

Janice Helland, *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 212 pp, 40 black-and-white illus.

Juliette Peers

Volume 28, 2001–2003

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069793ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069793ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Peers, J. (2001). Review of [Janice Helland, *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 212 pp, 40 black-and-white illus.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 28, 92–97. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069793ar>

red, already flayed one, as a symbol of spiritual release. But did viewing himself as another Apollo preclude a complementary vision as another Marsyas? It seems to me that the evidence of Luca Signorelli's *Realm of Pan* of circa 1490 suggests that Lorenzo donned two diametrically opposed hats. After all, the enthroned Pan-cum-Lorenzo, the god of all, is as much a satyr as Marsyas. What is more, scholars have long noticed that Signorelli depicted this mythological protagonist and his companions in the manner of a *sacra conversazione*, as though to confirm that the outwardly secular subject contains Christian nuances.⁵ As Lillie argued for a closer examination of the inherently religious nature of the so-called secular villa, so the Bacchic symbolism treated by both Wright and Rubinstein likely yields a fundamentally Christian meaning.

At a cost of over \$100.00 Canadian, scholars may wish to think twice before purchasing this book for their private libraries. Still, it will be valuable to consult, and we may look forward to Wright's book on the Pollaiuolo brothers, forthcoming from Yale University Press, and to the publication of the theses of both Lillie and O'Malley.

CORINNE MANDEL
University of Western Ontario

Notes

- 1 Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art. Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 4th edn, rev. David G. Wilkins (New York and Englewood Cliffs, 1994), 307.
- 2 E.H. Gombrich, "The early Medici as patrons of art: a survey of primary sources," in E.F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London 1960), 279–311. See the discussion in Francis Ames-Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Early Medici and their Artists*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London, 1995), 9–10, concerning the legacy of this article.
- 3 Francis Ames-Lewis, ed., *Cosimo 'il Vecchio' de' Medici, 1389–1464. Essays in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of Cosimo de' Medici's Birth*, intro E.H. Gombrich (Oxford, 1992).
- 4 John T. Paoletti, "Strategies and structures of Medici artistic patronage in the 15th century," in *The Early Medici*, ed. Ames-Lewis, 36.
- 5 H.H. Brummer, "Pan Platonius," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, XXXIII (1964), 55, comparing Pan to the Madonna. Cf. Luba Freedman, "Once more Luca Signorelli's *Pan Deus Arcadiae*," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, LIV (1985), 152–59, esp. 157ff.; and Claudia Rousseau, "Botticelli's Munich *Lamentation* and the Death of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, LIX (1990), 253, this latter for contemporaneous, fifteenth-century comparisons between Lorenzo il Magnifico and Christ.

Janice Helland, *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 212 pp, 40 black-and-white illus.

As a reader familiar with many texts on women artists in the "western tradition", I always approach a new title with some apprehension, along with more pleasurable anticipation. Many books purporting to discuss women's art history are little more than picture books or general appreciations. Compared with the plethora of populist visual albums, the number of publications that actually seek to redress a relative imbalance of serious analytic art historical studies between men and women is still small. Those that deal with the complicated issues around the historical reputation of women artists and the shape of curatorial and historical memory are fewer still. Asking such questions casts uncomfortable light upon the clichés and stereotypes of cultural and curatorial politics, creating an awkward position in which few publishers or public institutions curating significant exhibitions care to find themselves. Few books on women artists, even since the upswing in historical research on women artists in the 1970s, breach new foundational and formal ground. One searches far to find original, fresh and cliché-free arguments that engage with the forces governing and delimiting women's professional art experience and the rigid, narrow space that was grudgingly assigned to women artists with public ambition before the twentieth century.

