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**Closed Systems: Alexandra Luke, Hortense Gordon
and the Canadian Art History Canon**

Janice Anderson

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art History**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

September, 1995

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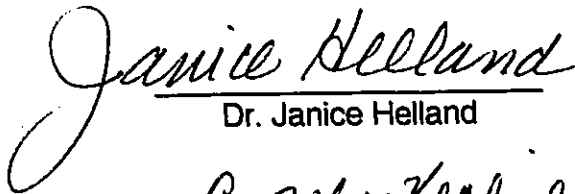
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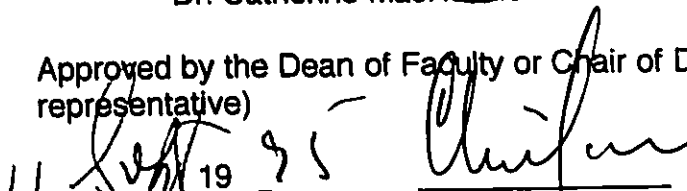
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ABSTRACT

Closed Systems: Alexandra Luke, Hortense Gordon and the Canadian Art History Canon

Janice Anderson

The marginalization of women's art within the Canadian art history canon articulates the dichotomy which exists between the practice of making art in a Canadian context and the selective recording of that practice within written history. Canadian painters Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon made significant contributions to the development and acceptance of abstract art in Canada, not simply through their own art practice, but also as teachers, lecturers and exhibition organizers, especially in Ontario. In spite of this contribution and the local, national and international reputations that both women enjoyed, their work does not appear in a position of significance in Canadian art history texts. The origin and meaning of this marginalization is based on the social construction of gender with the standard canon privileging male production. Feminist intervention in this system has failed to fundamentally improve or change the structure which is power-based and difficult to destabilize.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	1
ChapterOne.....	4
ChapterTwo.....	21
ChapterThree.....	57
Conclusion.....	80
Bibliography.....	83
Illustrations.....	94

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
1. <u>Journey Through Space</u> , 1956, Alexandra Luke.....	94
2. <u>Fugue</u> , 1955, Hortense Gordon.....	95
3. <u>Space, Form, Tension</u> , 1947, Hortense Gordon.....	96
4. <u>Colour Study</u> , 1960, Hortense Gordon.....	97
5. <u>Automatic Number 52</u> , 1948-50, Alexandra Luke.....	98
6. <u>Dweller in the Ageless</u> , 1963, Alexandra Luke.....	99
7. <u>Christmas, Burk's Falls</u> , 1936, Hortense Gordon.....	100
8. <u>Light Housekeeping</u> , 1945, Hortense Gordon.....	101
9. <u>Studio Interior Abstraction</u> , 1948, Hortense Gordon.....	102
10. <u>Chalk Lake Road</u> , 1936, Alexandra Luke.....	103
11. <u>Moonlight, Banff</u> , 1945, Alexandra Luke.....	104
12. <u>Circus</u> , 1948, Alexandra Luke.....	105
13. Photograph of Painters Eleven, 1957.....	106

Introduction

Twenty-five years of feminist scholarship have failed to reshape the structures of exclusion which have functioned to marginalize the work of women from the mainstream of contemporary Canadian art. This marginalization can be read everywhere - in our galleries, in our magazines, in our text-books, our university courses, sales of works of art, and on and on, systemic throughout the structure which supports Canadian culture and cultural history. Everywhere, the memories and the knowledge that women have of their experience are minimized and positioned as secondary in importance to the male experience.

A recent survey - and one which is on going - conducted by the Women's Art Resource Centre (Toronto) and published in the magazine Matriart, reaches two rather startling conclusions. First, there has been little change in the representation of women's art in the National Gallery of Canada, and in other public galleries across Canada, between 1970 and the present. Secondly, the National Gallery, in its corporate plan projected to 1998, does not "indicate any acknowledgement of past and/or present gender or cultural inequities within either its exhibition agenda or its purchasing agenda."¹

In 1970, for example, the permanent collection of the National Gallery held the work of 155 Canadian women artists and the work of 701 Canadian male artists. In other words, women artists formed eighteen percent of the total number of artists represented in 1970. By 1993, the permanent collection held

¹Linda Abrahams, "Who Counts and Who's Counting?," Matriart 5, no.1 (1994): 9.

the work of 416 women artists and 1881 male artists.² Twenty-three years after the original count, women in the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection still constituted eighteen percent of the total of artists represented. In other words, fundamental changes have not taken place in regard to women's status in the arts in Canada. And not only have those changes not taken place, they are not likely to take place in the future without deliberate action at decision-making levels in institutions such as the National Gallery.

A simple recounting of the statistics, much as it might be thought to have the power of shaming those in control into equitable action, has no such effect. The system which has held the work of men in higher esteem than that of women has no intention of releasing its hold on that controlling power. As Craig Owens writes, "The representational systems of the West admit only one vision - that of the constitutive male subject - or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centered, unitary, masculine."³

Assessing women's production within such a framework becomes a difficult task. If representative systems are dominated by masculine structures, then do women even want to be represented within them in the first place? What problems might result from the creation of parallel but alternate structures? What dangers are posed by the idea of rewriting history so that

²Abrahams: 10.

³Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, Hal Foster, ed. (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983): 58.

women are included in its narrative, rather than excluded? These questions merely skim the surface of the problems that women face in trying to address issues of exclusion.

Notwithstanding the intricacies of the problems which arise when issues of exclusion are addressed, on a fundamental level women want recognition of their role in artmaking praxis, no matter what theory or theories might be invoked to achieve such a goal. Women have continued to make works of art regardless of history's neglect. Feminists want to know why those works of art have been left on the margins of representation and what changes need to occur in order both to expand the definition of Canadian art and to include in Canadian art practice and art history the work of women artists.

Chapter One

The recording of history is always something of a fictional process. The mechanisms which select what will find its way into a written history, and what will be excluded from that same history are shaped by the discourses which surround and inform the life of the reporter. What is not included is often as important as what does find its way into the written narrative of a civilization's record. To understand the history of art, as well as history in general, it becomes important to accept that received ideas, or the ideologies of culture which have been taught as if they represented an ultimate truth, are only one way of looking at the body of what constitutes our understanding of art and art history. The written record refers to only a part of the whole, and the inclusion and exclusion of particular parts speak volumes about social structures and the positioning of the individual within them.

The recording of the history of Canada has focused on the activities of certain men to the exclusion of a range of other groups, with the making of historical narrative being generally attributed to those Canadians who are male and white. This construction leaves out large segments of the population. The recording of the history of Canada's art has paralleled this course, with texts which follow a virtually unchanging paradigm which frames the artist within a pre-described matrix of gender and race (although there has been a recent proliferation of interest in the subject of Native art which has made it more visible in mainstream discourse). The focus of this study will be the functioning

and the effect that this marginalization has had on the recording of women's art practice in particular, the understanding of this marginalizing system as closed and difficult to destabilize, and the problems which arise when attempts are made to redress issues of historical marginalization.¹

The result of the gap between the practice of creating art and the recording of that practice has been the development of two parallel but different discourses which seem to have evolved simultaneously. On the one hand, primary sources confirm that Canadian women have been active in the creation of art, have named themselves as artists, have often been endorsed as artistic producers by media (especially newspapers) contemporary with their production, and also have been accepted as equals by their peers in the artistic community. On the other hand, within the dominant discourse, a standard text on art in Canada might lead the reader to the conclusion that women have not traditionally made much art at all. The work of marginalized groups does not appear as an integral part of the model by which the history of art is defined.

In spite of the fact that women constitute a majority of students in most art disciplines,² and have done so since at least the late nineteenth century, statistically women appear in Canadian art history texts at a rate which

¹For a detailed discussion of the development of art and art history vis-à-vis feminism, see: Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," The Art Bulletin 69, no.3 (September, 1987): 326-357.

²For additional information on women as students and as teachers in the fine arts see: Anne Innis Dagg, The 50% Solution: Why Should Women Pay for Men's Culture? (Waterloo: The Otter Press, 1986): 58, and the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook (London: Association of Commonwealth Universities, 1994).

averages only ten percent, except in cases where the text is devoted entirely to women artists.³ Their names appear in the writing either not at all, as token representations, or in ghettoized circumstances such as an entire chapter devoted to women. The problem is compounded by the fact that women's art, even when it has been retrieved, tends not to be shown in galleries. For example, Anne Innis Dagg counted one hundred and ten early Canadian paintings hanging in the National Gallery of Canada in 1984. Not one was by a woman. During the same year the Art Gallery of Ontario was showing one hundred and nineteen paintings, only five by women.⁴ This marginalization articulates the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion which exists in Canada between the practice of creating art and the selective recording of that production within both museum practice and written history.

Similarly in the United States, the work of the Guerrilla Girls confirms that this marginalization is epidemic throughout the English-speaking world. Guerrilla Girls, a group of unidentified American artists, have banded together to take direct action to counter women's exclusion. Based in New York, the group (always disguised in gorilla costumes) presents performances, appears on television, conducts protests, and erects posters such as the 1985 contribution which read "How Many Women Had One-Person Exhibitions at NYC Museums

³Dagg: 49.

⁴Dagg: 53.

Last Year? Guggenheim: 0, Metropolitan: 0, Modern: 1, Whitney: 0."⁵ Women's lack of presence in the discourses which surround art production by no means stops at Canada's borders. The inclusion/exclusion dichotomy can be read across many countries.⁶

This dichotomy is rooted in the structure of the larger form of social discourse in general, and it both reflects and constructs that discourse; that is to say, the marginalization of women's art practice parallels the marginalization of the lives of women in general within the structure of patriarchal society. Within that society, art history contributes to a specific but unstated goal: to maintain the hegemony of the closed system of patriarchy.⁷ A closed system is one which uses its component parts to answer questions which challenge its power. For example, if the question is asked: "Why have women not been known as abstract painters?," the answer within a closed system would be: "Because they are incapable of abstract painting." In this way, generalizations come to be accepted as truths; what has been perennially believed comes to be accepted as having a natural or intrinsic basis in fact.

⁵For an extended discussion of the work of the Guerrilla Girls, see: Elizabeth Hess, "Guerrilla Girl Power: Why the Art World Needs a Conscience," But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism, Nina Felshin, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 309-332.

⁶For example, the same practice of exclusion is seen in the discourses surrounding British art. A recent survey of British collections shows that the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, holds 300 works by women from a collection totalling 11000 items. Jane Sellars, Women's Works (Liverpool: National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, 1988): 15.

⁷The notion of a closed system originates in the mathematical ideas suggested by Douglas R. Hofstadter, Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (New York: Random House, 1979).

A closed system is therefore extremely sturdy and difficult to destabilize. It functions on a pre-ordained grid, with each term and concept having its own pre-established, hierarchical position. The introduction of terms and concepts which are incompatible with the system is not necessarily a strategy which will lead to change, since inconsistencies, as noted above, can be incorporated by a closed system using component parts. Gender differences, for example, are reiterated and accepted in day-to-day living as norms of behaviour, the manifestations of which are determined at birth and do not significantly deviate from a "natural" or "intrinsic" standard.

Within the same structure, social relations are dominated by a theory of logic formulated originally as a series of principles of order or rules of formal logic. This series was referred to by writer Nancy Jay, and she outlines it as the principle of identity (if anything is A, it is A), the principle of contradiction (nothing can be A and not-A) and the principle of the excluded middle (anything and everything must be either A or not-A). She writes, "These principles are not representative of the empirical world: they are principles of order. In the empirical world, almost everything is in a process of transition; growing, decaying, ice turning to water and vice versa."⁸

Following Jay's thinking, these three postulates can be altered and used as keys to the understanding of postmodern thought and the potential for change. If each principle of logic is recreated from the perspective of a limitless

⁸Nancy Jay as cited by Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power," Linda J. Nicholson, ed. Feminism/Postmodernism (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 162.

rather than a reductive logic, you get something like the following: the principle of identity (if anything is A, it is not necessarily A), the principle of contradiction (everything can be A and not-A) and the principle of the included middle (there is nothing which must be either A or not-A). This expanded framework provides a way of thinking about the subject which describes the postmodern fluidity, ambivalence and ambiguity which forces the abandonment of the passivity that accompanies the belief in the existence of any absolute truth (or closed system), and enables us to deconstruct and thereby problematize the issue of gender as a political question. According to Jane Flax, "postmodern discourses are all 'deconstructive' in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture."⁹

Using a postmodern framework that denies a fixed subject position determined in advance by gender, "woman" and "man" can be understood as cultural constructions, not natural categories. If we consider the multiple positions the individual might occupy within the diversity of discourse in terms of art and art history, the range of style and content which marks the work of twentieth-century Canadian artists who are women delineates the impossibility of identifying a style which might be called essentially "feminine." Although being born a woman will influence the individual in certain ways, the

⁹Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 12, no.4 (1987): 634.

consequences are not inevitable, nor are they necessarily identifiable in the work itself. If the gender of the artist is not necessarily identifiable in the manifestation of the work, then we need to examine the following statement posed by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker in Old Mistresses:

We need to understand the significance of that process by which art by women has been separated from the dominant definitions of what constitutes art, consigned to a special category, seen simply as homogeneous expressions of "femininity"¹⁰

and their most poignant question: "Why has this happened?"¹¹

The model of the artist as the solitary male genius has dominated the history of art for many generations. Art historians have traditionally fitted the examination of works of art into a binary, hierarchical structure. Within the structure, male artists are designated by the generic term "artist" and artists who are women are kept as "other" with the designation "woman artist."

