

Through Feminist Eyes: In Memory of Natalie Luckyj **2 May 1945 – 16 January 2002**

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Through Feminist Eyes: In Memory of Natalie Luckyj¹

(2 MAY 1945 – 16 JANUARY 2002)

On Monday, 28 January 2002, a memorial service was held at the Carleton University Art Gallery to honour Natalie Luckyj, Associate Professor of Art History and Director of Canadian Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa. Filling the Gallery for this event were approximately two hundred people, including peers, artists, members of the community and students past and present. Gathering to remember Natalie's ground-breaking retrieval of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian women artists,² attendees were also present to commemorate Natalie's publications, curatorial work, multiple graduate supervisions, and reputation as a challenging and well-loved teacher. Speakers at the memorial consistently referred to Natalie as a mentor and inspiration, and frequently cited her teaching or a personal encounter as the very reason for continuing in the field of either Art History, or Women's History, or both.

This memorial service, and subsequent symposium in Natalie's honour ("Through Feminist Eyes: A Day in Honour of Natalie Luckyj", Carleton University, 23 March 2002) gave voice to two strong themes: the degree to which Natalie made a difference to her students as a remarkable teacher; and the degree to which Natalie dedicated herself, graciously and generously, to the fight for change within academia. A strong advocate for the presence of First Nations art and culture in the curricula of Canadian Studies and Art History, Natalie was also a consistent and thoughtful champion of women's issues and artistic production from the early 1970s, while at Queen's University (Kingston) and during her career at Carleton. The many speakers on the night of the memorial were unanimous in their observation that Natalie had not only inspired, but had encouraged her students and fellow academics towards their own directions, their own questions, and had given them faith in themselves in the process.

Prudence Heward's *Rollande* (oil on canvas, 1929), on loan from the National Gallery of Canada, hung behind the speakers' podium as a reference to Natalie's exhibition, *Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward*. Published in 1986 by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, this presented and analysed Heward's striking images of uncompromising, powerful women. *Rollande* herself is windblown, set against a pastoral Quebec landscape and clad in a geranium-pink tunic. This is no wilting image of femininity; the subject's shoulders are squared for some unknown order of battle, and her hands are set on her hips in a gesture that is at once confident and defiant, echoing her strong yet ambiguous expression. *Rollande* is easily the poster image for the achievements of the feminist movement within Canadian Art History.³ Thus, Heward's painting was an appropriate and rallying emblem for Natalie's memorial. Set beside this image of complicated strength, however, were other

paintings and two-dimensional media which represented the breadth of Luckyj's feminist and art historical focus. Luckyj's most recent work, for example, deals with the subtleties of negotiation which faced historical Canadian women artists, such as the sculptor Jacobine Jones (1896–1976) and the Impressionist Helen McNicoll (1879–1915).⁴

In her catalogue essay on McNicoll, Luckyj argues for the artist's conscious engagement with issues of class and gender in light-dappled scenes of women and children at work. From this position, Luckyj rescues McNicoll's images from both historical neglect and from the damning praise of such epithets as "lady painter". Luckyj argues against the confined stereotype of middle-class, white femininity as a mode of analysis for the artist's sewing and flower- and fruit-gathering women. Instead, Luckyj views the few archival details of McNicoll's life and the compelling material evidence of her artistic work as slippery signifiers of a specific woman's self-articulation, self-determination and irreducibility.⁵ As Natalie writes in her introduction to her recent publication on the sculptor, Jacobine Jones, "[r]ecovery is but one step in the process of reconstruction of the lived experience of women artists. A pivotal component of this process lies in the mapping of the specific conditions and nature of their art practice."⁶

The import of such a reading becomes clearer, perhaps, when set against a recent review of a retrospective of another historical Canadian woman artist, Mary Hiester Reid (1854–1921). The exhibition *Quiet Harmony: The Art of Mary Hiester Reid*, which originated at the Art Gallery of Ontario, travelled to the Carleton University Art Gallery in the fall of 2001. In his review of *Quiet Harmony* for the *Ottawa Citizen*, author Paul Gessel states that women artists are "no longer trapped in the world of pansies and hollyhocks, as Reid seemed to be."⁷ No fan of "sissy posies", Gessel confidently assures us that today, "[women] can paint whatever they darn well please and won't be accused of overstepping gender boundaries..." The author's position clarifies, however, when he suggests that "[r]adical feminists may holler that Mrs. Reid's disappearance is a sign of the art world being yet one more misogynist patriarchy. Perhaps. But one does not see too many radical feminists painting cutesy bouquets themselves these days."

