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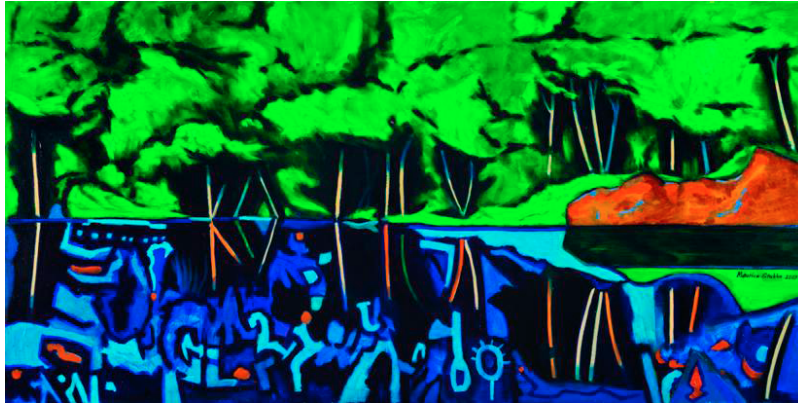


The London Yodeller

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Maurice Stubbs - A London Art Pioneer Finally Gets His Due

Herman Goodden - June 19, 2015 - Art & Books



A couple decades ago when BealArt was enduring one of its periodic assaults from educational bureaucrats looking to scale back and normalize its operations to save a few dollars, I wrote an article defending its autonomy and held up as my irrefutable proof of the school's idiosyncratic excellence, the case of one Greg Curnoe (1936-92). Arguably London's most famous artist, a few years before he died Greg told me how much the art program at H.B. Beal had helped him find his way and I quoted him in the article expressing his gratitude to BealArt and its teachers.

About a week after the article ran, I received a letter from one of Greg's teachers, Herb Ariss (1916-2009) perfunctorily thanking me for the article and pointing out that by focussing on this success story from the 1950's, I really wasn't making a very compelling argument for why the school was worth protecting now. Then, extrapolating from Beal to the city at large, Ariss urged me as a media commentator to do what I could to sometimes shift my focus to the legion of other accomplished artists who toiled away in our midst with a fraction – or none – of the attention that was routinely lavished upon the usual suspects like Curnoe or Jack Chambers or Paul Peel.

As both a journalist and an editor assigning stories to other journalists, I've tried to keep Ariss' words in mind ever since. But if there was a predisposition to favour the most established artists in the media generally (I actually think that situation has

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significantly improved today), the outlook was – and remains -several magnitudes worse when it comes to book publishing. Even with the general lowering of printing costs in the digital age, reproducing fine art between covers is still pricy and nobody but the best established artists typically receives the glitzy coffee table book treatment.

Which is why the publication last month of a stunningly beautiful art book (tied in with a retrospective exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery) is cause for celebration on several fronts. The book, *Maurice Stubbs: Intuitive Painter*, pays overdue homage to a long-time fixture in the London art scene who has never really had his moment in the sun even though he’s been producing top flight work in watercolour and oils for more than 70 years. There are extensive essays by Phillip McNamara, Catherine Elliot Shaw and Tom Smart and 153 reproductions of works from every period of his life. Now in his 91st year, it’s gratifying to see Stubbs honoured in this way while he’s still with us; thereby avoiding that all too common situation where an artist dies and the tributes pour forth and you can’t help thinking, “You know, I’ll bet that he or she really would have appreciated hearing some of this stuff while they were still on this side of the sod.”

Another thing that makes this book so noteworthy is that geographically, experientially and stylistically, the Australian-born Stubbs has always been a roustabout and an explorer; never content to get one approach down and then endlessly milk it – and that kind of artist can be difficult for critics and curators to draw a bead on, let alone adequately appraise. Also, until he retired as curator of the McIntosh Gallery in 1989, Stubbs had almost never enjoyed the luxury of being able to devote all of his waking hours to his art. Certainly some periods were more productive than others (the increase of output from the ‘90s onward is torrential) but it’s a real testament to his focus and drive that he kept the flame of inspiration burning through what must have been some pretty distracting and discouraging patches.

Born in the Western Australia town of Geraldton near Perth in October of 1924, Stubbs received his earliest education in art by studying the elements (gazing out over the Indian Ocean and swimming in it virtually every day of his youth; drinking in the details of a landscape that was drenched in broad antipodean sunlight for 340 days of the year) and listening to his older sister Dorrie (who also went on

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to a career in art) who instructed him to shun commercialism of any kind, to see things for himself and trust his instincts and to regard colour, not as a “visual adjective,” but as a means to convey emotion and his innermost feelings about whatever scene he was painting.

At the age of 18 Stubbs commenced three and a half years’ service with the Royal Australian Air Force signal corps. His war work earned him a coveted slot at the National Art School in Sydney where, he told me, “They had a group of about eight war artists who weren’t dyed-in-the-wool teachers. They came from all over the world and they did all different styles. Of the students the youngest was about 23 and the oldest was about 50 and we weren’t about to be messed with either. We were there to work and very keen to go.”

Through the 50’s Stubbs continued to paint and exhibit his work (enjoying some early acclaim as a member of a modernist cabal called The Perth Group), earned his teaching degree, travelled and worked in England, Scandinavia, Italy, Brussels and Canada, finally turning up in London in 1962 where he served as assistant curator of art at the old London Public Library and Art Museum under Clare Bice. After a four year stint as an education officer with the National Gallery of Art in Ottawa (a gig which allowed him to tour his country of birth giving lectures on modern Canadian art) Stubbs returned to London for keeps; serving from 1969-89 as the first full time, professional curator of the McIntosh Gallery at Western University.

Much of what Stubbs accomplished over two decades at the helm of the McIntosh is symbolized in his decision early on to tell the university bureaucrats to go stuff themselves by over-riding their refusal to have the gallery’s front door painted McIntosh apple red and doing the job himself. Stubbs’ work with cataloguing, managing and developing the gallery’s collection, his nurturing support (moral and financial) for local artists, his improvements to and expansion of exhibition spaces and offices, his dynamic and innovative approach to programming – all worked together to put the McIntosh onto London’s (and indeed, Canada’s) radar in a way it never had been before. It seems a fitting tribute that this institution he did so much to shape and define should now reciprocate by publishing this book.

(Maurice Stubbs: Intuitive Painter costs \$40 and is

available at Attic Books and Brown & Dickson)

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