Moreover, the understanding of art production has tended to narrow its focus to valorize the art object in and of itself. The many other activities which construct our understanding of art are less liable to be considered an integral part of the process when history is being recorded. It is not only women's art production which is not included, but discussions of artists who teach art, the availability of exhibition space, the volunteers who keep the galleries running,

¹⁰Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980): xviii.

¹¹Parker and Pollock: xvii.

art education and myriad of other issues tend to be ignored, while only the product itself, within its own frame, is considered significant. In addition, the importance of the art object itself is something which is again narrowed to include only a small percentage of productions, and this decision to ascribe meaning only to certain objects is constantly repeated in the reporting. Text books tend to focus on painting, drawing and sculpture to the exclusion of other media; photography, tapestry and ceramics, for instance. Canadian texts often have titles like Dennis Reid's A Concise History of Canadian Painting, Dorothy Farr's and Natalie Luckyj's From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada, or Barry Lord's The History of Painting in Canada, all with an emphasis on "painting" to the exclusion of other possibilities. Media and idioms that fall outside valorized parameters, quilts, for example, or jewellery design, might not be considered. So not only is the structure of what constitutes art discourse seriously narrowed, even within what is reported the field is restricted.

This model provides the framework in which artists such as Alexandra Luke (1901-1967) and Hortense Gordon (1886-1961), the two female members of the group of abstract painters known as Painters Eleven, are understood. Both were active in the creation of art, both named themselves as artists, both were often endorsed as artistic producers by media and both were accepted as artists by their peers in the artistic community. However, they do not appear as figures of significance in the writing of the art history canon. In spite of their local, national and international exhibitions, their memberships in prestigious

art societies, and particularly their contributions to the development and acceptance of abstract art, they have been marginalized from the history that purports to document the development of that art in Canada. To acknowledge this is not specifically to argue that the production of these two artists in particular should have been included in the canon as it stands, but rather that the recording of Canadian art history needs to be problematized to examine the structures of inclusion/exclusion and reframe the canon itself. The relegation of Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon to marginal positions within Canadian culture reflects and constructs the culture as a larger whole, with women's experience functioning within the matrix of that culture, but held outside its representation, without voice.

This is not to suggest that the marginalization of artistic production is limited solely to the work of women. It is certainly possible to argue that several of the members of Painters Eleven who were men - Yarwood, Hodgson, Nakamura and Mead - tend to be similarly ignored.¹² In fact, in some ways, the group should be more correctly remembered as Painters Five, if emphasis were to be placed solely on the reputations of the most prominent members - Bush, Cahen, Macdonald, Town and Ronald. However, while some men do not make their way into our history books, it is more significant that it is not some women who are missing: most women are not there.

¹²The members of Painters Eleven were Jack Bush, Oscar Cahen, Hortense Gordon, Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Jock Macdonald, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakamura, William Ronald, Harold Town and Walter Yarwood.

Some understanding of women's marginalization might be gained through the examination of a woman who often is included in art history texts, Emily Carr. While there is no doubt that Carr has been considered by many to be a magnificent painter, the fact that this one individual has become such an icon in Canadian art is a telling phenomenon. Emily Carr, or at least the image of Emily Carr, fits nicely, with the exception of her gender, with the image of what constitutes an artist. She is constructed as eccentric, solitary, a "genius." In spite of a hiatus of several years during which she made almost no art at all, she is remembered as an artist first and foremost, not as a teacher who made art, as many women (Hortense Gordon, for example) were perceived to be. Nor was she a wealthy society matron, committed to the community and engaging in various community activities, like Alexandra Luke. The fact that she was associated with the Group of Seven, at least informally, encouraged her fame, because she represented the West Coast manifestation of a "national" school, and, significantly, an otherwise all-male one. She has continued to be included as a standard fixture in texts on Canadian art. This implies that the individual must meet certain criteria in order to be considered for a position as an important Canadian artist. Those criteria have been designed around the way men make art; Carr is included because she worked "like a man."

Therefore, the relegation to the margins of representation in a Canadian context can be articulated through the examination of specific examples of Canadian artists whose representation within Canadian cultural history, it is

possible to speculate, would have been different had they been men. In chapter one, I have been discussing the general issue of the omission of women from Canadian art history and outlining the concerns and approaches that have informed my examination of Hortense Gordon and Alexandra Luke in this regard. In chapter two I consider Gordon and Luke in detail. Both Gordon and Luke played an active role in the production, development and growth of understanding of Canadian abstract painting, but neither is credited in art history with the significance of her contribution.

The use of the word "both" as a repeated theme in the preceding paragraph and throughout this study is, however, problematic. To search for and to identify facts that link the two women together reinforces the concept of their "otherness." The two personalities are conflated under the heading "women artists," as if they can be discussed as some kind of uniform entity simply because of their gender and its difference from the gender of the other members of Painters Eleven. The fact that they are united in this way is also a reflection of the dominant discourse. In addition, the category "woman," when reiterated as a stable or knowable category, reinforces gender relations, as Judith Butler has noted. She points out that "woman" is only a fixed designation within "the context of the heterosexual matrix."¹³

However, Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon were two people very different from one another, and it is entirely possible to argue that each of them

¹³Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990): 5.

had more in common with other members of Painters Eleven than with each other. Luke, for example, was friends with Jock Macdonald, and Gordon with Ray Mead, rather than the two women forming some kind of separate entity. There is no reason, therefore, to place them together in this thesis, except for their gender - and above all for the effect that their gender has had on their place in the writing of the history of Canadian art. They had nothing else particularly in common, or at least no more or less in common than any other artists (male or female) involved with twentieth-century Canadian art. I do not wish to reproduce or reinforce the understanding of Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon as "women artists" by talking about them at the same time.

I therefore think it is important to emphasize that, although it is possible to construct a body of similarities to identify the importance both these women had for the development of abstract Canadian art, it is also important to emphasize the many differences between them. Although both artists studied under Hans Hofmann, each developed an individual style. Compare, for example, Alexandra Luke's Journey Through Space of c.1956 (fig.1) with Hortense Gordon's Fugue of 1955 (fig.2). Gordon used strongly contrasting colour and well-defined geometrical shapes with fairly hard edges. Luke's use of colour was softer and more monochromatic. There are no clearly defined shapes in her painting and there is a strong sense of diagonal movement. There is little or no similarity in any formal sense between the two, and the differences underline

the difficulty of talking about women as if their work could be described "by nature" as more similar to the work of other women than to that of any men.

I therefore do not intend to reduce the differences between the two women on an individual level. However, the understanding of how women work within the matrix of culture, but outside the discourse which selects what will remain as the written record of that matrix, demands that issues of gender discrimination be addressed. The insoluble circular argument which results (i.e., if you represent women as having some intrinsic "otherness" you reinforce the existing canon, but if you do not deal with the issues of "otherness" you provide no possible means of redress) must be circumvented by some strategy that will actually disrupt the closed system of patriarchy. The canon will not change until that happens.

To understand how artists such as Luke and Gordon could be simultaneously enmeshed in the production of innovative art and excluded from the canon which records its production, a broader understanding of the discourses which affected their lives is indispensable. However, there is another serious difficulty inherent in examining the private details of women's personal lives. By ascribing meaning to the way personal issues manifest themselves in Luke's and Gordon's art, there is a risk of attributing an unwanted meaning to their private lives. That meaning would be an affirmation of the traditional public/private dichotomy which has been given the status of "natural" in the binary thought processes of patriarchal structure; that is to say, the

acceptance of the idea that men function intrinsically in the public sphere, and women function equally intrinsically in the private.

I do not intend here to ascribe "natural" or "intrinsic" meaning to the personal circumstances of the life of either artist. I am trying instead to understand the history which has forgotten or ignored such women, even though that history uses the gender divisions of public/private as part of its hegemony. In other words, I recognize that the examination of women's personal lives might be construed as reiterating their assignment to the private sphere. However, I wish to use that personal information as a political tool to establish that the marginalization of the work of these two women was based on something other than their conceptions of themselves, other people's opinions of the quality of their work, or any parallels in their personal lives.

The usual method of acquiring this personal information about an historical subject is to consult artist files and archives for personal data. In their article "The Making of a Feminist Biography," Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell write "The biographical subject speaks to us through the record she leaves behind."¹⁴ Hortense Gordon, however, left virtually no private papers such as diaries or personal letters, no notebooks, very little record of her teaching career and no documentation of her paintings.¹⁵ Her artist files held at museums across

¹⁴Patricia T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, "The Making of a Feminist Biography: Reflections on a Miniature Passion," *Atlantis* 15 (Autumn, 1989): 60.

¹⁵A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon, Chatham: Thames Art Gallery, Chatham Cultural Centre, 1993: 7.

Canada are essentially empty. Similarly, Alexandra Luke's files contain little more than one or two sheets of paper, usually photocopies of newspaper clippings. However, Luke has a comparatively extensive archive which has been preserved by The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa. This archive exists because Luke's husband, Ewart McLaughlin, funded the construction of the building for the gallery, and the collection itself was founded on work that Luke had compiled.

Reconstructing the history of the work of these two artists from either primary or secondary sources is complicated by the fact that both women changed the titles of their work several times and also used titles that they liked for more than one painting. This source of confusion was not clarified while either artist was alive, and has become difficult, if not impossible, to clarify now. According to Paddy O'Brien in A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon (Thames Art Gallery, Chatham Cultural Centre, September 10 - October 31, 1993, and circulating until November, 1994), the biographical information that has been collected about Gordon was "largely composed by her cousin Reva Colerick after Hortense's death." She continues:

Outstanding for her loyalty and devotion to Hortense, Reva was, alas, demonstrably unreliable with regard to dates. Even the information to be gleaned from studying the backs of canvases in Hortense's own handwriting is confusing and contradictory. She seems to have changed the titles of paintings several times, or given different works the same title, so it is impossible to believe that a catalogue raisonné could ever be accurate. (The Dock at

Sunset was also exhibited as The Float, Gloucester and The Dock, Sunset Glow, for example.)¹⁶

There is apparently also some belief that Reva Colerick signed some of Gordon's canvases and altered some of the dates, perhaps with the intent of making Gordon look more greatly talented at an earlier age.¹⁷ Luke also tended to alter the titles of her work and also to reuse titles that she liked. In the catalogue essay to Alexandra Luke: A Tribute (The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, July 6 - August 7, 1977), Jennifer Watson writes, "I have found four, even five titles assigned to a single picture.... On the other hand, Luke would reuse favourite titles for several different works: there are countless pictures named 'Bouquet' for example."¹⁸

In contrast to the shortage of information about Hortense Gordon, Alexandra Luke's archive at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery is rich in biographical and autobiographical information, including letters, her notes from classes with Hans Hofmann, her diaries, her sketchbooks and her lecture notes. This does not particularly attest to a specific interest in Luke's life which has been taken by art historians. In spite of her achievements during her lifetime and the admiration of her peers, none of the information was accumulated while Luke was still alive. Both she and Gordon had lives which were documented

¹⁶A Dedicated Life: 7-8.

¹⁷A Dedicated Life: 18.

¹⁸Alexandra Luke: A Tribute, Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1977: 5.

after their deaths. But in spite of the fact that much work has been accomplished in reconstructing the life of Luke in particular, she has still failed to find a significant place in the writing of art history. "Anonymity, we have long believed," says Carolyn Heilbrun, "is the proper condition of women."¹⁹

Heilbrun's thesis that the truth of the female experience is repressed in written history to conform with the needs of patriarchal discourse expresses the greatest difficulty that feminists face in exploring the lives of forgotten women. If that life is elaborated as a specifically female experience, the risk of reducing women to one entity and subsuming individual difference is very great. It is not possible to suggest a universal experience that would unite women in some common way. At the same time, however, women do experience a common suppression within patriarchal social structures, and giving a voice to them, especially as silenced subjects within the matrix of culture, is an essential step towards change. So Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon must be named and allowed to speak (in as much as it is possible to assign a voice to them - they cannot speak for themselves) but their similarities must be understood as coincidental, not as features that define them specifically as women or that can reduce them to some commonality.

¹⁹Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing A Woman's Life (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988): 12.

Chapter Two

Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon became members of Painters Eleven at its inception in 1953. In 1952, Luke had organized an exhibition of abstract art which travelled throughout Canada and was the first Canadian exhibition to present abstract work from across the country.¹ In 1953, William Ronald organized an exhibition at Simpson's department store in Toronto, Abstracts at Home (October, 1953). Simpson's had agreed to show the work of abstract artists as component parts of complete room settings, and Luke was asked to participate. "The aim," wrote Ronald, "was to persuade the general public that this form of contemporary expression in painting was as much at home within the surroundings of everyday living as in an art gallery."² The seven artists who showed their work at Simpson's decided to meet again, and with the addition of four other members, Painters Eleven was born.³

Painters Eleven had been formed in an attempt to unite artists with the common goal of wanting a better place for abstract art within the museums and galleries of Canada. Jack Bush wrote:

¹Alexandra Luke is frequently credited by many sources in this regard as being responsible for the organization of the first exhibition of abstract art in Canada in 1952. However, this exhibition was predated by several others, and what is meant is that Luke organized the first exhibition that showed abstract work from across Canada and was not limited by region.

²William Ronald, "Abstracts at Home," Canadian Art 11, no.2, (Winter 1954): 52.

³The seven artists who participated in the "Abstracts at Home" show were: Jack Bush, Oscar Cahen, Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakamura and William Ronald.