However banal, these comments indicate the need for both a greater comprehension of feminism in the press and the ongoing need to review and promote the efforts of scholars such as Natalie Luckyj. The suggestion that feminists should find nothing of value in flowers demonstrates (at best) a surprising ignorance of the popularity of the McNicoll and Reid exhibitions. The generation, gender and genre of artist that Gessel dismisses so easily are the very generation/gender/genre of the artists to whom Natalie directed so much diligence and com-

mitment. Her Archive of Canadian Women Artists (ACWA), the product of two decades of primary research and funded by a substantial SSHRCC Women and Work Programme Grant, is an extensive collection of textual and visual material related to the artistic production of women in Canada. In collaboration with Carleton University, Natalie also produced a film based on her research, titled *Canadian Women Artists* (1986). Natalie was best known for sharing the fruits of her labours, lending catalogue essays, newspaper reviews, and entire artists' files to students and colleagues. There need be no stronger argument for the merit of such art for contemporary audiences – whether radical, feminist, neither or both – than the heartfelt gratitude with which her peers and her former and present students speak of her generosity and vision.

The careful, creative work that Natalie Luckyj dedicated, and that her students continue to dedicate today, to women artists is an intellectual legacy that offers ways of reconsidering the art of women who did work within gendered realms. Portraiture, pastoral landscape and still life by women are not necessarily evidence of oppression, but rather may be seen as evidence of self-articulation despite conditions of oppression. With regard to her study of Jacobine Jones, Natalie stated, “only by re-presenting the past can the present be changed.”⁸ Among her many achievements, the transformation of the present reality of Canadian Art History, and thereby the lives of many students, colleagues and peers, stand as her greatest gifts to the field. The loss of Natalie Luckyj is deeply felt. Her work, her kindness and her feminism have been nothing short of inspirational.

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Notes

- 1 Credit for the title for this piece is due to Caroline Stevens, who proposed this as a title for our symposium to celebrate Natalie Luckyj and her contributions to feminism, Art History and Canadian Studies (“Through Feminist Eyes: A Day in Honour of Natalie Luckyj”, 23 March 2002, Carleton University). Organizers: Michael Bell, Sandra Dyck, Cynthia Hammond, Carol Payne and Caroline Stevens.
- 2 Luckyj's work sought to redress the relative obscurity to which post-war Canadian Art History relegated such artists. For example, R. H. Hubbard's *The Development of Canadian Art* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1963) refers to over 150 artists in the development of Canadian art from colonial, seventeenth-century New France to the late 1950s. Only six of these artists are women, and one of these is Emily Carr.
- 3 As the image portrays a white, probably Québécoise woman, set against an empty (read: colonized) landscape, painted by an anglophone living in Montreal, the nuances and complications of Canadian, feminist Art History are undeniably present.
- 4 Natalie Luckyj, *Put on Her Mettle: The Life and Art of Jacobine Jones* (Manotick, Ont., Penumbra Press, 1999); idem, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999).
- 5 In a similar vein, Janice Anderson has theorized the work of Mary Hiester Reid in terms of a “negotiation” of the Edwardian ideal of womanhood and the demands of a professional artistic career. See Janice Anderson and Brian Foss, *Quiet Harmony: The Art of Mary Hiester Reid* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2000).
- 6 Luckyj, *Put on Her Mettle*, 1.
- 7 Paul Gessel, “Same sex, different century: exhibits show how times change for female artists,” *Ottawa Citizen*, Wednesday, 12 September 2001.
- 8 Luckyj, *Put on Her Mettle*, 4.