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ARTS 2003

The Country Connection

M A G A Z I N E



STUDIO TOURS

HERITAGE & NOSTALGIA

SUMMER/AUTUMN 2003



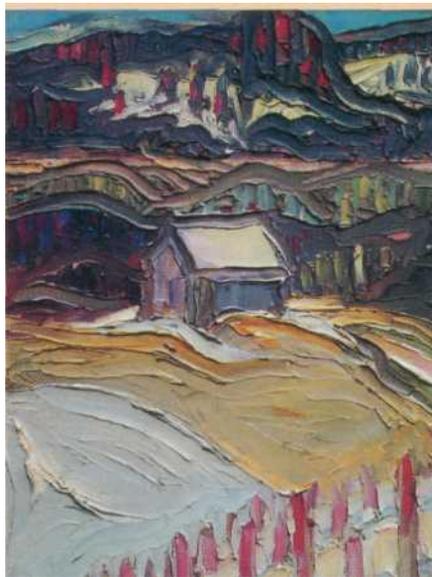
"The Sunday Drive" — Contemporary Quilt by Bridget O'Flaherty

DISPLAY UNTIL DEC. 15, 2003

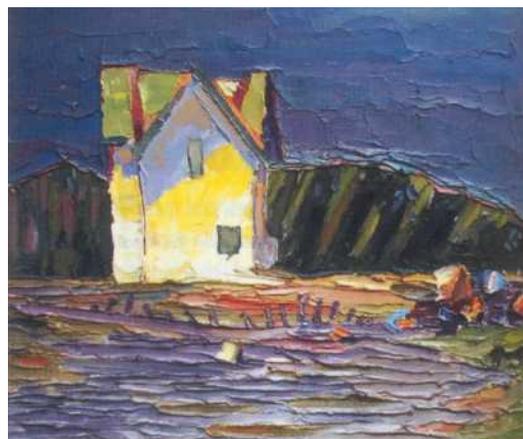
Hidden Landscapes

The Art of William Caldwell

by Dennis and Sandi Jones



Untitled Landscape, oil

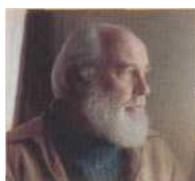


Untitled Landscape, oil



Working Drawing, pastel

“He felt...that the art would be good only if he made doing it as difficult as possible.”

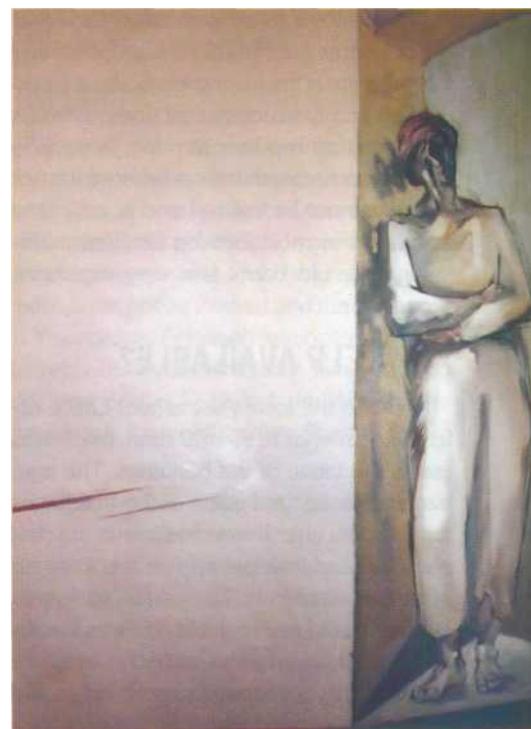


Run, plunge, dive into the depths. As an artist, your singular duty and responsibility will be to perceive, understand and then transmit this awareness and this truth to mankind.

—William Caldwell
(1928-1998)

A few miles north of Perth, Ontario, the Canadian Shield thrusts up through the soil to become a range of rock-ribbed, tree-cloaked hills. These are the Lanark Highlands, a country of granite outcrops, weathered rail fences and tiny villages with names like Elphin, Flower Station and Watson's Corners. As you drive its winding roads, you realize also that it's a country of hidden places and small, insoluble mysteries: the asphalt swoops into a narrow valley and there, crumbling inch by inch into the earth, are a sagging log barn and a rusted, horse-drawn plough. Barely glimpsed, they vanish as quickly as they appeared, taking their hidden histories with them.