We were sick and tired of exhibiting in big comprehensive shows representing the usual cross section of art points of view; we wondered what it would be like to look at a show of just one idiom. This turned out to be a power play, at least in our pretty confused country, art-wise.⁴

Hortense Gordon, a Hamilton artist, taught design and applied arts at the Hamilton Technical and Art School beginning in 1918. According to Paddy O'Brien in the catalogue essay to A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon, as early as 1924 Gordon was discussing colour use and the relationships of colour and space, and by the mid-thirties had incorporated into her teaching theories of negative and positive space and movement within paintings.⁵ These concepts would be integral to the development of the understanding of abstract painting. Gordon herself began painting in an abstract idiom in the mid-1940's (fig.3 - Space, Form, Tension, 1947), and she maintained her commitment to abstraction until her death in 1961 (fig.4 - Colour Study, 1960). Alexandra Luke, born in Montreal but having spent most of her life in Oshawa, defended abstraction as early as 1933, with a letter to the editor of the Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby). The President of the Royal Academy, Sir Wyly Grier, speaking at the 1933 annual exhibition held by the Oshawa branch of the Women's Lyceum Art Club, had said, "Modernistic art will not stand the test of time and is founded on verbosity and not conviction." Tracing the roots of

⁴Letter from Jack Bush to Henry Botkin, Toronto, February 21, 1956, The Robert MacLaughlin Gallery Archives. Cited by Joan Murray, Painters Eleven in Retrospect, Oshawa: The Robert MacLaughlin Gallery, 1979: 7.

⁵A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon, Chatham: Thames Art Gallery, Chatham

modernist art to "the French degenerates," he continued, "Modernism is founded on a passion for the limelight, it is written up like advertising for some of the rottenest breakfast food. People are hypnotized by the Niagara of verbosity."⁶ Luke replied:

Sir Wyly belongs to that group of academicians who can see no good in new or different methods of approach and technique in Art and who cannot tolerate the change from old to new, from static to dynamic.... Modern Art tends toward the elimination of photographic realism and should be as pure an art as music, the struggles of all great painters have been toward that goal. It's [sic] medium, colour, is as elemental as sound and when properly presented is as capable of engendering aesthetic emotion as is music.... I sincerely hope that those who heard Sir Wyly Grier...will not be prejudiced by his condemnation, but will realize that modern art has a very definite aim, it is a sincere reaching forth of the creative will to find a medium in which to express most perfectly the intrinsic beauty of form and rhythm.⁷

Although Luke herself did not begin to paint abstractly until about 1947 (fig.5 - Automatic Number 52, 1948-50), a date which almost parallels Gordon's mid-forties shift, her early commitment to its defence, and her dedication to abstraction until her death in 1967 (fig.6 - Dweller in the Ageless, 1963), frame the importance that her input, and that of Gordon, had for the development and acceptance of abstract art in Canada. Both women produced significant bodies

Cultural Centre, 1994: 13.

⁶"Urges Oshawa Artists Always Remain Original," Evening Telegram (Toronto), April 24, 1933.

⁷Margaret McLaughlin, "Defends Modern Art," letter to the editor, Oshawa Daily Times, after April 24, 1933. "Alexandra Luke" was the name that Margaret McLaughlin began to sign to her canvases ca. 1948.

of abstract work that spanned about twenty years of production. Both taught art, Gordon at the Hamilton Technical and Art School from 1918 until 1951 and Luke as a lecturer on the subject of abstract art, often at exhibitions that she had arranged herself. According to Joyce Zemans, Luke, along with Oshawa art teacher Dorothy Van Luven, organized sixty-nine art exhibits in Oshawa between 1945 and 1952, "lecturing regularly herself and inviting guest artists to speak about their work."⁸ Gordon also gave public lectures on abstract art, for example, at the Zonta Club of Hamilton in 1950,⁹ at the Chatham-Kent Art Association in 1952,¹⁰ and Glenhyrst, the art centre in Brantford in 1959.¹¹ Both Gordon and Luke played an active role in the production, development and growth of understanding of Canadian abstract painting, but neither is credited in art history with the significance of her contribution.

Gordon and Luke were both members of several Canadian art societies. Gordon was an Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy, and held memberships in the Canadian Society of Graphic Artists, the Contemporary Artists of Hamilton, the Women's Art Association of Hamilton (which she helped

⁸Joyce Zemans, "From Landscape to Abstractionism: Alexandra Luke," Vanguard 13, no.1, (February, 1984): 16. According to this statistic, Luke would have had sufficient curatorial experience to enable her to organize the important show of abstract work from across Canada in 1952, previously noted in the text. Dorothy Van Luven was not herself an artist, she taught at Oshawa Collegiate and Vocational Institute - see an interview between Joan Murray and Ron Lambert, January 12, 1987: 7.

⁹"Artist Guest Speaker at First Zonta Meeting," Hamilton News, September 15, 1950.

¹⁰"Modern Art Follows Set Patterns Hortense Gordon Tells Kent Artists," Chatham Daily News, May 17, 1952.

¹¹"News About Town," Hamilton Spectator, January 20, 1959.

to found), and she was the youngest member to win membership in the Ontario Society of Artists in 1904. She was also a member of the North Shore Arts Association of Gloucester, Massachusetts, the International Federation of Art, Zurich, and the Art Teachers Guild, London, England. Luke was a member of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour, the Canadian Group of Painters and the Ontario Society of Artists. She was also a Fellow of the International Institute of Arts and Letters. But for both of them their best-known affiliation was with Painters Eleven, in existence from 1953 to 1960. In the opening paragraph to the catalogue essay for the show Painters Eleven in Retrospect (The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, October 30 - December 12, 1979, and circulating until November, 1981), Joan Murray comments on the impact of this group of abstract painters: "From the perspective provided by two decades, it seems clear that Painters Eleven - its meetings, its exhibitions, its innovations - constituted a decisive moment in the history of modernist painting in Canada."¹² Murray also notes that the group provided a strength-in-numbers defence against the juried shows of the prestigious artists' societies of Ontario, primarily the Royal Canadian Academy and the Ontario Society of Artists, and their repeated selection of landscape and portrait themes. Juries selected "mere repetitions," according to Alexandra Luke. "The jury should catch up with the art of today and find out by study what is going on in the rest of the art world," she wrote in a 1950 letter to the Globe and Mail in reference to the jury which had

¹²Painters Eleven in Retrospect, Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1979: 6.

judged the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in that year. "Out of a jury of one dozen there are but two or three who know anything whatever of abstract art."¹³ The "mere repetitions" to which Luke referred were something that Painters Eleven wished to avoid, and deliberately shaped themselves to counteract. In the words of William Ronald, "If you didn't have someone to spill paint over the canvas, everyone in Canada would still be painting those lukewarm landscapes."¹⁴

The initiative for the formation of Painters Eleven is usually attributed to Ronald, since he assembled the seven artists who showed their work at Simpson's department store in the show Abstracts at Home.¹⁵ However, Luke had included several of these same artists in the Canadian Abstract Exhibition in October 1952 (the Oshawa Y.M.C.A., and circulating until 1953). Nine of the future members of Painters Eleven had participated, including Hortense Gordon. In an interview with Yvonne McKague Housser in 1977, Joan Murray commented: "In many ways, one feels that the formation of the Painters Eleven movement was due to Margaret; she was an organizer and she got people together"; to which McKague Housser replied, "Yes. She was an organizer and

¹³Alexandra Luke, "Current Exhibition Disappoints," letter to the editor, Globe and Mail, March 9, 1950: 6.

¹⁴"Canadians Abroad: Rebels in Manhattan," New York Times (Canadian edition), May 7, 1956.

¹⁵According to a thesis by Sharon Brooks, the fact that Abstracts at Home was held in Simpson's department store "confirms the beginnings of a new understanding of art as a consumable commodity." Sharon Brooks, "'Abstracts at Home' Against the Ideals of Nationalism: A Study of Exhibition Practices in Toronto 1940-1950." M.A. thesis, York University, 1992: 39.

she had some money and was generous with it. She could provide a place for meetings and not only could she provide a place for their meetings but she was generous enough to do so."¹⁶ The sentiment was echoed by John Bentley Mays in a more recent (1993) article. He wrote "I'm inclined to think that the honour for its [Painters Eleven's] benign, rapid reception by Ontario's museums and mass media should go largely to Alexandra Luke, who had the personal wealth and strong organizational ability...to open doors and keep them open."¹⁷ Certainly the group met for the first time at Luke's cottage in Whitby. Whoever was responsible for initiating its formation, Painters Eleven met with the express intent of promoting abstract art and breaking what had come to be seen as the unprogressive dependence of Canadian artists upon portrait painting and the representational work of the Group of Seven's nationalistic landscape aesthetic as it was reiterated in jury selection for prominent shows.

In a 1958-59 catalogue entry for the circulating exhibition Points of View (London Public Library and Art Museum), Painters Eleven (no individual author was named) summarized their intentions thus:

Painters Eleven exists as a mechanism for the exhibition of work created in the spirit and character of this, the present, by artists who, though they may not agree, are kindred in creative intention. We have issued no manifestoes, we have condemned no one, no

¹⁶Joan Murray interview with Yvonne McKague Housser, reprinted in Alexandra Luke: A Tribute, Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1977: 15.

¹⁷John Bentley Mays, "Painters 11's Brush With Notoriety," Globe and Mail, April 3, 1993: sec.c. 15.

school or opinion. Most importantly, we have at no time insisted that ours was the only way.¹⁸

The group was structured on a non-hierarchical framework with a democratic membership. They had no president or other official leader, and they made decisions collectively. It was also decided that they would have no jury selection for exhibitions.

Painters Eleven did not, of course, define itself as a specifically feminist organization, but as members of the group Hortense Gordon and Alexandra Luke seem to have been treated as equals. No catalogue entries, personal correspondence between artists, media input or minutes of Painters Eleven meetings suggest that any decisions were made or questions asked on the basis of their gender. Gordon and Luke also considered themselves equal to the other members in terms of artistic merit; neither of them undervalued their own work by underpricing it in relation to the prices that other members of the group asked for their work. This confidence in the value of their work dated back to the Canadian Abstract Exhibition of 1952, where Gordon asked \$250 for her work Orange and Yellow Bound in Space and Luke asked \$200 for Painting No.23 and \$250 for Vibrations No.5. Prices amongst other exhibitors ranged from a low of \$40 for William Ronald's Catch as Catch Can to a high of \$500 for Sydney Watson's Two Birds With Stove. Altogether twenty-six artists showed work, and the average price of the forty-five pieces shown was approximately

¹⁸Cited by Kathryn Reid Woods, A History of Painters Eleven (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1970), n.p.

\$160.¹⁹ Luke's and Gordon's prices stood noticeably above the average, although admittedly the catalogue does not include such information as the relative size of the works, the degrees of finish or even the media, all of which would have had an impact on pricing. The artists' notes (by six of the artists) which were included with the catalogue all describe the work as being "painting," but this word may have been used with a rather broad meaning. The catalogue does not mention whether any of the pieces were in watercolour.

By the time Painters Eleven had an exhibition at the Park Gallery in Toronto in 1957 (Painters Eleven 1957, October 31 - November 16) the two women were still demonstrating their confidence in their work, perhaps Luke more so than Gordon. By this time, the group had been reduced to nine members. Oscar Cahen had died in a car accident on November 26, 1956, but the group continued to include his work in their shows as long as it was available. William Ronald had resigned earlier in 1957. At this exhibition, each member of the group showed three works. Cahen's was listed as "Not for Sale." Other prices ranged from a low of \$95 for Tom Hodgson's From Dorset to a high of \$1500 for Luke's Symphony, a price attesting to the level of her confidence in the quality of the work.²⁰ The average price was approximately \$450, with Hortense Gordon asking \$250, \$200, and \$200 respectively for her three

¹⁹Canadian Abstract Exhibition Oshawa: The Y.M.C.A, October, 1952. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

²⁰Joan Murray refers to Symphony as amongst Luke's finest paintings. Alexandra Luke: Continued Searching, Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1987-88: 6.

inclusions, below the average, but not at the base. All the pieces were listed in the catalogue with their dimensions included but without the medium being specified. Luke's Symphony at 82" x 97" was second in size only to Oscar Cahen's Warrior at 108" x 84".²¹ Symphony was a finished, abstract work, oil on linen canvas, which might be conveniently compared to a work by Jock Macdonald in the same exhibition, Forbidden Valley. Macdonald's painting was also a finished, abstract work, oil and Lucite 44 on masonite, almost half the size of Luke's painting at 48" x 42". He asked half the price, \$750.

Although the members of the group seemed to treat each other as equals, and the two women valued their own work as having similar worth to that of the other members, there are comments by some members which remain open to interpretation. In some places, the work is held in obvious high esteem; in 1954, for example, Jock Macdonald wrote to Luke: "I saw things in Paris, in a first rate gallery, very like your cards, framed as paintings, but they weren't anything approaching the qualities to be found in your work."²² And again in 1955: "I could certainly enjoy seeing it [your 1955 show at the Eglinton Gallery] and discovering once more that you are a mighty fine painter...and being able to

²¹Painters Eleven 1957 Exhibition, Toronto: The Park Gallery, 1957. This is by no means to suggest that the quality of a work is to be measured by its size, but simply to note that Luke had the confidence required to handle a large canvas.

