Rodman Hall Art Centre
Abstract/Abstracted: "This is not a tree"
3 Dec. 2016 – 12 Feb. 2017

Reflecting on the exhibition *A Painter's Country: Canadian Landscape Paintings Selected from the Permanent Collection* (curator: Stuart Reid) presented at Rodman Hall during the summer of 2016, *Abstract/Abstracted: 'This is not a tree'* presents works by Karel Appel, Frederick S. Coburn, Hans Hartung, Kazuo Nakamura, Carl Schaeffer, and Tony Tascona. Put together, these artworks, also from Rodman Hall's permanent collection, explore a different problematic. How much abstraction is there in representation? In turn, to what extent is an abstract work abstract? *Abstract/Abstracted* highlights, but also questions the contrasts between abstract and figurative art.

Brock University students in "Intermediate Painting" respond with selected artworks, while students in "Interpretive and Critical Writing in the Arts" provide critical texts that explore these questions.

Curators: Catherine Parayre and Shawn Serfas

Artworks from the permanent collection of the Rodman Hall Art Centre (with permission)

Appel, Karel. *Dans la tempête*, 1960, lithograph on paper (Ed. 25/125), 56.5 x 76.4 cm.

Coburn, Frederick S. *Sketch #2 (Green and white)*, nd, pastel on paper, 13.8 x 16.1 cm.

---. *Sketch #3 (Road in Winter)*, nd, pastel on paper, 14 x 18.5 cm.

---. *Sketch #7 (The Bush Road)*, nd, pastel on paper, 12.1 x 20 cm.

---. *Sketch #6 (The Edge of the Bush)*, nd, pastel on paper, 12.2 x 20.2 cm.

Hartung, Hans. *Composition*, nd, lithograph on paper (Ed. 26/75), 71.8 x 55 cm.

Nakamura, Kazuo. *Solitude 5*, 1972, oil on canvas (51.2 x 61.2 cm).

Schaefer, Carl. *Lake Hanover*, 1937, watercolour on paper (28.5 x 39.5 cm).

Tascona, Tony. *Horizontals*, 1964, gouache on paper, 52.7 x 68.1 cm.

Artworks by students in Visual Arts, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University

Donaldson, Emily. *First Autumn*, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas.

Dove, Rachel. *Third Season*, 2016, mixed media.

Higenell, Gail. *Dimensions*, 2016, fluid acrylics on glass.

Rodgers, Stephanie. *Unconcluded*, 2016, mixed media.

Ross, Adam. *Standout*, 2016, acrylic on canvas.

Williams, Amber Lee. *Peripheries*, 2016, encaustic, moss, plaster of Paris.

Texts by students in Studies in Arts and Culture, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University

Allenov, Mark (on Kazuo Nakamura)

Donaldson, Emily (on Frederick S. Coburn)

Duntsch, Justus (on Hans Hartung)

Inceoglu, Defne (on Tony Tascona)

Osman, Muhamed (on Karel Appel)

Mazarella, Annika (on Carl Schaefer)

Photo credit: Shawn Serfas

Hartung, Hans. *Composition* / Donaldson, Emily. *First Autumn*

Appel, Karel. *Dans la tempête* / Williams, Amber Lee. *Peripheries*

Rodgers, Stephanie. *Unconcluded* / Nakamura, Kazuo. *Solitude 5*

**Karel Appel, *Dans la tempête*, 1960, lithograph on paper
(ed. 25/125)**

Gift of Walter Carsen, 1980

Dutch artist Karel Appel (1921-2006) was influenced by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Jean Dubuffet. A member of the European experimental movement CoBra, he had a declared preference for what he considered “childish” interpretations. His works manifest a sense of the real world as well as the rejection of mainstream art. One important question he poses through his work is: what is abstract?