Janice Helland's *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure* is unconditionally welcome for its fine scholarship. In meticulous detail she reconstructs subtle nuances in the social and economic strata of nineteenth-century Scotland, its women artists and the careers they constructed for themselves. The depth of her research is matched by her willingness to engage with the elusive stratagems through which her subjects constructed their working lives. Helland's placement of her arguments in a singular, finely tuned methodological framework allows her to maximize a variety of strategies to make sense of the life and work of her chosen artists. It articulates with confidence a persuasively neo-Marxist strategy of valuing "labour" and defining an individual through the actuality and experience of work. Yet, it cannot be fully characterized as a "Marxist" text insofar as it simultaneously advocates the importance of pleasure through creativity and refuses the leftist masculinist rejection of the feminine world as bourgeois. Helland particularly seeks to unpick the notion of the "middle class" that has, in Anglo-European convention (and particularly in my own culture of white settler Australia), been indissolubly associated with women. Why should middle-class work be surrounded by different historical levels of validation than that of the working class? In Helland's refreshing viewpoint "middle class" cannot be reified into a single unit, but runs from the almost and anxiously near-poor, demarcated through social ritual and gesture as much as economics, to

the comfortably wealthy who could purchase aristocratic “lifestyles”. Women artists’ choices and experiences are shaped by where they fall upon this continuum of wealth and privilege. Helland outlines the very different working and life experiences of the artists and of their servants, as young working women of comparable age but with differing socializations and support groups.

If Helland sidesteps aspects of conventional Marxist interpretations, she equally does not overlook the substantial investment that conservative forces have made in marginalizing women artists. She demonstrates how the stratagems of capitalism, in particular the “art market”, uphold misogynist values. With unusual forthrightness, she indites the imbrication of institutions of cultural validation – public galleries, universities and publishers – with the fetishism of the high profiled “genius”, fostered by art dealing and the publicity machines of transnational auction houses. Women artists who do not fit this simplistic market-driven image of the “genius” are virtually invisible presences in publicly accessible memory. Helland questions the supposed purity and neutrality of aesthetic judgements made by “public” institutions and their role as impartial arbiters of fame and reputation when the systems of validation are so directly tied to the commercial marketplace. Women artists of the past, usually assumed to be poor “performers” in the market and investment stakes, can be particularly disadvantaged in the covert, yet central hegemony of art dealing when brokering reputations.

Let us hope an exhibition follows to further consolidate and make visible Janice Helland’s research. Yet, a request for a glossily catalogued exhibition may be optimistic. The reader notes the chilling outline of the curatorial politics behind the famed *Glasgow Girls* exhibition of 1990–91. Helland suggests that these bitter disputes contributed to the premature death of the curator, a freelance scholar from beyond the permanent gallery staff. This moving and unexpected story presents for academic scrutiny an intensely personal struggle behind the apparently seamless unquestioned authority of highly visible cultural institutions. Such contests are obscured by the polished and orderly presentation of public gallery confidence and authority. The inclusion of such otherwise discreetly avoided material further indicates the *de facto* subversive nature of *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland*.

I can identify some parallel Australian instances in the 1990s where there was the same triangulated relationship between independent feminist curators, an extremely enthusiastic viewing public and a disapproving public gallery permanent staff, although without such a drastic effect upon the scholar’s career. Such contestations especially took place during the Australian National Women’s Art Project of 1995, a nation-wide coordinated experimental event in which many Australian pub-

lic galleries took part, with varying degrees of anxiety. An enthusiastic group of feminist activists and supporters explicitly intended the collaborative project to move historic women’s art out of the storeroom and relegate the expected gallery stars to unaccustomed public invisibility. In some cases, senior gallery staff sought to censor and limit the access to unfamiliar works, anxious that presenting “unknown” women of “lesser” quality betrayed the staff’s professional credibility amongst their peers and transgressed established patterns of gallery “standards”. In permanent staff members’ opinions, the public often had travelled many miles and they expected to be able to see the familiar masterpieces that made each gallery a “destination venue”. Yet, the public came to the gallery in response to the unusual opportunity to see the previously hidden. In some cases these battles over showing supposedly “unimportant” art were fought out directly amongst gallery staff, even before the works were chosen and the galleries were hung. As stated above, a central but unspoken presence in Helland’s arguments are the hierarchies of value judgements that characterize the art historical canon and how they direct options for historical memory and recording.