²²Jock Macdonald to Alexandra Luke, November 24, 1954, from Vence, France. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

again convince myself that my belief in this, years ago, was a correct judgement."²³

On the other hand, Luke herself wrote in her diary in May, 1958: "The show [Alexandra Luke, Park Gallery, Toronto] looks fine. Great praise from Yarwood, Bush, Town who keeps saying I am the greatest female painter in Canada."²⁴ Town apparently had used the same sort of superlative, this time "the most important," to describe Luke's work at a meeting of the Ontario Society of Artists when Luke was up for membership. Town stated "that we absolutely had to elect Alexandra Luke because she was the most important artist in Canada, the most important female artist in Canada."²⁵ Laudatory as these remarks are, the phraseology is significant. One possible interpretation is that Town is limiting his praise to a definition framed by Luke's gender. She may have been a "great" artist, but only inasmuch as this definition was available to a woman.

More straightforward praise came from William Ronald, who said of Luke, "She was a very mystical person and her paintings are very strange and in many ways ahead of their time...."²⁶ Tom Hodgson admired her work for its

²³Jock Macdonald to Alexandra Luke, January 10, 1955, from Vence, France. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

²⁴Luke's diary, May 5, 1958. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

²⁵Joan Murray and Alan Collier, interview, March 27, 1983. Collier goes on to say that Town was so objectionable in his insistence that most people voted against him rather than against Luke and she wasn't elected in that year, although she did become a member later, in 1962.

²⁶Joan Murray and William Ronald, interview, May 31st, 1977. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

freedom from the influences of commercial art, which shaped many of the members of Painters Eleven who worked in the field.²⁷ He said, "Her work was very personal. It was very personal calligraphy."²⁸ In the same interview Hodgson said, "There were people like Jock and Alexandra and Hortense that were really trying to bring together and bring to the public and bring out the inevitable changes that were happening and they were doing it in a really quite unselfish manner." Joan Murray asked, "So they had a tremendous role really as pioneers?" Hodgson replied, "Oh I think so."²⁹ Kazuo Nakamura found Luke to be "conservative" in her personal life, but he nevertheless described her work as "spontaneous."³⁰

At the same time, Luke's friends and colleagues did not feel that she was receiving her just place in the art world. When Jack Bush suggested in 1957 that Clement Greenberg be invited to come to Canada and express his opinions on the work done by the members of Painters Eleven, he added that it was "for the benefit of some who have not had one-man shows for some time, like Alexandra Luke. God, the way she has been treated in this town makes us weep blood all over the floor." "Well, it doesn't bother me," Luke replied. "Well, it

²⁷Town, Mead, Cahen, Hodgson, Bush, Yarwood and Nakamura all worked as commercial artists. Canadian Painters Eleven, Amherst College: Mead Art Museum, February 26 - April 24, 1994. University of Vermont: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, October 22, 1994 - February 5, 1995: 9.

²⁸Joan Murray and Tom Hodgson, interview, May 6, 1977. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

²⁹Joan Murray and Tom Hodgson: 13-14.

³⁰Author's interview with Kazuo Nakamura, December 15, 1994.

damn well bothers us," Bush answered.³¹ This complaint, however, refers more to the specific issue of the number of exhibitions held by Luke than to the reactions to her work.

Surviving comments on the work of Hortense Gordon, by other members of Painters Eleven, are much scarcer than those on Luke. It was Town who wrote of Hortense Gordon, "Surely no one could better symbolize the vitality of Canadian art."³² Perhaps he was being generous. This quote, after all, comes from the catalogue to an exhibition. Nevertheless, its rhetoric, and the opinions regarding Luke's work, attest to the idea that the peers of these women, the other members of the group that represents their most well-known affiliation, did not specifically marginalize them or consider their work second-rate on the basis of their gender, although this is undeniable, more clearly documented in the case of Luke.

In terms of recognition in the form of participation in exhibitions, both Luke and Gordon showed their work locally, nationally and internationally. Luke in particular enjoyed international success. Their shows were not, of course, limited to the years 1953-1960 when they were members of Painters Eleven. Luke showed her work beginning in 1933 with an exhibition at the Lyceum Club in Oshawa³³ and Gordon held an exhibition of painted and glazed china in 1908

³¹Luke's minutes of Painters Eleven meeting May 9, 1957. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

³²Harold Town, Hortense Gordon, Toronto: Gallery Moos, 1961, n.p.

³³Alexandra Luke: Continued Searching: 52.

in Chatham.³⁴ By the time of the formation of Painters Eleven in 1953, Gordon was showing with Galerie Agnès Lefort in Montreal. She had a solo exhibition there in November 1952.³⁵ In the same year, Luke showed four times in group exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Toronto, in the Abstracts at Home exhibition in Simpson's Galleries and also in a one-person show of Christmas cards at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York (Christmas Card Originals By Alexandra Luke, December 10 - January 9, 1954). Luke also showed her work across Canada, in both group and individual exhibitions. For instance, her work appears over the years in Oshawa, Toronto and Hamilton, to select three local venues; in Banff, Montreal and Winnipeg, to select three national venues; and on the international scene in New York (three exhibitions), Miami, Jackson (Mississippi), and Vichy (France). The Globe and Mail reported in 1952 that "a painting by Alexandra Luke of Oshawa has been chosen for the Hall of Fame in connection with the International Art Exhibition at Perry Institute, Florida. There were 2,250 exhibitors, from whose entries the 100 best were selected for the Hall of Fame showing."³⁶

Gordon's exhibition history is more difficult to reconstruct. Information has been lost, and some assumptions - for example, that she exhibited with

³⁴A Dedicated Life: 9.

³⁵Hélène Sicotte, "Un Etat de la Diffusion des Arts Visuels à Montréal," The Journal of Canadian Art History 16, no.1, (1994): 64-95. Sicotte provides an exhibition list of shows which took place at several Montreal galleries in the 1950s.

³⁶"Oshawa Painter to Hall of Fame," Globe and Mail, March 15, 1952: 8. In the catalogue Alexandra Luke: Continued Searching, the exhibition is named the "Terry National Art Exhibit."

Painters Eleven many or most of the times they had a group show - must be made. This is not to suggest that Gordon's career was marked by few exhibitions. In fact, she showed extensively and was known to be enthusiastic about seeking out exhibition opportunities. In 1946, she held a show of fifty works by herself and her husband in Brantford and the show included some of her first abstract paintings. She and Luke held a joint exhibition at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery in 1959, and Gordon also showed her work in Burlington (Exhibition of Paintings by Hortense M. Gordon A.R.C.A., Burlington Public Library, 1957) and Hamilton (in annual exhibitions of Hamilton artists from 1927 through the 1940s, annual exhibitions of the Hamilton Women's Art Association, with the Contemporary Artists of Hamilton and with the Art Club of Hamilton). With Painters Eleven she would also have shown in national venues such as Montreal and Ottawa. She participated in a group show (with Jock Macdonald, Sidney Watson and P.H. Taçon, Four Modern Canadians, Willistead Art Gallery, Windsor, 1954). The last show before her death took place at Gallery Moos in Toronto (H. Gordon, 1961). Gordon also showed in international exhibitions such as those held at the Riverside Museum, New York City in 1952 (Canadian Women Artists) and 1956 (20th Annual Exhibition of American Abstract Artists, with 'Painters Eleven' of Canada). She also had a solo show at the University Museum of Art at the University of Michigan in 1952. A newspaper clipping from 1956 also mentions a show which originated in Hamilton, Ontario and travelled to Hamilton, New Zealand. The show, which

included such well-known Canadian painters as Frederick Varley and Arthur Lismer, also included work by Gordon. It toured New Zealand before returning to Canada.³⁷ The catalogue A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon describes her as also showing her work in Toronto, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Flint, New Brunswick and Burlington, although the actual exhibitions are not noted.³⁸

In 1953 Gordon held a show at the Creative Gallery in New York, which the Hamilton Spectator reported she considered "her most important exhibition...which resulted in favourable write-ups in the art magazines and in the New York Times."³⁹ The somewhat qualified review in Art Digest said of the show that Gordon "addresses her canvases with vigor and knowledge, but as yet without a style of her own." The article continues with the observation that "the restrained use of color here is effective, as is the artist's use of line in Horizontals and Verticals."⁴⁰ Also qualified was the Art News opinion of the same show: Gordon's work was "uneven" but with "freedom and freshness and respect for the material."⁴¹

While newspaper reviews would remain supportive of both Luke and Gordon specifically, and of abstract art in general, forceful attacks on the idiom

³⁷M.M., "Shown in New Zealand, Art On Display Here," Hamilton Spectator, September 4, 1956.

³⁸A Dedicated Life: 21.

³⁹Sylvia Delzell, "Art Brushes," Hamilton Spectator, March 26, 1955: 31.

⁴⁰"Hortense M. Gordon," Art Digest, 26 (January 15, 1952): 26.

⁴¹"Hortense M. Gordon," Art News 50 (January 1952): 42.

would come from another source. The press commented that abstract art was "like a breath of warm air from a more humane climate," as the Regina Leader-Post wrote, continuing, "the freshness and vigor of these paintings [Painters Eleven at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, 1958-59] clears the atmosphere and purges the senses with exuberant energy."⁴² "An excellent show" wrote the New York Times, describing Painters Eleven at the Riverside Museum.⁴³ "The Eleven are sensational painters" proclaimed the Montreal Star, while La Presse reacted to the same show [Painters Eleven at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, 1958] by writing "L'Exposition des Onze est spectaculaire."⁴⁴ The general reaction of the press, then, was a positive one, although not totally without criticism. Françoise de Repentigny, for example, wrote in Le Devoir in 1960 of Painters Eleven, "Il s'en suit un gaspillage pénible à voir, triste farce, de paté, de papiers collés, de morceaux de toile rapiécés, glanés ici et là: une tour de Babel moderne.... Il me semble depuis que l'exposition de l'Etable n'est qu'un épouvantable cauchemar."⁴⁵ This reaction, while not totally isolated, was not representative of the press in general.

The source of condemnation would come much more vituperatively from people like Graham McInnes, for example, who wrote a strong condemnation of

⁴²A.P. McKay, "Painters Eleven Work on Display at Gallery," Regina Leader-Post, November 29, 1958.

⁴³Stuart Preston, "New Shows in a Wide Range," New York Times, April 15, 1956, sec.2: 9.

⁴⁴R. de Repentigny, "Enfin, les 'Onze' a leur meilleur," La Presse, May 3, 1958: 5.

⁴⁵Francoise de Repentigny, "Peinture sans Issue," Le Devoir, 23 April, 1960.

abstract art in 1956 in an article entitled "Has the Emperor Clothes?" published in Canadian Art. According to this article, contemporary artists had denied "access to the inspiration which may be derived from the external world of commonly communicable experience and...robbed themselves...of the delights of the spirit which are to be found in using human experience and the visible world as points of departure for creative synthesis."⁴⁶ McInnes continued by adding that the result seemed to be sterile and "emasculated," which would be an ironic choice of words to describe an idiom which would subsequently be ascribed almost solely to men in the various venues that recorded it.⁴⁷

With this description of abstract art as an "emasculated" genre in mind, the expressions chosen by various media to describe the work of Luke and Gordon can be read as a more gendered language than might be immediately obvious, and one that creates a complex juncture. Newspapers, for example, would often focus on the use of colour in the work of Luke and Gordon and minimize compositional qualities. Luke's abstractions were characterized by "verve of color and form," according to Pearl McCarthy in the Globe and Mail.⁴⁸ And again in 1958 Jo Adwinckle wrote: "Courageous color concept give these

⁴⁶Graham McInnes, "Has the Emperor Clothes?," Canadian Art 14, no.1 (Autumn, 1956): 11.

⁴⁷McInnes: 11. McInnes even paralleled the growth and development of abstract art to the spread of Antinomianism, a Christian heresy which he described as developing into "grotesque and monstrous forms."

⁴⁸Pearl McCarthy, "Let Buying Replace Bossing, Then Leave it to the Painters," Globe and Mail, March 22 1952: 10.

paintings a definite 'Luke' signature."⁴⁹ A 1960 article in the Oshawa Times commented on Luke's work by saying: "In all there is the same flow of lovely color - never harsh or startling, but vibrant, harmonious, glowing...soft, bright, pleasant."⁵⁰

Hortense Gordon's work was often described in a similar manner. In a review of Four Modern Canadians David Mawr wrote: "It is difficult, then, to say why we should consider the paintings of Hortense Gordon deeply emotional, passionate expressions. It may be partly the color she uses: hot reds, eerie combinations of green and mauve and blue."⁵¹ The Michigan Daily described Gordon's work Blinking Lights as "a pleasing arrangement, chiefly blue, lavender and orange."⁵² The review of Gordon's work at the Creative Gallery in New York described Abstraction I as having "an original color quality: the green, red, brown, yellow and blue, but especially the purple, are like the colors in a grade-school child's watercolor box."⁵³

⁴⁹Jo Aldwinckle, "One-Woman Show at Park Gallery Success for Alexandra Luke," Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby), May 10, 1958. Other sources include Pearl McCarthy, "This Week's Openings are Uneven in Appeal," Globe and Mail, May 10, 1958: 15; Pearl McCarthy, "They Don't Ask Why, Just Paint," Globe and Mail, November 8, 1958; "Paintings in Individual Settings Brave, Praiseworthy Exhibit," Oshawa Times, March 14, 1960: 7.

⁵⁰"Paintings in Individual Settings Brave, Praiseworthy Exhibit," Oshawa Times, March 14, 1960: 7.