Watson's Corners, however, is easy enough to find and not conspicuously mysterious. An



Entry into Madness, oil

old blacksmith's shop stands near the village centre and, with its high stone foundation and worn shiplap siding, merits hardly a second glance. But there *is* a secret here. Behind those weathered boards is the studio of William Caldwell, one of the most extraordinary artists Canada has ever produced.

Caldwell didn't come from Watson's Corners. He and his wife Lorraine moved into the frame house beside the blacksmith's shop in 1974, arriving by a roundabout path that included Caldwell's successful career in graphic design, his founding of the Art Gallery of Oshawa (later, the McLaughlin Art Gallery) and his ultimate decision to abandon his *career* for the unpredictable world of the artist.

In 1970, that decision had taken him and Lorraine to the Newfoundland outport of Rocky Harbour, where they spent four difficult years as Caldwell taught himself to draw. His subjects were the people of the outport, and by the time he and Lorraine left for Watson's Corners, he had captured them in myriads of drawings. He destroyed most of this work, considering it inadequate, but he finally had the tools he needed. He could now do *anything* with a line.

He'd found something else, too. In coming to know the outport's men and women, he'd discovered an empathy with them that put an indelible stamp on his art. He hadn't intended this; as he himself put it, "I went to paint landscapes, but I saw and painted people." Ultimately, he did become a landscape artist, but not in exactly the way he'd expected.

After the move to Watson's Corners, he occasionally put the Lanark countryside on canvas, usually as a gift to Lorraine. Barns, farmhouses, a fence line beside a muddy road—he captured the harsh, beautiful country of the highlands with an unhesitating brush. There is a suppressed energy in these works, as if something lived and breathed just beneath the textures of the paint. The paint hides it, but at the same time reveals its existence.

Those small canvases are therefore important (although Caldwell considered them merely occasional) because they fall into the pattern of concealment and revelation that shapes his portrayals of human beings. These portrayals are also landscapes, but they are the psychic and spiritual landscapes concealed in everyone. Such places are hard to reach and harder to paint, but this suited Caldwell perfectly—he was fascinated by difficult things, a fascination that extended to his working conditions. Most artists want a well-lit workspace, not Caldwell. His studio, which remains almost as he left it, is lit by narrow windows set into the shop's thick foundation



Hopes that Were and Aren't, oil

walls; it is dim even on the brightest of summer afternoons. "He felt," a friend observed, "that the art would be good only if he made doing it as difficult as possible."

This worked for Caldwell. He had an uncanny ability to capture the psyches of the men and women who sat for him, as if drawing back surface after surface to reveal the secret landscapes of their lives. He portrays them as deeply individual, but they are also intimately connected to the country in which they live: a place of stony pastures wedged between cedar swamps, nineteenth-century cemeteries on dusty side roads, and pancake breakfasts at the community hall.

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that abused and degraded
human beings.**

But Caldwell's insight into the people he portrayed was neither detached nor clinical. He had a deep sense of social responsibility and hated the forces that abused and degraded human beings. He struggled all his life against such wrongs. His refusal to compromise cost him much of the success that he might otherwise have enjoyed.

The consequences of this engagement are evident in all his work. While many of his drawings reveal an inner sweetness that lightens the heart, the power of his major canvases flows from quite different sources. Their deli-

cate pastel values at first suggest a gentle lyricism, then abruptly and angrily deny it. For what is happening in these works is far from gentle; they reveal human suffering and the infliction of suffering in profoundly unsettling ways. And Caldwell's outrage at what he reveals is obvious in every line he lays on the canvas.

They are not comforting paintings. But if one confronts them and looks deeper into them, another landscape appears, one that affirms the human strength and endurance that makes such suffering possible to bear. Beneath this, in the deepest stratum of the work, lies Caldwell's sadness and compassion for what he called "the tragedy of the forfeiture of enrichment," the lost promise of the men and women he painted. Few contemporary artists have attained such eloquence in the exploration of the human spirit.

Commentators have placed Caldwell's work in the great moral tradition of Bosch, Goya and Francis Bacon. A curator of Canada's National Gallery described his drawings as "among the top in the country." Sadly, his career was cut short by his death in 1998, when he was 70. Most of his life's work, an enormous collection of some 3,000 large and small drawings, scores of landscapes and almost 70 major oil paintings, remain in Watson's Corners under Lorraine Caldwell's stewardship. A rare exhibition and sale of these very important works will be held in Watson's Corners during the Inroads Studio Tour on Labour Day weekend. A second exhibition, at the Balderson Art Gallery in Balderson, Ontario, will be held January 2004 through February 2004. □