so well received that the Mint offered him the commission for the entire set: penny, nickel, dime, quarter, half dollar, and dollar (In 2020, in honour of the centenary of Alex Colville's birth, the Canadian Mint is reissuing the entire set as a limited edition, "Tribute to Alex Colville," in gold). In 1967 Colville was named to the Order of Canada, continuing a trend of rising popular and critical success. In 1975 Colville received the Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prize, and in 1981 he was appointed chancellor of Acadia University (by which time he had received honorary doctorates from seven Canadian universities, including Acadia).

In 1978 Colville began a long partnership with Mira Godard Gallery, exhibiting in both the Toronto and Montreal locations. In the ensuing years Colville would have numerous exhibitions at the Godard Galley, which now exclusively represents the Colville estate.

In 1955 Colville produced his first serigraph, *After Swimming*, and in the ensuing decades he produced 35 screen prints (usually in editions of 70), ending the series in 2002 with *Willow*. Colville never worked with a printshop or a master printer, choosing instead to make each print himself. This self-sufficiency was typical of Colville, who also designed and built the frames for all of his paintings.

Colville's work is included in every major public collection in Canada, including those of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Montreal Museum of Fine Art, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. His work is also held in several major international collections, including those of the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, Germany; Musée National D'Art Moderne, Paris; and Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne. His work is also found in numerous corporate and private collections world-wide. Four nationally and internationally touring shows were organized of his work in his lifetime, the first by the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1983. On his

death, the AGO was in the process of mounting a major retrospective curated by Andrew Hunter. *Alex Colville* opened in Toronto in 2014 and travelled to the National Gallery of Canada in 2015.

Alex Colville's work represents one of the most coherent bodies of painting in Canadian art history, a sustained, thoughtful practice that sought to find order in a chaotic world. As he told MacLean's magazine in 2003, "in a sense the things I show are moments in which everything seems perfect and something is revealed." That critical perception remained central to his practice from 1950 until his final painting in 2010. Alex Colville died at his home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia on July 16, 2013.