⁵¹David Mawr, "Abstract Art Dominates Gallery Shows," Windsor Daily Star, January 9, 1954: 25.

⁵²Siegfried Feller, "Art," Michigan Daily, April 20, 1952.

⁵³Art News: 42.

Similarly, works by Luke and Gordon would be considered more successful, according to their stereotypically "feminine" qualities. "Light-hearted gay little water colors" described Luke's work in 1960.⁵⁴ "Charming colors with decorative effect" described her work, according to the Globe and Mail, also in 1960.⁵⁵ In a 1977 article, the same newspaper claimed that Joan Murray had described Luke's paintings as "womanly." The article continues, "We can compare this, say, with Ronald's paintings, which with their hard blacks are concentrations of power and energy."⁵⁶ Of Gordon's work, Walter Moos commented "it's rare to find such strength and subtle femininity in a painter."⁵⁷

Abstract work by Luke and Gordon, then, was considered most successful when "feminine" attributes of the work could be isolated and praised. In apparent contradiction, describing a woman as capable of "working like a man" was also praiseworthy, since men represented the ideal, but conversely, describing a man's work as "feminine," would position it as weak or ineffectual. As Frederick Housser commented on the work of Yvonne McKague in 1928-29, "Her compositions have masculine strength and intellectuality, showing much intelligent feeling and consideration for structure, design, form and spatial

⁵⁴"Paintings in Individual Settings Brave, Praiseworthy Exhibit," Oshawa Times: 7.

⁵⁵"Luke Display," Globe and Mail, March 12, 1960.

⁵⁶Peter White, "Painting the Mystical into the Oshawa Y," Globe and Mail, July 16, 1977: 29.

⁵⁷Elizabeth Dingman, "She's Been Abstract for a Long Time," Toronto Telegram, February 2, 1961.

qualities."⁵⁸ If the two issues (abstract art as "emasculated" and the "feminine" attributes of the work of Luke and Gordon as subjects for praise) are conflated, then it might seem that abstract art would be considered an ideal idiom for women artists. However, this would not be the case. In fact, the gendered (male) language often used to describe the work of men is typified by these words by Clement Greenberg on the subject of Jackson Pollock:

Pollock's superiority to his contemporaries in this country lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control. His emotion starts out pictorially; it does not have to be castrated and translated in order to be put into a picture.⁵⁹

I will further discuss the attribution of abstract art to men in chapter three.

Within the parameters of what was suitable praise for the work of a woman, newspaper reviews would remain generally supportive of both Luke and Gordon. For example, of Luke the Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby) noted in 1946, "Mrs. McLaughlin shows a keen sense of color and design in her studies."⁶⁰ The Globe and Mail commented in 1953 that "Alexandra Luke's painting, seemingly inspired by a blaze of sun on flowers, shows her very real

⁵⁸Frederick Houser, "The Amateur Movement in Canadian Painting," Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928-1929, Bertram Brooker, ed. (Toronto: The Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1929): 89.

⁵⁹Clement Greenberg, "Art," The Nation (April 13, 1946): 445, as cited by Michael Leja, "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango," Critical Inquiry 21, no.3. (Spring, 1995): 567.

⁶⁰"Exhibit of Pictures to Open at Y.W.C.A." Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby), before January 18, 1946.

talent for relaying the emotional pleasure in such sights."⁶¹ In 1954, the Toronto Star's Hugh Thomson wrote of Luke's work: "the general impression, though vague, is pleasing and thought-provoking."⁶² Luke's work was also paralleled often to musical compositions, as in the Daily Times-Gazette of 1956, which explained that the visitor to the Painters Eleven exhibition at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery "could find a parallel to Debussy in Alexandra Luke's inventive colour and freedom of form."⁶³ In general, the press seldom said anything negative about the work of Alexandra Luke specifically. Negative comments were directed at abstract painting as an idiom, rarely at her individual use of the style, although one writer did comment: "Luke's designs are like linoleum blocks - pretty, but are they art?"⁶⁴

Hortense Gordon was also not without frank admirers of her work in the press contemporary with her production. The Hamilton Spectator of 1958 wrote: "Particularly vivid and bursting with light is her larger oil 'The Wharf', executed in swirling green and orange."⁶⁵ "There is a delicate, almost brilliant, use of

⁶¹Pearl McCarthy, "Parade of Abstract Talent, With Hodgson in the Lead," Globe and Mail, October 17, 1953: 14.

⁶²Hugh Thomson, "'Painters Eleven' Show Modern Art," Toronto Star, February 13, 1954: 23.

⁶³"Painters Eleven Soon Scattered to Important Art Exhibitions," Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby), March 31, 1956.

⁶⁴"Display of Non-Objective art Seen Offering Little to Mind," London Free Press, January 10, 1956.

⁶⁵Ian Vorres, "Painters Eleven Show Controversial Works," Hamilton Spectator June 5, 1958.

collage in many of the excellent watercolors," wrote Julius Lebow in 1963.⁶⁶ Stuart Preston in the New York Times described her work as having "excellent geometric ideas,"⁶⁷ for example, in response to the show at Riverside Museum; and in 1961 Pearl McCarthy wrote in the Globe and Mail that, "Abstracts by Hortense Gordon at the Gallery Moos show remarkable artistic energy - a characteristic of her work from the first and through all its stages."⁶⁸ Unlike Luke, however, Gordon was more frequently ignored in reviews of the work of Painters Eleven, or was occasionally condemned, often for what was seen as a derivative quality in her work, as in the article in La Presse in 1958 in which Rodolphe de Repentigny wrote: "Cette artiste succombe à l'éclectisme le plus épuisant, chacun de ses tableaux pouvant être rapproché du style particulier à tel ou tel peintre bien connu - Soulanges, Lhote, Villon, etc."⁶⁹ By 1994, Jeff Mahoney would write in response to A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon that "This will have to do until they build a statue of her in the park or name a school after her - she deserves as much."⁷⁰

In 1982, the Toronto Star observed:

⁶⁶Julius Lebow, "Artist and Teacher 'Symbol of Vitality'," Hamilton Spectator, March 16, 1963: 41.

⁶⁷Stuart Preston, "New Shows in a Wide Range," The New York Times, sec.2: 9.

⁶⁸Pearl McCarthy, "Pseudo-Psychology, Bane of Abstractionists," Globe and Mail, February 4, 1961: 15.

⁶⁹R. de Repentigny: 55.

⁷⁰Jeff Mahoney, "The Push and Pull of Hortense Gordon," Hamilton Spectator, June 2, 1994: D1.

The show's [Painters Eleven at the Macdonald Gallery, Toronto] main surprises are the paintings of Luke and Gordon. Each is represented by only a couple of pieces, but what pieces they are! Luke's *Symphony* (1957) rates as one of the best works in the exhibition. It sings, it dances, it is alive in every brush stroke and line. If *Painters 11* deserves better play than it's getting, then this goes double for both Gordon and Luke. Funny isn't it, that the two female artists of the group are the names we have to scratch our heads to remember.⁷¹

The women who were members of *Painters Eleven*, then, were not treated as less than equal by the press and did not themselves feel that they were less than equal in terms of the value of their work. The reactions of their male peers for the most part confirms that these women had long histories within the art world, and that they were respected for their contributions.

In a short article in the Toronto Daily Star of 1961, Robert Fulford summarized the opinions of the press and the opinions of future art historians of the work of Luke and Gordon. In his first paragraph, he noted their remarkable achievements, including the fact that women's names are not generally linked with abstract art. He noted that Gordon was the first Canadian to study under Hofmann and the first to teach his theories in Canada, in the early 1920's. He noted that Luke organized the first exhibition of all-abstract art in Canada, and that the first meeting of *Painters Eleven* was held at her studio.

But in contrast to these contributions, both Luke and Gordon were seen by Fulford as being eclectic and derivative in their work. Gordon's paintings,

⁷¹Christopher Hume, "Former Rebels Now Firmly Established," Toronto Star, October 23, 1982.

although "always lively" and with a "spirit of adventure" were nonetheless influenced by a range of artists and movements from Soulages to Picasso to Impressionism.⁷² Luke's work had "vigorous charm" and made "an impressive statement" but she "leaps from style to style, never settling anywhere long enough to build up a confident, flexible approach to the canvas." Fulford prefers Luke when she works on a smaller canvas. He calls her piece College 59 [sic?] "light and precise...a delightful little work."⁷³ In general, however, accusations of eclecticism and a tendency to derivativeness would be criticisms that would not appear in the press and were constructs subsequently used by historians of art to record the production.

Having established that Luke and Gordon were taken seriously by their peers and by the press, we can move on to examine and evaluate the importance of the role they played as educators and promoters of abstract art. Unlike the other members of Painters Eleven, Luke and Gordon received almost no formal art training as young women, either in the fine arts or in commercial art. Gordon's only formal art training was limited to Saturday morning art classes at the Hamilton Art School while she was a public school student, and some evening classes which she attended at the same institution after winning a scholarship.⁷⁴ It wasn't until 1945, when she was in her mid-forties, that Luke

⁷²Robert Fulford, "Pioneers," Toronto Daily Star, February 4, 1961: 28.

⁷³Fulford, Toronto Daily Star.

⁷⁴A Dedicated Life: 8.

attended the Banff School of Art, where she met Jock Macdonald and was introduced to the concept of automatic painting. As older artists, both Luke and Gordon had the opportunity to study under Hans Hofmann and bring his ideas to Canada. Luke was a student at Hofmann's summer school in Provincetown, Mass., starting in 1947. She attended until 1952. She encouraged her friends, among them Yvonne McKague Housser, Ron Lambert, and William Ronald to attend.⁷⁵ Hortense Gordon attended Hofmann's summer school in 1945 and some sources say she was there as early as 1938.⁷⁶ Luke considered Hofmann's teaching to be invaluable - five of her notebooks remain in The Robert McLaughlin Gallery archives, containing comments by Hofmann not only on her work, but also what he said about the work of other students. Her catalogue entry to the 1952 Canadian Abstract Exhibition echoes concepts from Hofmann's teaching. She wrote:

My experience is that more beauty and interest is to be found in the negative space created by the object than in the positive. The painting thus created must have a vital breathing quality and carry with it the mystery of creation.⁷⁷

Luke and Gordon, as a result of this opportunity to study with Hofmann, would bring important new ideas to Painters Eleven. They would create a link between Abstract Expressionism and what was happening in Canadian art. This

⁷⁵Alexandra Luke: Continued Searching: 3.

⁷⁶A Dedicated Life, fn.30: 24-25.

⁷⁷Alexandra Luke, "Artists' Notes on Abstract Paintings," Canadian Abstract Exhibition,

contribution would represent a significant influence on the development of abstraction in Ontario, and it reads in the remaining literature as tireless and dedicated.

Luke was known as a very energetic person. She accomplished a great deal in a day, and appearing throughout her diary is the word "exhausted" and expressions like "I came back to hotel more dead than alive" and "very tense and tired." In a 1977 interview with Joan Murray, Barbara Macdonald said of Luke that "she had tremendous energy and that energy shows in everything. Margaret could hardly rest the sole of her foot."⁷⁸ In addition to the many exhibitions that she organized and the lectures she gave at those exhibitions, she also wrote articles for publication in the Oshawa-Whitby Daily Times-Gazette promoting exhibitions of work in Oshawa. For example, in 1948 she wrote about an exhibition of the work of Rody Kenny Courtice, Coziel Haworth, Yvonne McKague Housser, and Isabel McLaughlin which had been showing in Toronto and which was brought to Oshawa. She began by asking the public, "Do you ever wish when you look at a modern Canadian painting that you could ask the artist what it is all about? Well, you can."⁷⁹ She tried hard to make modern art accessible: a medium that could thrill all who saw it and not be merely reserved for the elite and privileged few.

1952.

⁷⁸Joan Murray and Barbara Macdonald, interview, May 25, 1977. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

⁷⁹Margaret Luke McLaughlin, "Oshawa Welcomes Exhibit of 'Four Women Who Paint'" Daily Times-Gazette (Oshawa-Whitby), Tuesday, April 13, 1948: 6.

While Luke was at liberty to devote her time to such activities as the organizing of exhibitions and the giving of lectures, Hortense Gordon worked as a teacher, and it was in this capacity that she made her greatest contributions to the promotion and development of abstract painting. "In fact," wrote Jeff Mahoney in the Hamilton Spectator, "Gordon's current reputation rests as much on her role as an early ambassador of abstract art...as it does on her stature as a painter in her own right."⁸⁰ Gordon and her husband, artist John Gordon, had also been responsible for the showing of work by Hamilton students at the sixth International Congress for Art Education in Prague, in 1928. In reporting the event, the Hamilton Spectator noted:

Hortense Gordon is well qualified to speak upon the subject of art education, for her work in Hamilton has attracted the attention of educationists in the United States. They are asking "How are Hamilton's students able to do things our students do not seem to accomplish?"⁸¹

The combined salaries of Gordon and her husband, and the fact that they had no children and were teachers with time available during the summer, enabled them to travel abroad every year to see what was happening in the art worlds of Europe and also of New England and the Caribbean.⁸² Gordon

⁸⁰Mahoney: D1.

⁸¹"Canada Gains from Local Art Exhibit," Hamilton Spectator, September 15, 1928: 23.

