

**Tom Forrestall: Paintings, Drawings, Writings**  
**Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, June 14 to November 2008**

Virgil Hammock

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# TOM FORRESTALL

***PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, WRITINGS***

By Virgil Hammock

THIS EXHIBITION IS A MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF MARITIME ARTIST TOM FORRESTALL. IT WAS CURATED BY TOM SMART, DIRECTOR OF THE McMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION IN KLEINBURG, ONTARIO, WHO ALSO AUTHORED A BOOK ON THE ARTIST'S LIFE, WHICH ACCOMPANIES THE EXHIBITION. THERE ARE WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION FROM FORRESTALL'S STUDENT DAYS AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY IN THE MID 1950'S TO AS RECENTLY AS 2007. THERE ARE OVER FIFTY PLUS YEARS OF AN ARTIST WORK IN VARIOUS MEDIA COVERED IN THIS VERY COMPLETE EXHIBITION. A HALF-CENTURY IS A LONG TIME AND FORRESTALL WORKS VERY HARD AT HIS ART, WHICH MEANS THAT THERE IS A LOT TO LOOK AT.

What is interesting to me is that the very last completed work in the exhibition, *The House at River Bend*, December 2006-February 2007, is the finest painting in the show. This speaks volumes of the artist as he continues to get better with each passing year. No small feat in such a long career. That is not to say that there are not ups and downs in Tom's works as there are with all artists; only that he refuses to stand still, but sees each thing that he does as a challenge. Smart states in his book that Tom regards every painting a failure and that is why he does the next one. I would not agree with Forrestall that all his paintings fail; many are outright successes, but he is a hard judge of his own work and if this idea keeps him working, all the more power to him.

*Self Portrait*, December 14, 1993  
Mixed media on paper  
28.0 x 21.5 cm  
Collection of the artist

Tom can be broadly categorized as either a Maritime realist or a magic realist with the former being the more Canadian title, but there is more to it than that. He was certainly formed by his education at Mount Allison University, which at the time he attended was a centre for a rigorous, and traditional, art education. The three people teaching studio courses during that period were Alex Colville, Lawren P. Harris and Ted Pulford. Colville was at the time well on his way to becoming Canada's best known realist artist. Harris, the son of Group of Seven artist Lawren S. Harris, was an outstanding portrait artist and Pulford, in addition to being a gifted teacher, was a fine water colourist. It would be too simple to say that he followed in the footsteps of Colville, because Tom's work while he was at Mount Allison, and indeed for the first years after he graduated, was much more broadly and freely painted than that of Colville. Harris's own work at the time was non-objective

geometric painting. He did, however, learn how to master watercolour painting from Pulford. Tom continues to paint beautiful watercolours to this day and there are many examples in the current exhibition.

What did result from his education was a wariness of mainstream modern art. The late 1950's was a time of Abstract Expressionism and even the beginnings of the Pop movement. The type of realism that Tom was drawn to was considered at the time to be, at best, old hat or even downright reactionary. Even in the late 1950's, Atlantic Canada was artistically isolated from the rest of the country. In the long term this was a good thing as it gave him an independence that likely would have been lacking had he been raised and educated in another place, more attuned to contemporary art. The very early paintings in the exhibition, such as *The Exhibition Grounds*, 1962, which are mainly in oil, already demonstrate a quiet stillness that is a quality that typifies Forrestall's art.

Tom is well known for his work in egg tempera; a technique he first learned at Mount Allison in a painting class taught by Colville, during his third year in the programme. However, he did not start using tempera as his primary medium until the mid 1960's, after a short-lived bout with acrylic which he found to be too 'plastic'. This is interesting, because at the same time Forrestall was switching to egg tempera Colville was switching from tempera to acrylic. Colville used acrylic like he used egg tempera and that is to build up the paintings using very fine cross hatching, and building colour by a visual mix rather than a physical mix, (for example, by using a fine cross



hatch of blue and yellow, the eye will perceive a more vivid green than would be achieved by mixing blue and yellow paint.) The main advantage to acrylic, of course, is that it comes in tubes rather than having to mix egg yolks, water and pigment by hand, which is what you do to make egg tempera.

The major point in favour of egg tempera, and that is certainly known to Tom, is its permanence. If used correctly, egg tempera will last forever, which cannot be said for oil paint and it is beginning to look like acrylic paint might prove to be fugitive (tends to fade) as well. Egg tempera paintings done many hundred years ago look like they were painted yesterday. Actually in the short-term, egg tempera paintings get better as they age. Their colour gets richer and you can even polish them with a soft cloth. Forrestall over the past forty years or so has become a master in the medium. Many think that tempera is a fussy medium that requires slow tedious work. That may be true for some who have used the medium, but Tom has learned how to use tempera both quickly and boldly, otherwise he could have never completed the body of work that he has done. In contrast, Colville has completed far fewer paintings over the same period of time using acrylic. The real first masterpiece in tempera is Forrestall's painting *The Kitchen*, 1967, which is very Andrew Wyeth like in both its subject matter and execution. (Wyeth is another user of tempera and a lone wolf out of the mainstream American art).

If there is one area that I have a problem with in Forrestall's work, it is with his shaped paintings. This where he breaks away from the traditional rectangular and square format, using differently shaped supports for his painting, and there are several examples in the exhibition. I just do not think that they work as well as the more traditionally shaped supports. (I use the word 'support' rather than 'canvas' because tempera paintings need to be painted on a solid surface or support, otherwise they would crack.) It might be that I am more

hide bound than the artist, but I think that the eye travels over the surface of a rectangle or a square better than it does over an irregularly shaped surface. Mind you, this how we are trained to see paintings. I know that the artist is a strong believer in his shaped works and I give him full marks for trying something different and there are certainly art works throughout history that have been shaped.

I would like to get back to the subject of Forrestall's water colours of which there are several in this exhibition. Watercolour is a medium that is not often used these days by serious (professional) artists and the main reason is that it is both difficult and unforgiving. As I stated earlier, Tom learned how to use this medium from a real master, Ted Pulford, at Mount Allison. I doubt if water colour painting is even taught in many art schools these days and that is frankly because most of the people who teach painting today to not know how to do it themselves as they were not taught how when they went to school. Even when I went to a rather traditional art school at about the same time as Tom the subject was barely mentioned. Tom's watercolour paintings are downright beautiful. He often uses this medium as studies for his painting, but they can stand on their own as finished works of art, for example the exhibition's *Tall Elm*, *The Boundary Line*, 2000.

The ideas for Forrestall's paintings are often to be found in his notebooks in sketch form. Over the years Tom has filled hundreds, and I mean hundreds, of notebooks with drawings, small wash paintings and writings on his art and life. Some of these notebooks are in the exhibition, and there are illustrations from them in Smart's book. They are a valuable testament of the artist's life; a day-by-day diary, over many years and every mood from exhilaration to despair. The self-portraits in the notebooks are telling, presenting a realistic record of an artist



*The Boundary Line*, 2000  
Watercolour on paper  
57.2 x 38.2 cm  
Collection of the artist

aging. There is story in these notebooks that needs to be told; they are the source for a book that is waiting to be written.

Following *Tom Forrestall: Paintings, Drawings, Writings* closing in Halifax, the exhibition will travel to Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick in January of 2009; the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, PEI in May 2009; The McMichael Collection of Canadian Art in Kleinberg, Ontario in January 2010; and, finally the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville New Brunswick in the Summer of 2010. □

EXHIBITION

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Halifax, Nova Scotia

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