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Fall 2008

Review of *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview* By Patricia Ainslie and Mary-Beth Laviolette

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Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview. By Patricia Ainslie and Mary-Beth Laviolette. Calgary, AB: Fifth House, 2007. xi + 147 pp. Illustrations, notes, artist biographies, bibliography, index. C\$39.99.

Alberta Art and Artists is a modest book with large ambitions. It is first and foremost an introduction to the historic and contemporary visual arts within the western Canadian province. But it is also a declaration that this art supports a “confident difference,” a unique provincial identity that distinguishes it from other regions.

The two authors are well positioned to undertake the volume’s double task. Patricia Ainslie, who served as curator and vice president of collections at the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary, contributes two historical sections. Following a sampling of First Nations productions, she directs the reader to exploratory topographical and picturesque landscapes and early portraiture up to 1920. A series of short subsections corresponds to developments such as the introduction of the Mounted Police, the railways, and colonization. Moving into the mid-twentieth century, she links the work to the creation of an emerging “Sense of Place” in a province situated both in the prairies and next to the mountains. She then documents the somewhat late introduction of modernism and abstraction, which took on distinctive forms within the region, frequently in response to the specific qualities of the land. Her second section ends at 1970.

Here, Mary-Beth Laviolette, a Calgary-based critic, picks up the tale, focussing on late modernist and postmodernist Albertan art to the present. Given the diversity of the province’s art of the last three decades, her divisions are less chronological than Ainslie’s and more thematic. Although the contemporary productions are more cosmopolitan and relate directly to broader international movements such as feminism and identity issues, she too shows how these have been inflected by the specific nature, history, and culture of the place of their production.

The book is richly illustrated, broadly inclusive, well balanced, and informative. Ainslie covers painting primarily, but also printmaking, photography, ceramics, and sculpture. Laviolette’s section features all of these, plus glass and fabrics, installation and multimedia work, as well as video and performance pieces. All works are presented in color plates with lucid descriptive captions. In separate, introductory prefaces each author outlines the institutional shifts that affected the instruction, production, exhibition, and reception of art within the province. Biographical sketches of the artists follow the main entries.

This is a uniformly friendly and accessible text, which welcomes the newcomer to Alberta’s art. Like the province, the book asserts both a populist, provincial identity and a sophisticated global vision.

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