⁸²A Dedicated Life: 11.

incorporated these new ideas into her teaching at the Hamilton Technical and Art School, and:

As early as 1924 she was discussing the properties of colour and describing the movement of colour in space with her students. By the mid-thirties she was talking about negative and positive space and stressing movement within a painting and how it can be established by colour relationships.⁸³

Hofmann's now famous concept of "push and pull," which he described as the "simultaneous operation of flatness and depth,"⁸⁴ influenced many abstract painters, Gordon and Luke amongst them. Gordon repeated the phrase "push and pull" often in attempting to explain the functioning of abstract art. In fact, the Hamilton Spectator noted that her friends recalled that "Hortense couldn't say three sentences without saying 'push and pull.' She'd tap her finger on the table 30 or 40 times and say, 'You must remember push and pull.'"⁸⁵

Luke's and Gordon's roles as promoters, educators and artists, while they might have been acknowledged by some sources, were not supported in their private lives. Both worked against the influence of husbands who did not support their endeavours in the field of abstraction. In spite of the fact that Gordon taught abstract concepts as early as the 1920s and 1930s, she did not progress into an abstract format in her own work until after the death of her

⁸³A Dedicated Life: 13.

⁸⁴William Seitz, Hans Hofmann (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963): 27.

⁸⁵Mahoney: D1.

husband in 1940. Artist John Gordon had remained opposed to abstract work, stating that "it is passing and will rapidly become obsolete," and it is speculated that this opinion prevented Gordon from moving earlier into abstract work.⁸⁶ Prior to the death of her husband, Gordon's work Christmas, Burk's Falls (1936, fig.7) was typical of her style. A transitional work, Light Housekeeping (fig.8) of 1945, presages her move to the abstract as the forms become less literally representational. Gordon had completed five or six years of abstract work before she became a member of Painters Eleven; the 1948 work Studio Interior Abstraction (fig.9) is an example of the work produced during these years.

Alexandra Luke also faced a lack of support for her work from her husband. Ewart McLaughlin, a member of the wealthy Oshawa McLaughlin family, was known for taking down her abstract paintings from the walls of their home when she was gone and replacing them with the more traditional works that he preferred. In a 1978 interview with Joan Murray, Luke's daughter Mary Hare said:

He liked her early work, her - what she did as more of a pastime - landscapes and still lifes and such. I think he quite liked those and felt that it was nice that she had this wifely sort of interest in painting as a hobby....[W]hen she would go away on a trip or something, out would come all the old - I would like to say old masters - the Verners. And when she got home she would have to take them all down and she'd put hers up again.⁸⁷

⁸⁶A Dedicated Life: 13.

⁸⁷Joan Murray and Mary Hare, interview, December 13, 1978, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives: 5-6.

Luke's work followed much the same transitional path as that of Hortense Gordon, although their work is not in any way the same. Early work, such as Chalk Lake Road of 1936 (fig.10) shows some influence of the Group of Seven interest in landscape. Transition to the abstract begins around 1945, two years before her first classes with Hans Hofmann, with work such as Moonlight - Banff, of 1945 (fig.11). In this work the form of the trees remains readily identifiable, but the structure is much looser and less detailed and the work itself takes on a new meaning: it is no longer a simple representation of a landscape; the act of painting itself has become important. Luke's move to complete abstraction is represented by Automatic #52 (1948-50, fig.12). Thus, like Hortense Gordon, Alexandra Luke was a staunch proponent of modern art for many years before she worked in an abstract way herself.

Both women expressed an early interest in artistic innovation which would manifest in following years as innovative production. As the catalogue A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon notes, Gordon's "compulsive drive towards the new maintained itself throughout her life, and thus fate disposed that she would become a pioneering Canadian abstract artist when she was sixty years old."⁸⁸ As for Luke, she herself had noted as early as the time of the Canadian Abstract Exhibition, in 1952, that,

Painting should not stop with the already discovered beauty, but should continue searching. I think the artist should grow spiritually with his work so that each year, through thought and struggle, his

⁸⁸A Dedicated Life: 6.

progress should show an unfolding and not mere repetition of his former works.⁸⁹

The two women negotiated the space required in their personal lives for their dedication to abstraction in different ways. With little or no support from their families, they developed different strategies that allowed their subjectivity, a way of balancing what might be considered appropriate and therefore acceptable behaviour for a women and what might be considered inappropriate or unsuitable and therefore unacceptable behaviour for a woman (in this case to be an abstract painter). Alexandra Luke juxtaposed the radical painter with an alter ego, the conservative Margaret McLaughlin. This conservative persona founded the Oshawa Skating Club in 1939, conducted Saturday morning painting classes for the children of Oshawa, belonged to the Oshawa Historical Society and the Henry House Museum Committee, and was generally active as a community organizer and contributor. "Alexandra Luke" created a strategy for the possible activities of a person that Margaret McLaughlin could not be and would not be allowed to be. And "Margaret McLaughlin" created a space in which Alexandra Luke was able to function.⁹⁰ It is possible that Luke maintained her Margaret McLaughlin persona because it was this persona that her husband, Ewart McLaughlin, supported (although not always graciously). For

⁸⁹Canadian Abstract Exhibition Oshawa, October, 1952.

⁹⁰For an extensive discussion of Luke's use of the name "Alexandra Luke" as a pseudonym, see Margaret Rodgers, "Locating Luke," M.A. thesis, Trent University, 1993: 42-52.

example, in a letter to Luke dated November 18, 1953, art dealer Martha Jackson wrote:

Look. What is the good of your being married to this rich man who pays you so little attention unless you can spend some of his money and come to New York? I think your attitude is absolutely wrong. I think you have a right to spend money on some of these pleasures, as well as build a studio and a few other things, good god, you only live once.⁹¹

Luke's support by her husband, however, did give her the financial freedom which allowed her to study with Hans Hofmann, for instance, and to devote a certain portion of her time and energy to her artwork.

Hortense Gordon's negotiation of space is more difficult to categorize because of the relative lack of documentation. Reconstruction of her personal life is of necessity based on secondary sources and speculation. However, as a columnist for the Oshawa Times wrote in 1979: "She was the character of the group and Painters Eleven each tell stories about this eccentric lady with the jet-black wig, riding in Oscar Cahen's car, often on Harold Town's knee."⁹² This description is indicative of the flamboyance and eccentricity that Hortense Gordon embraced to negotiate her own space. Since the different or unusual personality is often expected to be radical, Gordon's development of grandiose characteristics created a space for her as an abstract painter and a woman. She

⁹¹Martha Jackson to Alexandra Luke, November 18, 1953, from New York. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

⁹²Marg Jackson, "Luke, Ronald, Town Among Painters Eleven at Gallery," Oshawa Times November 22, 1979.

waited until after her husband had died (in 1940) before she took this project on with complete devotion. In any event, as Paddy O'Brien notes in A Dedicated Life: Hortense Mattice Gordon: "It is clear that by late 40s Hortense had not only established a reputation as an eccentric, but immensely enjoyed working at it."⁹³ In this sense, the notion of the artist as a temperamental genius described Gordon more than Luke. She often wore unusual hats, and a former student and friend of hers remembers, "When I had my first shows she would always be the first one in the door. She'd come half an hour early, dressed to the nines in a Spanish mantilla - she had incredibly beautiful hair, miles of it, and she piled it up under this mantilla."⁹⁴

Photographs of Luke and Gordon provide another source for speculation about how they presented themselves and wanted to be understood. The famous photograph of Painters Eleven taken in 1957 (fig.13), for example, shows Alexandra Luke, composed, conservative as she always was in photographs, with her hands held serenely on her lap and her face tranquil. Hortense Gordon, on the other hand, leans forward in a much more assertive way, her dress and hair more unusual, her face determined and her body language flamboyant.

Although both Luke and Gordon negotiated individual spaces for their own positions as abstract painters, neither of them specifically supported the

⁹³A Dedicated Life: 18.

⁹⁴Gordon Perrier quoted in Jeff Mahoney, "The Push and Pull of Hortense Gordon."

work of painters who were women. In fact, in the case of Luke, it could almost be argued that the opposite was true. When Joan Murray asked Luke's son Dick McLaughlin in a 1978 interview, "Was your mother an early feminist? Did she ever feel sympathy with other women artists?" he replied, "Do you mean the Women's Lib? You're talking about that? She was above that really."⁹⁵ Certainly when Luke lectured, she used slides that illustrated only the work of male artists, except her own. In her 1961 lecture to the Lyceum Club, the notes for which still exist in The Robert McLaughlin Gallery archives, she used twenty-one slides, all of the work of male artists except for two of her own. She obviously did not perceive a need or a desire to promote particularly the objectives of women as creators in the history of art.

Hortense Gordon's attitude towards the position of women in the making and recording of art practice is not known for certain. She did not overtly promote the cause of women as a direct act, at least in any recorded source. She did not speak of "women" as an issue that concerned her, or of the issue of women's positions as something that she felt had to be changed before she could take her rightful place in history. Luke's attitude seems to have been that if a woman had talent, then she would succeed. She did not consider the structure of social discourse as a determining factor in the success or failure of an artist, nor did she perceive a problem in the recording of historical information which excluded women. Both Gordon and Luke seem to have been

⁹⁵Joan Murray and Dick McLaughlin, interview, November 8, 1978. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

in collusion with structures that allowed their production as abstract artists of the forties, fifties and sixties in Canada, but would not accord it any status as an important part of recorded history.

Chapter Three

The marginalization of the work of women artists in the history of Canadian art has not functioned in a linear or systematic way. In other words, it is not possible to open a text on Canadian art and predict with certainty the role that women will play in the text, except to say that in texts written in the past, that role would never be one of equality with men. However, unlike some texts which have been published in other parts of the English-speaking world, Canadian histories have not been as totally exclusionary of the work of women. Texts published in England and the United States are still used in Canadian universities as sources of the history of art in survey and other courses, since no Canadian text has been written that surveys the history of world art. For example, H.W. Janson's History of Art (1978) and E.H. Gombrich's The Story of Art (1985)¹ are frequently referred to and sometimes constitute the sole text for courses taught in Canada. Neither of these books mentions any women.

The exclusion of women in these books is not a misconception, but rather reflects a conscious decision regarding the position and importance of women in the history of artmaking practice. In a 1979 interview with H.W. Janson, artist Eleanor Dickinson asked: "Dr. Janson, is there any hope for your including women in your textbooks?" Janson replied: "...I may very well in the next edition include a woman artist, but at least until the most recent edition

¹Editions of Gombrich's text also continue to print things like references to First Nations peoples as "The Red Indians of North America." E.H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (New York: Phaidon Publishers, 1985): 26.

[1978], I have not been able to find a woman artist who clearly belongs in a one-volume history of art." Dickinson continued: "But Mary Cassatt, or Frida Kahlo, or Kathe Kollwitz...." Janson replied: "They are all important artists, but they are not quite important enough to go into a one-volume history of art.... Of course, I keep revising [the book] every five or six years, and as things continue I may very well find a woman artist who does make the grade...."²

Marginalization as a conscious decision, rather than as a misunderstanding, has a lengthy history within what has been understood in the twentieth-century as a Western tradition. In 1929, for example, R.H. Wilenski in his Introduction to Dutch Art stated that "Women painters as *everyone knows* always imitate the work of some men"³ (emphasis added). Similarly, Faure's Modern Art volume of his History of Art series (1921-1924) is written on the assumption that the generic human being is male. All the history, all the philosophy, the math, the wars, the poetry, everything in the text is exclusive to men. The operative words are "he," "him," and "his."⁴

In Canadian texts, on the other hand, women artists have historically been treated in one of three ways. First, they might be included as a token part

²Eleanor Dickinson, "Sexist Texts Boycotted," Women Artists News 5, no.4, (September-October, 1979): 12, cited by Eleanor Tufts, "Beyond Gardner, Gombrich, and Janson: Towards a Total History of Art," Arts Magazine 55, no.8, (April, 1981): 151-152. Janson subsequently included nineteen women in the 1991 edition of his book, which included approximately three thousand male artists. For a review of the 5th edition, see Selma Kraft, "History of Art, 5th Edition," Women Artists News Book Review, 20, (1995): 3-4.

³Cited by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980): 7.

⁴Elie Faure, History of Art: Modern Art (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1937).

of the text, but incorporated into it, representing a minor percentage of the artists discussed, as in, for example, Dennis Reid's A Concise History of Canadian Painting (1973 and 1988). Second, they might be assigned a separate section or chapter titled something like "Canadian Women Painters," as in Newton MacTavish's The Fine Arts in Canada (1925). More recently, they might be assigned an entire book, as in Maria Tippett's By A Lady (1992). In this chapter, I will explore the various ways that the work of Canadian women artists has historically been reported, and how new approaches are failing to change that reporting.

Women appear in English Canadian art history survey books at a rate that averages only 10%, except in cases where the text is devoted entirely to women artists.⁵ For example, in Barry Lord's The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art of 1974, the percentage of content about artists who are women is three percent. Terry Fenton and Karen Wilkin in Modern Painting in Canada: Major Movements in Twentieth Century Canadian Art (1978) refer to women six percent of the time. In Dennis Reid's A Concise History of Canadian Painting of 1973, women constitute seven percent of the text. David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff's Contemporary Canadian Art of 1983 is somewhat more representative at nineteen percent. This increase is to be expected in a text on

⁵The statistics concerning Barry Lord's The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art, Terry Fenton and Karen Wilkin's Modern Painting in Canada: Major Movements in Twentieth Century Canadian Art, Dennis Reid's A Concise History of Canadian Art (1973) and David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff's Contemporary Canadian Art and the concluding average of 10%, were all taken from Anne Innis Dagg, The 50% Solution: Why should Women pay for Men's Culture? (Waterloo: Otter Press, 1986): 52.

modern art. One reason - a very important one - why women are rare in longer surveys is that they have been lost to history and that this process becomes more and more pronounced the farther back in time one goes. Huge amounts of research would be needed to correct this invisibility. Reid's second edition of A Concise History of Canadian Painting (1988), fifteen years after the original edition, increased the representation of women artists to only eight percent.