Helland’s text is not only about the sanctions – historic and contemporary – that limited women’s art; it also indicates how, in their own spaces, her chosen women artists were able to enact power and status drawn from class and gentility while subject themselves to gendered power hierarchies. She is mindful of how women articulated class and race issues when painting “Othered” women: servants, peasants, fisher folk and foreigners. Yet, she can highlight feminist merit in seeking to record this overlooked feminine presence and experience, in cultural tourism and pilgrimage to sites in Great Britain and other countries from Spain to Japan. Previously female content/presence in picturesque tourist or orientalist art has been relatively invisible, or art historical knowledge has centred upon masculinist fantasies of the feminine in which professional women are obscured and the colonized are spoken for.

However, this text not only foregrounds middle-class experience. Helland’s most dramatic and interventionist art historical gesture in the whole text is the reclamation of Anne Macbeth’s and Frances Newberry’s political radicalism through embroidery. In Scotland, as elsewhere in Great Britain, the economic centrality of the textile industry ensured that textiles were part of the working environment of the proletariat from home outworkers to industrial workers. Embroidery was an art that dealt in substances with a familiar presence in working life, and Newberry used “ordinary”, cheap fabrics as much as the rare and precious. Her advocacy of embroidery in the school curriculum spoke of working-class right of access – especially the female – to the means of producing “beautiful” and aesthetically pleasing items, a privilege usually associated with bourgeois leisure. Masculine impetus to design reform has tended, in

Helland's viewpoint, to benefit the wealthy bohemian consumers of avant-garde style and its associated artworks and products, while Newberry delivered to working-class girls the means of self-expression and aesthetic exploration. In opposition to the democratic impulses behind the original Glasgow reforms, the commodification of the "Glasgow School" as consumerist spectacle, as "investment" art, as blockbuster exhibition, as designs for greeting cards and wrapping papers, as Scottish cultural propaganda in present-day North America denies both its female and its socialist identities.

Helland refuses to be fazed by the fact that the motivations and the working contexts of her chosen women artists are alien to major ongoing populist clichés of the construction of the "artist" or "artistic success". Her avoidance of these clichés highlights how far other historians and curators are still cowed by these frameworks. One could apply the word "courage" to her steadfast foregrounding of subjects who have superficially been regarded as unpromising: picturesque landscapists, conventional watercolourists, artists excluded by modernist legends which still linger even in so far as they are deconstructed. This stance is facilitated by her deft combination of historical methodologies and her versatile grasp of the operations of various historical techniques. She blends accessible empirical history with the lateral and wide-ranging styles of analysis associated with art theory. Her historical research has unlocked the achievements of women outside institutional validation. This "straight" and traditional history gains new vitality and intellectual energy through deploying more recent models of feminist writing. Contemporary theory can permit an eclectic, multi-faceted perspective that effectively engages with the poorly documented careers and elusive and subtle artists under discussion.

Yet, Helland also avoids what can be seen as a pitfall of recent theoretical approaches, the trend in populist, accessible art texts that cherishes and prioritizes the baroque personal dramas of Artemisia Gentileschi, Frida Kahlo, or in Australia, Joy Hester, above their professional achievements. Seen from this perspective of "entertainment", or even "infotainment", Helland's artists do not even have the romantic intensity or displaced passions that can rescue Christina Rossetti or the Brontë sisters, for example, from obscurity in a tabloid or soap-opera vision of historical debate. In this interchange between the humble and the flamboyant, Helland herself makes a plea for the mundane and routine against the highly coloured. She advises against investing too far in the romantic and dramatic texts by such favoured and privileged sources as Baudelaire and Benjamin when reconstructing the female presence in the nineteenth-century city. What do nineteenth-century women's own accounts tell about the "gap between the ideology of women's place and reality of day to day existence" (p. 85)?