Dans la tempête’s variety of bright and dark colours and its mixture of white, black, blue, green and red evoke many different feelings and imagery. Equally intriguing is the whirlwind born out of these colours. Different parts of the lithograph suggest divergent images. Some viewers may perceive faces, some animals, some nothing at all. The circular motion is both creative madness and a storm. The work’s abstract intensity of vision sparks imagination and creates visual pleasure (or displeasure) for the viewer. Appel’s lithograph encourages contrasting interpretations.

Mohamed Osman

Frederick S. Coburn***Sketch #2 (Green and White)*, nd, pastel on paper*****Sketch #3 (Road in Winter)*, nd, pastel on paper*****Sketch #7 (The Bush Road)*, nd, pastel on paper*****Sketch #6 (The Edge of the Bush)*, nd, pastel on paper****Gift of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, 1988**

Born in Upper Melbourne, Quebec in 1871, Frederick S. Coburn travelled extensively through Europe before settling back in rural Quebec. At the Royal Academy in Berlin, he engaged with Realism. At the Slade School of Fine Art in London, he was encouraged to interpret rather than imitate. He was exposed to Impressionism in Paris. In Holland, he experimented with different palettes in landscape painting. Grasping the old-fashioned romance of the Quebec winter, Coburn plays with subtle, tangible light and harmonious yet illusive colours.

The cold outdoor scenes captured in these four preliminary sketches are intimate in their immediacy. Scratched thin lines imitate the immersive environment that surrounds the artist. In *Sketch #2 (Green and White)*, the viewer can almost sense the still air as a storm builds in the distance. Flickers of pastel colours, dense greens, soft blues, moments of gentle yellows and reds cast a fading nature contrasted against endless snow. In *Sketch #7 (The Bush Road)*, dramatic marks of vertical and horizontal lines depict a harsher atmosphere: thin air stings in the face, trees thrash in the wind, the glare of the sun reflects against the blinding snow. A small cabin, a road and power poles dominate in *Sketch #3 (Road in Winter)* and *Sketch #6 (The Edge of the Bush)*. The sketches are honest; one can almost feel the numbing cold, and each mark echoes the intense climate. They demonstrate the artist's presence as well as a tension between human influence and the natural environment. The beauty and simplicity of nature dominate as two potentially everlasting attributes.

Emily Donaldson

**Hans Hartung, *Composition*, nd, lithograph on paper (ed. 26/75)
Gift of Walter Carsen, 1980**

Hans Hartung (1904-89) was a practitioner of Art Informel, a post-WWII shift away from conventional composition and realistic representation in favour of gestural abstractions. In the 1950s Hartung earned recognition for his paintings of “long grasses.”

The scratchy, fibrous lines resting on the blue background of *Composition* invoke a natural world. The artist’s ordered yet organic creative process fits appropriately within an exhibition on landscape painting, although the lack of reference to space leaves any relationship to scale or plane open to interpretation. The contrasting black and white gestural strokes evoke an uncertain depth. The black, shadow-like forms create the illusion of void spaces, while the scraped white forms suggest a tangible foreground. The artist’s reductive process is loaded with implications and achieves a conversation between conventional representation of the physical and the expression of the intangible.

Justus Duntsch

**Kazuo Nakamura, *Solitude 5*, 1972, oil on canvas
Purchased through the President's Fund, 1972**

Kazuo Nakamura (1926-2002) was a Japanese-Canadian abstract expressionist artist, and one of the co-founders of the Toronto-based Painters Eleven group. At the age of sixteen, he was held at a Canadian internment camp for Japanese nationals near Hope, B.C. The natural subject of his landscape paintings was determined by the landscapes surrounding the camp. Nevertheless, Nakamura's preoccupation for the better part of his career remained chiefly concerned with natural mathematical patterns in artistic expression. His early work consists largely of vibrant and stylized landscape paintings, but, influenced by the artist's desire to display "universal patterns" found in nature and science, slowly shifts towards more abstract compositions referring to geometric shapes and numbers.

Nakamura's shift from the representation of nature to abstraction can be observed from comparisons to works such as *November* (1958, watercolor) as well as to less figurative pieces such as *Forest* (1953, oil on masonite). In time, the method of depiction becomes more important than the observation of nature.

