

Canadian sculpture from A to Z Interview with Joyce Millar

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Canadian sculpture FROM A TO Z

INTERVIEW WITH **Joyce Millar** | GREG BEATTY



Director of Galerie d'Art Stewart Hall in Pointe Claire, Que, Joyce Millar is currently writing a book on the history of Canadian sculpture. I conducted this email interview with her after attending her keynote address at Transitional Form/Transitional Spaces, a conference on sculpture organized by the University of Regina Fine Arts department, Oct. 1-5, 2003.

G.B. How did this project come about?
J.M. While working on my Masters at Concordia University on the history of the Sculptors Society of Canada, I became increasingly upset over the lack of printed material on Canadian sculpture and sculptors. When I finished my thesis and began teaching part-time at the university I proposed a course on Canadian sculpture only to be told it would be difficult to do as there were so few books on the subject. In fact, of the nine survey books on Canadian art published before 1980, only four had anything on sculpture. So I applied for an explorations grant from Canada Council to do research on Canadian sculpture with the idea of writing a book on twentieth-century sculptural practice. As part of the application, I was required to contact publishing houses to gauge interest. Out of twelve small-to-medium size publishers I contacted, eleven said "What a great idea!". Unfortunately, while they felt such a book was definitely needed, they said they were not the ones to do it. So I decided to go to the top and wrote Oxford University Press, which had published Dennis Reid's *Concise History of Painting in Canada*, and were just in the process of publishing Harold Kalman's *History of Canadian Architecture*. I guess I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

In your address you spoke about the privileging of painting over sculpture in Canadian art history. Do you think that a book like yours is needed to provide a better understanding of sculpture's place in Canadian art?
There is no doubt in my mind that Canadian sculpture deserves a book all its own. I like to tell a story about a professor who taught me my first Canadian art history course. He began his first lecture by saying it would be about Canadian painting as there was no Canadian sculpture to speak of.

When I told him I was now writing a book on Canadian sculpture, he said "Well, I guess it will be a very thin book." Little does he know.

What are the project's parameters?
Canadian sculpture from A to Z. The book has tentatively been divided into three sections: "The Foundations," dealing with what I call the three gestation points for Canadian sculpture — Aboriginal art, carving from old Quebec, and sculpture from the British regime prior to nationhood; "Bridging the Gap," which looks at the transition in sculpture from the tradition of monuments and architectural sculpture to a fully autonomous art form; and, "Modernist and Contemporary Sculpture."

How do you feel about the task you've undertaken? Daunted? Frustrated by the knowledge that the project's survey nature precludes any in-depth investigation?
Obviously, it is a daunting task, and one that has taken much longer than I ever imagined. I will never be able to tell all stories about sculpture and sculptors in Canada. It is not my book, or my story, it's the story of Canadian sculptors — it's their book. I'm just the crazy person who decided to do it.

Do you regard your book as a necessary first step in developing scholarship around Canadian sculpture?
I'm trying to present an overview of sculpture, to place it in a context, to understand the practice and, most of all, to destroy myths that I feel continue to surround sculpture in Canada. There is a history of the medium, and it is a proud and accomplished one. There are Canadian sculptors who can easily compare and compete with international "stars." Included in that heritage are monuments, memorials and architectural sculpture that are deserving of recognition.

How difficult/important is it for you to ensure adequate regional representation?
I think my biggest fear is that because we are a country of such vast and diverse regions I will omit someone from the story who should be there, but has been missed because of the difficulty of learning everything there is to know about each region.

What steps have you taken to ensure that doesn't happen?
Five years ago, when I first started my

research, I received a Canadian Heritage grant that enabled me to travel across the country to see Canadian sculpture, to interview sculptors, curators and museum personnel, and to do research in various areas. It was an incredible experience. Everyone — maybe prompted by surprise and shock that finally something was going to be written on Canadian sculpture — was so willing to share their knowledge. I feel grateful for their input.

As a critic myself, I've occasionally wrestled with the dividing line between sculpture and installation. To many artists, curators and critics in our post-modern age the question is perhaps irrelevant, but for the purposes of your book did you feel a need to distinguish between the two?

Sculpture's expanded field that Rosalind Krauss so aptly defined is part of our world and part of how we define sculpture. So, yes, I deal with both installation and environment or earth works as part of the evolution of sculpture, and also look at some of the issues surrounding public art and monuments, the percentage for art and architecture programs, and the unique practice of sculpture symposiums.

What about multi-disciplinary artists? How significant did sculpture have to be to their practice for you to consider them for inclusion?

I would say there are enough "true" sculptors to deal with in this survey. But multi-disciplinary artists, if they have made an impact on Canadian sculptural discourse, will certainly be considered.

How are you organizing the book? Chronologically? Regionally? Thematically within an art historical context?

That's the million dollar question, one that I've discussed with over one hundred people as I criss-crossed the country. A survey denotes a chronology based on a timeline, and that is basically how I've been writing the book. But within those loosely structured time marks I hope to vary the themes and emphasis depending on the specifics of the period.

Can you provide an example?
Well, early twentieth-century sculptors, while doing major commissions for war monuments, were also trying to build up an interest and place for small salon sculpture — sculpture for

the home. Here, it's interesting to look at the various themes and subject matter used. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, new materials were introduced, and so it seems pertinent to discuss the events and work of those decades in terms of materials.

Are you concerned about perhaps pigeon-holing artists through your analysis?

For some wonderful reason, Canadian sculptors seem to live long lives. How does one deal with an artist who has been making sculpture for thirty, forty, even fifty years, as in the case of Anne Kahane or Charles Daudelin in Montreal; or western sculptors such as David Marshall or Richard Prince? Even more difficult is selecting one image as being indicative of the sculpture they've made over that long productive career. To come to terms with this dilemma I've chosen to discuss sculptors and their work where I deem it appropriate — where they, or their works, have made an impact on the story of Canadian sculpture. If you're looking for a "one entry" dictionary-type book, you won't find it. You'll have to rely on the index to take you to the appropriate pages as the discussion could span chapters, and certainly span sections within a chapter. But I hope the text will be compelling enough to read from cover to cover.

Are you open to people contacting you with suggestions?

Yes, definitely! My email address is joycemillar@sympatico.ca. I would be more than happy to receive and discuss any suggestions for the book, especially with respect to more contemporary sculptors who haven't perhaps crossed their own province's borders for exhibitions, but are still doing important work. That being said, I do have page restrictions and physical parameters that will preclude an all-inclusive book. For just this reason, I have had to omit a discussion of Folk Art and craft, and the chapters on Aboriginal and French-Canadian carving are limited as each of these areas has already been dealt with by others who are expert in those fields.

When do you anticipate the book being published? ←

My deadline is August 2004, with publication slated for August 2005. So keep your fingers crossed! ←

Joyce MILLAR & *Sans titre*, 1985, by Jean-Jacques Besner. Aluminium sculpture. Photo: Courtesy of Stewart Hall Art Gallery.