When consideration is given to the number of women who have their work reproduced in Canadian texts, the percentages often fall even lower. In Reid's 1973 text, the number of black and white illustrations that show the work of women is four percent.⁶ Reid also includes thirty-six colour reproductions, of which only one is by a woman (Emily Carr). J. Russell Harper's Painting in Canada: A History, includes one hundred and seventy-three black and white illustrations with only three by women - Charlotte Schreiber and Emily Carr (two works).

Reid's text relies heavily on formal analysis as the way in which the importance of works of art are to be measured. The emphasis on formal analysis implies several things: that innovation is the most important factor in judging the importance of a work of art; that art history progresses in a linear fashion of stylistic change; that there are aesthetic standards which can be used to judge a work of art from a neutral position; that art exists in its own vacuum -

⁶Dagg: 51

art grows from art; and that artists are concerned only with formal art issues.⁷ Reid fundamentally dismisses both Luke and Gordon by valorizing the importance of the formal characteristics of works of art, and then including no discussion of the formal characteristics of works by either of them. In other words, while Luke's and Gordon's names might appear in the text, their value to the development of Canadian art is dismissed through a failure to include a discussion of their work in that text. While fairly lengthy comments are included on the subject of the male members of Painters Eleven, the work of Gordon and Luke is conflated into one short paragraph which reads:

Both Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon continued to find inspiration in the theories and painting of Hans Hofmann. Although they experimented continuously and thrilled their colleagues with their bold enthusiasms, even their most successful work carries a strong mark of derivation.⁸

In general, Reid accomplishes the inclusion of women in his text by simply listing their names with little biographical detail and less formal discussion of their work. His section on the women of the Beaver Hall Hill Group, for example, is extremely short, and dismisses the key contributions of Anne Savage, who he labels "the beloved teacher." Savage's four decades of real force that she exerted in reforming art education in Montreal are reduced to

⁷I am indebted here to Selma Kraft, review of H.W. Janson History of Art, 5th edition. Women Artists News Book Review, June, 1995.

⁸Dennis Reid, A Concise History of Canadian Painting (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973): 249. Dennis Reid, A Concise History of Canadian Painting, second edition (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988): 258-259.

implications of kindly, well-intentioned, but meaningless tautology. In addition, Reid virtually ignores the extensive contributions to Canadian art made by the Women's Art Association. Only one reference is made to the Association: a note that it gave Jack Bush his first solo exhibition.⁹

These statistics notwithstanding, Canadian texts in general, as already noted, are not as exclusionary of the work of women, both in an historical context and in more recent writing, as books originating in other parts of the English speaking world. The reason for this difference is not immediately obvious, but it might be considered to be a reflection of the differences between the history of Canadian art and its relative youth, as compared to the much more established canon (going back five centuries) of the history of world art, as reflected in survey texts from other parts of the English-speaking world, for example.

So although it is not possible to state that English-Canadian writers on the subject of art include women artists anything like fifty percent of the time in their texts, women are more represented in Canada than in the States. William Colgate in Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development (1943), for example, includes the work of several artists who are women, without commenting in any way on gender differences. In other words, he does not dismiss the work of women as derivative, nor does he ascribe stereotypically "feminine" features to it. A comparable text, R.H. Hubbard's An Anthology of Canadian Art (1960),

⁹Allison Thompson, "A Worthy Place in the Art of Our Country: The Women's Art Association of Canada, 1887-1987," M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1989: xii.

includes the biographies of four women in its biographies section (which includes the biographies of eighty-four men), and in his text, he also includes the women without commenting on their gender.

Similarly, Newton MacTavish in The Fine Arts in Canada, published in 1925, includes the work of several artists who are women. He also goes one significant step further than Colgate or Hubbard and their followers would go in later years. Unlike most writing of the time, his text does not describe Canadian art as something which started exclusively with the introduction of European ideas and the paintings of Paul Kane and Cornelius Kreighoff. He is able to include in his text the possibility that the many thousands of people who lived in this country before Europeans arrived might have had artistic traditions of their own. This is not to claim that MacTavish, in 1925, held a similar view to that which might define thinking about First Nation's traditions in the 1990s. In fact, his description of totem poles ("grotesque in design and crude in execution, these glaring specimens of savage handicraft possess nevertheless a positive decorative quality"¹⁰) could hardly be read as anything but highly problematic. However, the inclusion of a culture other than that of Western civilization was unusual, even though the inclusion was based on some blatant misunderstandings. MacTavish showed that there was the possibility in the discourse of the time for issues of race to at least be included, even though that inclusion might be understood today as dubious.

¹⁰Newton MacTavish, The Fine Arts in Canada (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1925): 2.

MacTavish was also one of few writers to understand gender issues as issues that needed to be addressed specifically. He noted that no women had been full members of the Royal Canadian Academy, that they were only elected as Associates, and that women could not take an active role in the decision-making process of the Academy because it was assumed that a woman could not command enough votes for election to the committee responsible for setting policy.¹¹ He also noted later in his text that when the Dominion Government increased the annual travelling scholarship to \$1000, the first two recipients were women: Mabel May of Montreal in the first year, and Dorothy Stevens of Toronto in the second.¹²

In spite of MacTavish's accomplishments in addressing issues of race and gender, he still grouped all the women in his text into one chapter, beginning with the words "Perhaps the women painters will regard it as a compliment if they are considered in an exclusive chapter."¹³ All the individual biographies in the book where single chapters are devoted to one artist are biographies of male artists. Of the one hundred and seventy-one artists listed in the biographical notes at the end of the book, twenty-eight are women. What this means is that in a book written in 1925, the percentage of included artists

¹¹MacTavish: 25-26.

¹²MacTavish: 76.

¹³MacTavish: 139. I think it is important to note that he might possibly be correct, and that women painters *may*, in fact, have regarded it as a compliment. It is a mistake to map the feminist theories of the 1990s over all historical experience without study.

who were women was sixteen percent, higher than percentages recorded on average more than fifty and sixty years later.

In addition, MacTavish's later writing contradicts his earlier support for the work of women. As Anne Page has noted: "Urgent concern must be expressed regarding the seriousness of MacTavish's self-assumed role as the 'champion' of Canadian women painters once one has encountered his 1938 publication Ars Longa."¹⁴ In this text, MacTavish has become belittling and derogatory on the subject of women's work. Page speculates that his earlier expounding upon the merits of women artists could be a smokescreen for his real purpose: an assault upon the Royal Canadian Academy.

The reduced role that women have since played in the recording of the history of art becomes even more difficult to understand when consideration is also given to the major contributions they have made to the maintenance of the system which surrounds its production. Women, in the words of Mary Garrard, "have played a significant role as patrons of the arts, and fill nearly all of the army of volunteers who offer their services to museums."¹⁵ However, a simultaneous structure functions to allow women to do much of the labour involved in the continuation of our understanding of culture in Canada, while they are excluded from holding an equal number of positions of power within

¹⁴Anne Mandely Page, "Canada's First Professional Women Painters, 1890-1914: Their Reception in Canadian Writing on the Visual Arts," M.A. Thesis, Concordia University, 1991: 68.

¹⁵Mary D. Garrard, "Of Men, Women, and Art: Some Historical Reflections," Feminist Collage, Judy Loeb, ed. (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1979): 151.

those same structures. For example, if we examine the proceedings of the 1941 Kingston Conference, the results reveal that, at first glance, women were reasonably represented at that pivotal event. Of the one hundred and forty-six participants listed in the biography section of the proceedings, eighty-six were men and fifty-three were women. The presence of so many women attests to the idea that women defined themselves as artists and were defined and included by the artistic community as artists. However, only five of the eighty-six men were listed in the biography section of the text without biographical details attached to their names. On the other hand, fourteen women were listed without biographical detail. More significantly, no woman addressed the conference, and the only reference to their silence came from Paraskeva Clark. When the Chair (Arthur Lismer) stated: "I have been asked to announce that the members of this [Resolutions] committee are: Messrs. Kettle, Shadbolt, Henri Masson, Holgate and Robert Ayre," Clark replied: "No women?"¹⁶

One argument which might be mounted in defence of the existing structures of power is the issue of whether women or men can be judged to be better artists. Is it possible to subtract all the ideological constructs surrounding a work of art and still be left with some component which might be called "aesthetic" and which may be assessed with neutrality? On this subject, Michèle Barrett writes: "Of course, works of art do encode ideological positions, but we do not exhaust their significance by decoding their ideological content.... An

¹⁶The Kingston Conference Proceedings, reprint, Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1991: 21. Clark was subsequently given a position on the Committee.

exclusive emphasis on ideology necessarily denies the aesthetic dimensions of the text."¹⁷ Does the fact that large numbers of people (within the same cultural framework) are moved by the same cultural artifacts - Monet's Water Lilies, for instance, or Bach's Brandenburg Concerti - imply that there is some quality to those artifacts separate from constructions within ideology? I would have to answer "No," or at least "It is not possible to know, and therefore cannot be assumed to be either 'Yes' or 'No,' but must remain 'It is not possible to know.'" Placing a definitive line of separation between ideology and some more elusive characteristic called "the aesthetic" is so problematic, that an attempt to do so can always be challenged with the argument that nothing is known outside of what we have learned. This is not to deny in toto the existence of something which might be described as "the aesthetic," but rather to acknowledge that it is deeply entangled with issues of cultural construction and it is therefore precarious to claim impartiality in its assessment.

In this sense, it becomes problematic to claim some neutral assessment of the work of Luke and Gordon which would answer the question "Were they good painters?" Issues of "good" and "bad" art are intricately linked with the cultural construction of the notion of "artist." Within a Western definition of the artist presumed as male, it follows that "woman" is not capable of artmaking in its historically important sense as the product of genius. In the words of

¹⁷Michèle Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism," Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 699.

Christine Battersby, "Our present criteria for artistic excellence have their origins in theories that specifically and explicitly denied women genius."¹⁸ Even if some neutral territory could be claimed for an assessment of the aesthetic, women would not be included because they were excluded in advance on the basis of their gender.

As Battersby points out, genius is associated with innovation, and artists not located within a "chain of influence" will not be included within the category of "genius." However, "the lines and chains of influence can be re-drawn again and again to suit subsequent historical perspectives and value-systems." She cites as examples the work of Van Gogh, William Blake or Richard Dadd who were "retrospectively assimilated into the contours of progress."¹⁹

However, as the earlier interview with H.W. Janson illustrated, art historians have, in fact, often claimed and believed that their assessments of the aesthetic value of works of art have been neutral, and that, in Janson's opinion at least, no woman has ever created a work of sufficient genius for inclusion in his writing, or at least in his writing prior to 1991. As a feminist intervention, however, attempting to claim that women artists have created works of art which by virtue of their "greatness" should be included in the art history canon creates yet another set of problems. This kind of claim naturalizes that canon and validates its existence. It also assumes that contributions like teaching and

¹⁸Christine Battersby, Gender and Genius (London: The Women's Press, 1989): 23.

¹⁹Battersby: 125.

promoting art - two of the things for which Luke and Gordon deserve recognition - are not valid factors in determining which artists are "important." This argument for women's inclusion is a circular one, and the circle will most definitely not be breached to the benefit of marginalized artists. Demanding that they be included in a canon whose structure depends on the exclusion of a great deal of artistic production can result in token inclusion at best.

In examining the famous cover design by Alfred Barr for the catalogue Cubism and Abstract Art (1936), in which Barr assigned men as the initiators of all modern art canons, Griselda Pollock asks: "Is this because there were no women involved in early modern movements?" She answers her own question, "No." She continues: "Or is it because those who were, were without significance in determining the shape and character of modern art?" Again, she answers, "No." Now she asks: "Or is it rather because what modernist art history celebrates is a selective tradition which normalizes, as the only modernism, a particular and gendered set of practices?" Now, she answers, "I would argue for this explanation."²⁰

This gendered set of practices and the discourses which surround production are far more important than issues of "greatness." This means that an individual venue can be examined in its historical context in a separate way to extricate and understand the ways that women have been marginalized from the history which has reported that particular location within its own moment in

²⁰Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art (London and New York: Routledge, 1990): 50.

time. However, the understanding of the specific historic moment as having singular discourses of marginalization does not deny that the overriding cause of marginalization within a Western tradition in general is formed in the context of a consistently maintained power structure, regardless of the specificities of the particular moment. The issue of aesthetics functions as a microcosm of the macrocosm which is patriarchy. As long as aesthetics continue to function as part of a system of power, then any discussion which claims neutrality in the assessment of a work of art becomes specious for the simple reason that, as a component part of a structure that grants control to some but not others, it cannot be neutral. Its importance lies in its contextualization.