Current fashions undermine the writing of women's his-

tory. Historians who take the easy and seductive option of referring to familiar glamorous sources obscure the actual experience of women in the city, preferring to stay with familiar and popular tropes. Helland's response is twofold, again indicating the complexity of her whole project. She affirms that women were to a great degree – especially in the nineteenth century and in a society such as Scotland that was both colonized yet also anxious for its own self-confirmation against the powerful centre – confined to the straight and narrow. Women carried additional oppressions in a society where nuance of gesture and demeanour spoke volumes about autonomy, where middle-class identity could mask/assuage a reality shaped by generations of colonized dependency. If maintenance of existing social structures had to rely so much upon the self-governance and regulation of women, sexist patriarchal constructions of culture were bound to prevail.

Concurrently, Helland is also arguing that the uncomfortable strangeness of this cultural material (without modernist *imprimatur*) is matched by our stereotyped reaction. The interplay of the two factors of belittled subjects on one hand and our own uncertain reactions on the other have encouraged misinterpretation, undervaluing the degree to which these women were radical, exploring and self-reliant. Five decades of feminist interventions in Victorian Scotland did not dissolve into thin air but forged a fragile and elusive space in which women's options as working, embodied subjects began to multiply. Yet, if the artists' stage is a narrow one, and their act frequently a placid and orderly one, Helland's text reminds a later generation that the issues generated are not less complex because of the directed, regulated careers. Indeed, the well constructed and considered trajectory of these late Victorian careers was the direct result of feminist complaint against the constricting models of the appropriate range of women's social behaviours and their supposed intellectual and physical incapacities outside a purely domestic role, as her first chapter demonstrates.

The linkages and associations between many of Helland's artists range from personal friendships – one notes that some of them made a pilgrimage to paint the home of the "Ladies of Llangollen" – to professional guilds and societies. These networks are a byproduct of having to establish a toehold or a profile in a generally hostile environment. As in a 1970s slogan, the personal and the political/professional were linked in nineteenth-century women artists' lives, and as the subtitle *Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure* suggests, Helland sees this conscious deployment of "friendship" as a professional resource and support network as a key to the experience and choices of nineteenth-century women artists. This collectivist impetus is also traced concentrically into late nineteenth-century women's advances into professional life, tertiary education, architecture, design. Activities in all of these spheres facilitated or inspired

activities in related fields. Late nineteenth-century women artists have many social and familial links to feminist high achievers in other disciplines. In this context Helland's research entirely cross-references to my own findings in a late nineteenth-century Australian context. Indeed, one of the artists discussed by Helland, Florence Haig, included an Australian working in London, Dora Meeson Coates, in her circle of contacts. Coates generally painted in a late academic style but was politically radical – a dichotomy that has been hard to assimilate into modernist stereotypes and which echoes the difficulty of fitting Helland's artists into modernist-dominated agendas. Women's art is a story of the "Princess Ida Clubs", the "Austral Salons", the "Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors" and, in Helland's text, the "Edinburgh Ladies' Art Club", rather than of the "genius" of Picasso or David. Thus, the access to life classes, art education, exhibiting spaces and public patronage is foregrounded, not "innovation" and the cult of personality.

Her discussions of women's slow but tenacious eroding of the barriers to equality in training and exhibiting opportunities enters into dialogue with texts by other strongly research-based feminist historians of nineteenth-century art such as Deborah Cherry and Pamela Gerrish Nunn. Nunn's writing, in particular, has many affinities with that of Helland. With both writers, the orderly, stable surface of the text, its firm, almost non-sense prose contrasts with the direct challenges that the content lays down to cherished foundational narratives of connoisseurship and cultural norms. One could take a cue from late nineteenth-century feminists and affirm the power of consolidating many voices by tracking a coherent pattern of parallel struggle for professional training, exhibition spaces, critical attention, and public and private patronage. The experience of Victorian women in gaining access to resources taken for granted by male peers threads through the work of all three writers – Cherry, Nunn and Helland. The emergence of any woman artist in public exhibition spaces during the second half of the nineteenth century was the end result of a complex series of reforms, artistic, educational, political and medical-psychological, which were reframing nineteenth-century society as a whole. Even Victorian technological developments changed the options for women artists. Such innovations of Victorian industry and science which specifically aided feminist initiative included the paraphernalia of ready-made paints and *plein air* equipment. Better public transport, local, regional and international, increased women artists' mobility and access to new subjects.