Solitude 5 (1972, oil on canvas) is part of a series on the Canadian wilderness. The brushstrokes, performed in such a fashion so that the congealed paint visibly rises off the flat canvas, lend volume to the painting as well as a tactile tangibility to the elements of the scene. The forest develops a presence under imagined fingers; branches and needles gain individual recognition in the forest's multitude. Meanwhile, the waters of the river are a flat, cool contrast to the greenery's bumpy roughness. Yet abstraction is at the core of the painting. The distinct lack of isolated detail prevents any clear identification of the landscape. Nakamura's search for "universal patterns" is recognizable in the depiction of natural elements. A same flatness characterizes the water and the forest. The hues of blues and greens are not far removed from each other on the visual spectrum; their blending radiates universal coldness. The attempt at realistic representation conveys the impression of tangibility, despite the abstractness of the approach. It is a paradoxical amalgam, but a beautiful one nonetheless.

Mark Allenov

**Carl Schaeffer, *Lake Hanover*, 1937, watercolour on paper
Gift of the Douglas M. Duncan Estate, 1970**

Canadian painter Carl Schaeffer (1903-1995) painted many rural landscapes, primarily his hometown, Hannover, Ontario. He attended the Ontario College of Art in Toronto in the early 1920s and was influenced by his instructors J.E.H. MacDonald and Arthur Lismer, members of the Group of Seven. In the years overlapping World War II, Schaeffer took at times an allegorical approach to painting then returned to a more expressive style.

The light brushstrokes of his watercolour painting *Lake Hanover* create the lucid representation of a lonesome tree centered in the foreground. The section on the left is awake with fuller leaves casting shadows, which glisten on the reflected water's surface. The other side of the tree is sleeping, its branches exposed; footprints are visible in the frozen snow-covered water. *Lake Hanover* resonates with a cold thick air, still and silent, over the barren and abandoned landscape. Schaeffer's grey tones cast a mysterious, unknown presence on a timeless landscape as if to convey an altered, dream-like reality framed in stage-like layers of washes. The painting evokes *Canto XIII* of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* and the condemned souls who live immortally as trees. Surrounded by the darkness of death, Dante's trees are "rooted," "spellbound," and their thorns poisonous: they form a "knotted and twisted" forest "dark in color."

Annika Mazzearella

**Tony Tascona, *Horizontals*, 1964, gouache on paper
Purchased through the President's Fund, 1970**

There is something inherently appealing about the abstracted work of Tony Tascona. Tascona worked closely with non-representational shape and form throughout his artistic career. Born in the 1920s in Manitoba, he graduated from the Winnipeg School of Art in 1950 and later worked for Canadian Aerospace Industries where he became familiar with the industrial use of metals, plastics and other technical processes that inspired his artistic practice.

From a distance, *Horizontals* appears controlled and calming. As we get closer, it screams out a variety of different intricacies. Its bright red shines lustrously. The loose horizontal brushstrokes emulate light ripples across a lake. Yet, there is also an inherent turbulence in the way the red breaks through the cleaner lines. The lines bleed into the rest of the composition like a turbulent lava flow or a rushing river breaking its banks.

The golden hue of the frieze above the river contrasts with the stark darkness in the upper portion of Tascona's painting; it takes the viewer's attention away from the rectangular shape looming under black lacquer in the middle of the composition. In a slight variance of colour and shine, a window appears behind the lacquer. It invites the viewer to watch what is unfolding either behind the painting or in front of it.

If the sky is red in the morning, there will be turbulence at sea, says an old rhyme. If at night, then all will be calm. *Horizontals* is both a sunrise and a sunset, a forest and a desert. It is a fire and it is a body of water. It is calm and it is constantly moving. It lives on a planet we can see through the glass of the frame or observe through the window that hovers over the water. Landscape painting is just this: an interpretation.

Defne Inceoglu