Art historical chronology imposed a specific difficulty upon Helland's chosen subjects. By the time most of these artists gained public acceptance and renown, Impressionism and the avant-garde were beginning to be institutionalized – not the least because of the activities of a fellow Scot, R.A.M. Stevenson. Yet, in this twilight for academic art, women could negotiate a

surprising range of freedoms for themselves. The last gasp of academic art became a golden period for women artists whose considerable achievements and initiative have been brushed aside as worthless by the modernist metanarrative. It is a sad pattern that women frequently are only seen to excel in any given discipline when masculine self-congratulation has shifted not merely the goalposts but the whole playing field of cultural validation to a new arena that is usually as firmly guarded and policed as before. Simultaneously, when a profession or genre has a substantial female participation, then it is relegated to a humble position on scales of value judgements.

Earlier art scholarship seemed to struggle to find a cultural niche for academic Victorian women artists. In finding a new space for these artists one could parallel the complex and large body of feminist theory that has now grown around female "travellers" and "explorers". Late nineteenth-century Scottish women artists were, likewise, intrepid travellers, often despite familial disapproval when, as in a quaint phrase cited by Helland, proper women still lived "under the shadow of Queen Victoria's parasol". Mary Rose Hill Burton went to Japan, and Mary Cameron went to Spain. Other women travelled to Paris, Ireland, Italy and Wales in search both of new, novel subjects and advanced training. Again, one notes how feminist expansion in the realm of work dovetails into the broadening social experience of the nineteenth century. With the institutional fixation on modernism, many of these stories are fresh and unfamiliar. Mary Cameron's career indicates the range of women's achievement even as academic art was being undermined in critical discourse. That a woman artist travelled and painted subjects that critics found unexpected in terms of a female sensibility, a lack of mediocrity or "rose water", in Frank Rutter's words, that she could be praised by Spanish critics as a perceptive and unusual foreign artist who did not reduce their culture to a series of ludicrous and insulting stereotypes, indicates the cultural importance of Helland's forgotten women. Cameron's works raise the question of stereotypes and myths of identity trafficked across cultures, as well as the role of women in confirming cultural and racial hierarchies.

Postcolonialism has also given the lie to the modernist stereotype that representational landscape painting is neutral and vapid. Helland successfully employs a postcolonial analysis of meaning and affiliation in seemingly empty landscapes to reposition her artists. Even the least original landscapes by her artists heeded a series of cultural gestures around the Scottish landscape, especially the remaking of a colonized, depopulated Scotland into a picturesque tourist destination. This sanitization of a landscape from which the indigenous population had been forcibly removed was a phenomenon that Scots either assimilated as a norm or resisted. As Helland wryly notes, the financially rewarding assimilation/exploitation of stereotypes of

“wild” Scotland by the Scots continues today with the promotion of car and bus tours to “Rob Roy Country”. Here, twentieth-century tourists stop to admire the same beauty spots that caused nineteenth-century travellers to fantasize about unspoiled, primitive Scotland. Does a Scottish person assimilate the stereotype and count the cash, as did even these middle-class ladies by painting picturesque and recognized tourist landscapes? Or can pictures of familiar Scottish landmarks also function as a type of virtual subaltern rebellion, an imaginary re-possession of the land, a shared affirmation of locality and identity amongst the now-displaced? If, as early newspaper reviews suggested, picturesque landscapes were supposed to speak directly to Scottish buyers, then views of Scotland had a complex ideological function within the negotiations that constructed a Scottish identity. The careers of all the women artists documented by Helland unfolded in the context of Scotland as a society and culture colonized by a superior power, where the colonizers remade and sold the “identity” of Scotland as a series of entertaining vignettes – which the Scots themselves had to either maintain, subvert or interrogate from their own personal/political standpoints.

This construction of a “Scottish” identity and singularity especially concerned the middle and lower classes, rather than cosmopolitan, wealthy and aristocratic Scots, for whom such signifiers had less relevance; their loyalties were trans-national and class- and income-based. Artist Kate Macaulay was sustained by a typically romantic Scottish family mythology of lost wealth and status in the wake of British domination and the Scottish Diaspora. Whilst she grew up in different localities outside Britain as a “colonial gypsy” in a landless family who worked as expatriates in the middle ranks of colonial bureaucracies, later she often painted in the locality claimed as family ancestral holdings. The “romance” and “nostalgia” of landscape as a sign in Scotland had strong political resonance, as did a paradigmatic narrative of the decline of the family or the “clan”, the latter concept being also a means of connection to the traumatic narratives of military defeat and social dislocation.

Helland is particularly effective in causing the reader to rethink clichéd images of saccharine “Scottish” landscape and tourism that survive into the present era. In considering the issue of “Scottish” culture and identity that threads throughout the text, perhaps as an Australian outsider one could suggest that Helland’s Canadian location makes her alert to complex negotiations of the thoroughly and closely colonized. For whilst in an imperial hierarchy, the differences of race, colour and language are easily identified and can provide a rallying point, the burdens placed upon a colonized culture that shares a common border and language with the imperial power are particular, strange and inescapable and not lessened by superficial affinities.

I have few negative comments. *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* carries itself well on its own terms, and in negotiating the contradictions that it charts around central socio-cultural dishonesties about gender, race and class. The earlier pages are a little off-putting. They are the least prepossessing element of the text, sounding rather like the introduction to a dissertation by a dutiful student with a particularly unimaginative supervisor. Whilst they certainly outline the general content, these first few pages render the following arguments a disservice as they do not fully prepare the reader for the vividness or the subversive nature of the following discussion. The implications and inferences of *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* are even more wide-ranging than its stated content, and its introduction does not fully indicate the extent to which the following arguments deconstruct broad art historical truisms and cast scrutiny on the discipline of art history or curatorial and museological value systems.

My other criticism is minor. A short glossary or index of exhibiting histories and working lives of the various artists discussed throughout the book would be useful to the reader. It could permit the tracking of the complex web of friendships and associations across successive chapters. Most importantly, it would provide a definitive record of the impressive achievements of each of Helland’s subjects as presently known. Helland’s artists exist in a limbo for an international audience, including, I would suspect, her fellow Canadians. These artists’ works are not held widely in overseas institutions and few originals or illustrations are accessible outside Scotland. Even in Scotland public gallery holdings may be limited and fragmentary. Many once-celebrated works by nineteenth-century women are now principally accessible as postage-stamp-sized engravings in yellowing catalogues.

The impact of this book upon undergraduate art and cultural students may, therefore, be sadly limited. Yet, a young and relatively under-experienced audience is in most need of Helland’s firmly aimed deconstructions of modernist truisms. *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* certainly functions effectively without a further appendix detailing lives, or listing the awards of various artists, but many art historical beginners will still find it easier to locate information on high-profile stars and therefore will keep repeating the same round of art historical stereotypes. Again, Helland’s text is well organized and coherently produced, forcing us to contemplate the very frameworks of art historical practice and their impact upon women.

The austere, undramatic but ultimately accessible prose makes a palatable interface with arguments that challenge the conventions and clichés that still function as foundational values for current art historical practice. The challenge is all the

more outrageous as Helland ignores generations of modernist standing imperatives to demonstrate that artists hitherto regarded as unimportant can deliver significant cultural meanings. Helland persuasively rethinks the function and value of art that has been relegated to a position of cultural obscurity without distorting or romanticizing the original meaning and context of the artworks themselves. Nor does she resort to strategies such as a camp appreciation of flaw and irony or validating the aesthetics of the abject to mediate an appreciation of the marginalized.

If the “death” of empirical art history has often been proclaimed by art writers and theorists over the past two decades, Helland provides cogent proof that such obituaries are indeed premature, by demonstrating the value of solid research and its

possibility to complement and underpin contemporary theory. *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* indicates that far from women’s art being over-exposed, or thoroughly documented, three decades after the emergence of feminist art history significant fields of achievement in women’s art remain barely known. A rich corpus of unfamiliar material can still await the enterprising historian who closely and alertly reads the primary sources at a “micro” level, as Helland does, and resists populist feminist art history’s urges towards the expressionistic and gestural above informed analysis.

JULIETTE PEERS

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
Melbourne, Australia

Robert J. Belton, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture*. Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2001, 398 pp.; 36 colour illus., 112 black-and-white illus. and a glossary on CD-ROM, \$59.95 Cdn.

Robert J. Belton’s ambitious new textbook, *Sights of Resistance*, seeks to sample the range, diversity and historical context of Canadian visual culture from pre-Confederation to present. With the stated objective of shifting the reader’s real centre of attention away from the artist as the central agent for shaping meaning, he focuses on the critical strategies and processes that might reasonably be employed in the interpretation of examples of visual culture. Consequently, Professor Belton purports to have no interest in establishing a stable historical canon for Canadian art but, rather, seeks to challenge readers to recognize “conventions of meaning that ... [they] ... can then forge into substantial interpretations for themselves” (p. 3). As, perhaps, the first comprehensive yet general guide to Canadian visual culture, I found much to admire. Mostly written in clear, unadorned prose that conveys a wealth of stimulating ideas and useful information, this weighty volume is intended for the undergraduate university student, as well as the more advanced reader. With a tone that ranges from the informal and the generous to the authoritarian and absolute, this innovative undertaking provides its intended audience with compressed examinations of various aesthetic and political theories and definitions, and versions of visual literacy and visual poetics. Professor Belton also proposes his point of view about the elements of visual culture and the reasons for its study while offering didactic exercises for critical analysis. Moreover, despite his disclaimers, he has, indeed, supplied a concise survey of visual culture in Canada, as well as a reference list of important moments in Canadian history and visual culture. Approximately two-thirds of the book is devoted to case studies which

include illustrations of various works of Canadian art and design accompanied by brief texts that interpret the images from particular critical positions. Intended to stimulate further interpretations by the reader of both the images and the ideas inherent in the essay fragments, these case studies insist on interpretation as a dynamic process with little promise of permanent closure. Moreover, if the reader had any doubt that Dr Belton’s primary goal for this book was that it be used as a learning tool, it may be noted that throughout the text, various key words are printed in bold type. The CD-ROM that accompanies the book contains a glossary that can be searched at random for definitions of the terms. For these valuable inclusions, and more, I am very grateful to Dr Belton for his groundbreaking effort. That said, there are other, perhaps more subtle aspects of the book that are, indeed, troubling to me which I will consider at a later point in this review.

Claiming to have “no ideological agenda”, Belton declares that he intends to “break open as many approaches to meaning” (p. 4) and to interpretation as possible. He suggests that he has intentionally avoided writing a conventional survey of Canadian visual culture because he believes that such approaches usually reinforce a singular version of historical significance without making transparent the ideology of the author who shaped the narrative and the choices of illustrated works. Acknowledging the influence of a post-modern trend, as he perceives it, that favours “the audience over the traditionally sanctified artist” (p. 2), Professor Belton intended to construct a book that would encourage readers to be active participants in the critical interpretation of the art and ideas which they may encounter in his book or elsewhere.

Fundamentally suspicious of regarding the artist’s intention as a significant factor in the interpretation of the work of art, Professor Belton seems to privilege the persuasions of intellectually fashionable theories over the perceptual, physical and