A complex system which associates certain forms, materials and styles with female production has also contributed to this marginalization. This choice of medium has tended to function on a hierarchical scale, with large-format oil painting at the top, and embroidery or other fibre work, usually considered "women's work," at the bottom. In addition, the issue has been made more complex by the continued association of the work of women with imitation, the work of men with creativity, and the attendant implications for subject choice. Regardless of actual subject matter, the work of women has been consistently seen as second-rate because of a missing creative component, the quality of "genius." It can be argued that during the course of history, women have been excluded from the practice of dominant artistic idioms by varied but often specific means. For instance, exclusion from life-drawing classes made difficult

the practice of history painting by women throughout the nineteenth century.²¹ Similarly, lack of access to the public world that the Impressionist painters chose to represent defined the subjects unavailable to women artists in the late nineteenth century.²² But while women might sometimes have picked particular media and subjects, and might have been excluded from certain educational opportunities and public places, they have also chosen to work within idioms and with materials that have traditionally been ascribed to men, as in, for example, the abstract art of the twentieth century.

It is important to consider at this juncture the various ways that women in general were being constructed, in particular after the Second World War. The "ideal woman" of the post-Second World War period varied depending on who was doing the describing, but she tended to be uni-dimensionally either "mother" (Donna Reed, for example, in Leave it to Beaver) or "temptress" (Marilyn Monroe, for example). Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique described her as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home."²³ Cecil Beaton's famous photographs of high-fashion models in front of

²¹Parker and Pollock: 35.

²²Griselda Pollock discusses the limitations placed on the movements of women in the late nineteenth century in Paris in a chapter entitled "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" in Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art: 50-90. For a discussion of the separation of women's and men's activities into the private and the public, see Janet Wolff, "The Culture of Separate Spheres: The Role of Culture in Nineteenth-Century Public and Private Life," Feminine Sentences, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990): 12-33.

²³Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963): 30.

Jackson Pollock paintings were another image. Here, the woman was aloof and sophisticated, her averted gaze presenting her body and her clothes as objects for the admiration of the (male) gaze. There was no implication that the painting behind her belonged to her in any way - she could not possibly have created it. She was to be admired, to be looked at, in the same way that one might admire the painting itself. Gender roles, in other words, were quite definitely polarized, and the role of "artist" did not fit the parameters of what described a woman. She therefore might be an artist, but no description was available to incorporate that concept into contemporary discourse.

Yet the discourse surrounding the position of women as it pertained to abstraction was subtle - certainly far subtler than nineteenth-century discourses about women and art had been. The twentieth-century move towards abstraction in the arts represents a specific aesthetic question as it relates to work by women. Here women were participating in an idiomatic expression that was considered to be the avant-garde, using the same media, the same subject matter (if non-objective art can be considered to have a subject), the same canvas dimensions, etc. as their male counterparts. In other words, there was no specifically stated reason why women would not have the same access to art lessons, to being shown in galleries, to studio space, etc.: all the things that might have conspired in the past to deny women access to what would have been defined as "genius." This does not imply that the marginalization of women did not continue to be systemic and systematic, but rather that to read

that marginalization became a more difficult process as the suppression of women's work became more subtly defined - no longer overt. To conclude in these circumstances that women had access to the same potential as male artists, but did not create the same level of work, naturalized the idea that women did not make paintings as "great" as those by male painters because they were simply unable to paint as well.

As an idiomatic form, abstraction was a phenomenon recorded in art history as belonging almost exclusively to men. On the subject of Abstract Expressionism, Irving Sandler's The Triumph of American Art (1974) includes detailed histories of fourteen men but no women. Similarly, in David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro's Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record, women receive little mention. All the single-artist sections of the book are devoted to artists who are male. Lee Krasner appears only in a place where she has been mistaken for a male artist by a writer commenting thirty years earlier: Anita Brookner wrote, "Lee Krasner paints rather more spontaneously: the man [sic] is clearly a romantic."²⁴

Of Krasner's work, her teacher Hans Hofmann would comment in the early 1940s "This is so good you would not know it was painted by a woman."²⁵ In her article on the subject of Krasner's formation of herself in a male-

²⁴Anita Brookner "The New York Scene," Burlington Magazine 103, (November, 1961). Reprinted in David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 406.

²⁵Cited by Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K." Representations 25, (Winter, 1989): 42.

dominated art world, Anne Wagner suggests that Krasner adopted an intellectual stance and world view which was male, calling herself "Lee" as opposed to her more clearly gendered birth name "Lenore" and using the initials "L.K." to sign her work.²⁶ Prevailing prejudices against the work of women made it more expedient for Krasner to adopt a persona resistant to gendering and make it more difficult to label her work according to her gender. In elaborating this concept of the erasure of gender specificity, Griselda Pollock writes:

Women artists aligned themselves with the modernist project, which seemed to offer them access to freedom, equality, the chance to be just an artist - to be the body in the studio, free...from time, place and, however momentarily, gender....Without any serious deconstruction of the masculine power it had sustained, this liberal ideal reinscribed that gender's privilege. What it offered women and the white bourgeoisie's colonial others was participation in modernism on condition that they effaced their gender/cultural particularity.²⁷

I would speculate that abstract art and Abstract Expressionism were constructed as idioms which belonged intrinsically to men for several reasons. The move in Abstract Expressionism to greatly enlarge the size of the canvas in order to expand the expressiveness of the work was not seen as something that women were physically capable of handling. But much more importantly, abstract art - especially earlier in the century - was

²⁶Wagner: 42.

²⁷Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates, Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992): 161.

seen as an intellectual exercise which women (innately emotional as opposed to intellectual) were either not capable of or not interested in. On the other hand, Abstract Expressionism was seen as an intensely emotional exercise, which would seemingly make it an ideal practice for (emotional) women. However, this was not to be, because here, it turned out, women were not emotional *enough* and could not experience the intensity required to produce this kind of work. This is not to imply that the assumption that women would be non-participating in the field of abstraction was discussed by media, critics, or artists in the sense of a conspiracy to eliminate women from some artistic sphere. Rather, it was generally *assumed*, taken for granted as a given, that women were unable to parallel men in the field of abstraction - an assumption supported by the highly gendered language used to describe both the creation and the physical appearance of Abstract Expressionist paintings.

The underlying meaning of these interpretations is really that women can never be included as important artists, given the fixed construction of aesthetics as a system of power. As noted earlier in this chapter, Reid, for example, conflated the work of Luke and Gordon into one short paragraph in A Concise History of Canadian Painting. In The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art, Barry Lord merely lists Gordon's name, without further information, and includes one sentence of information about Luke. The sentence, "Alexandra Luke, an older painter who had also studied under Hofmann and

had married into the General Motors sell-out family of McLaughlins in Oshawa, used her influence to get the YWCA gallery there to hold the First Canadian Abstract Exhibition,"²⁸ does not include any information about Luke's work. J. Russell Harper in Painting in Canada: A History simply lists Luke's name and provides a few words about Gordon's involvement with "more advanced trends."²⁹ He does not discuss the work of either artist. Patricia Godsell in Enjoying Canadian Painting mentions neither Luke nor Gordon. The fundamental determining factor would be their gender, culturally constructed and changing in meaning over time, but nevertheless consistently functioning within a closed system which assigned greatness, with few exceptions, only to male figures.

Feminist scholarship has tended to take two paths of intervention into this system. Unfortunately, these interventions have also been problematic and unsuccessful. First, feminist writers have tried to reclaim the lost stories of women artists and insert them into the art history canon. The result has been the introduction of a token number of women into standard texts - an approach which hasn't changed significantly since 1925. Secondly, entire books have been devoted to the work of women. Neither of these strategies challenges the

²⁸Barry Lord, The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art, (Toronto: NC Press, 1974): 204.

²⁹J. Russell Harper, Painting in Canada: A History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978): 327.

underlying problem which requires the destabilization of the closed power structure.

Token inclusion can, in fact, be interpreted as a threat to real change. By inviting token members from the margins to participate in the activities of the centre, the core of the patriarchal structure discovers a means to maintain its hegemony and simultaneously deny that it is doing so by pointing to its generosity in including perfunctory representatives of marginalized groups in the activities of the mainstream. The result is a claim either that the system is inclusive because some women are there, or that it is indeed possible for a sufficiently talented woman to be included, as proven by those women who have "made it." As Adrienne Rich has noted:

This is the meaning of female tokenism: that power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to few, so that it may appear that any truly qualified women can gain access to leadership, recognition, and reward; hence that justice based on merits actually prevails.³⁰

This implies that the Canadian texts which do include token numbers of women would be more clearly understood if they included no women at all. Token inclusion merely serves to obfuscate the issue and perhaps cloak it in a potential guise of inclusion which would deny the true state of affairs.

Devoting entire books to the lives of women artists can also be problematic. The writing becomes a political act with its own paradoxical traps

³⁰Adrienne Rich, cited by Gayatri Spivak, Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, Russell Ferguson, ed. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990): 381.

and pitfalls. This type of book creates an alternate and separate canon, one which can be ignored by the dominant culture because it sits alongside it but fails to create any structural disruption. Canadian texts such as By a Lady (1992) or From Women's Eyes (1975) fall into this category.³¹ This difficulty is compounded by the fact that neither book is written with attention to issues of how or why women have been historically marginalized, and so neither book poses a disruptive threat to enduring systems. In her review of By a Lady, Janice Helland has noted that "Tippett colludes with a culture that devalues women even while she attempts to secure their place in an established and exclusive discipline."³² The writing fails to challenge the hierarchy which has continuously chosen painting as representing some ideal medium. It fails also to focus attention on the social discourses surrounding artistic production. "A possible consequence," say Sandy Flitterman and Judith Barry, "is the ghettoization of women's art in an alternative tradition."³³ Women could continue to produce such texts for endless years and see little improvement in the way women artists are viewed in general.

The conclusion must be that women have not succeeded in their attempts to validate and include their artistic production within a history of art.

³¹ Maria Tippett, By A Lady (Toronto: Viking Press, 1992). Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj, From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1975).

³² Janice Helland, Review of By a Lady, by Maria Tippett, The Journal of Canadian Art History 15, no.1, (1993): 125.

³³ Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," Screen 21, no.2, (Summer, 1980): 42.

Luke and Gordon will continue to be discounted on the basis of their gender, regardless of the true meaning of their contributions to Canadian art.

Methodologies have yet to be devised which will result in fundamental success in the restructuring of established systems.

Conclusion

Closed systems are intricately interwoven within the fabric of a social structure and represent a formidable challenge if they are to be breached. This difficulty is axiomatic in the snail-like pace with which women have begun to achieve equality of representation in the field of fine arts in spite of consistent efforts to understand and protest the system. Certainly the increased move into representation of the work of women artists has made the understanding of the history of art more complex. That is to say, we question more often the discourses surrounding the making of art, what actually constitutes art and how that art will be received. But it is a mistake to think that this move by the margins into representation is an indication of the attainment of equality for marginalized groups.¹ The continued marginalization of women in Western discourse has merely become more cleverly concealed behind some token changes and a move to a more politically correct language which disguises ongoing standards.

Interventions into closed systems must come from a combination not only of practical action but also changes in ways of thinking. In October, 1994 at the Symposium on Feminist Art Practice at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Jeanne Randolph, psychiatrist, feminist and art theorist, lectured on What Don't Women Want?. Randolph offered some important suggestions for ways of thinking about patriarchal discourse and changes which might be

¹For a discussion of the movement of the margins into representation, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991): 222-237.

affected by ways of thinking. She maintained that feminist theory could bring affluent nations to what she called a "state of luxury," where the polarities between dichotomies are extended. In this state of luxury, the distance between male/female, one/other, subject/object, etc., would become a place for interpretation, and within this space there would be no need to know whether things are good or bad. Randolph suggested that interpretation must not be left in the hands of a single ideology such as patriarchy, and that space must be created for interpretation in a safe environment. In this safe environment, no one would fear death; in fact, no one would even fear humiliation. This place of interpretation would provide no room for fixed subject positions based on gender; chance would replace established stereotypes and would become essential to experience. Randolph advised in particular a refusal to abdicate the right to interpretation, the right to decide what is "me" and what is "not me."²

Randolph's ideas provide a potential paradigm for a re-understanding of how we might want to see women represented in our culture. What she is suggesting is less a dismantling of existing systems than a more inclusive or expansive way of interpreting information. Rather than relying on what we already think we know, she advocated a questioning of fixed subject positions

²Jeanne Randolph, "What Don't Women Want?" Lecture delivered at the Symposium on Feminist Practice in the Visual Arts, January 28, 1995, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University.

which would allow a more flexible exegesis - not so much an explication as acts of elaboration, what she called the "willing addition of belief."³

Randolph's advocacy of a right to interpretation echoes the liberating thinking of postmodern theories, but she goes one step further with her insistence on the need for a space where thinking can take place in an environment which is not dominated by fear. Since fear (of death, of abuse, of attack, of ridicule, etc.) is a dominant factor in the lives of women, it would seem that a freedom from that fear would position itself as an immanent factor in the restructuring of dominant discourse. That is to say, as long as women live in fear, change cannot occur.

So while Randolph's ideas do not offer an immediate suggestion as to how the lives of women might be transformed, and how women might become instantly represented instead of marginalized, they do offer a way of thinking which is optimistic and potentially attainable. Women can use this paradigm to understand lives such as that of Alexandra Luke and Hortense Gordon, not simply as interesting historical figures, but as metaphors for their own lives, which are not considerably different.

³Randolph, "What Don't Women Want?"

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Fig. 1: Alexandra Luke, Journey Through Space, 1956.



Fig. 2: Hortense Gordon, Fugue, 1955.



Fig. 3: Hortense Gordon, Space, Form, Tension, 1947.



HORTENSE M. GORDON

Fig. 4: Hortense Gordon, Colour Study, 1960.

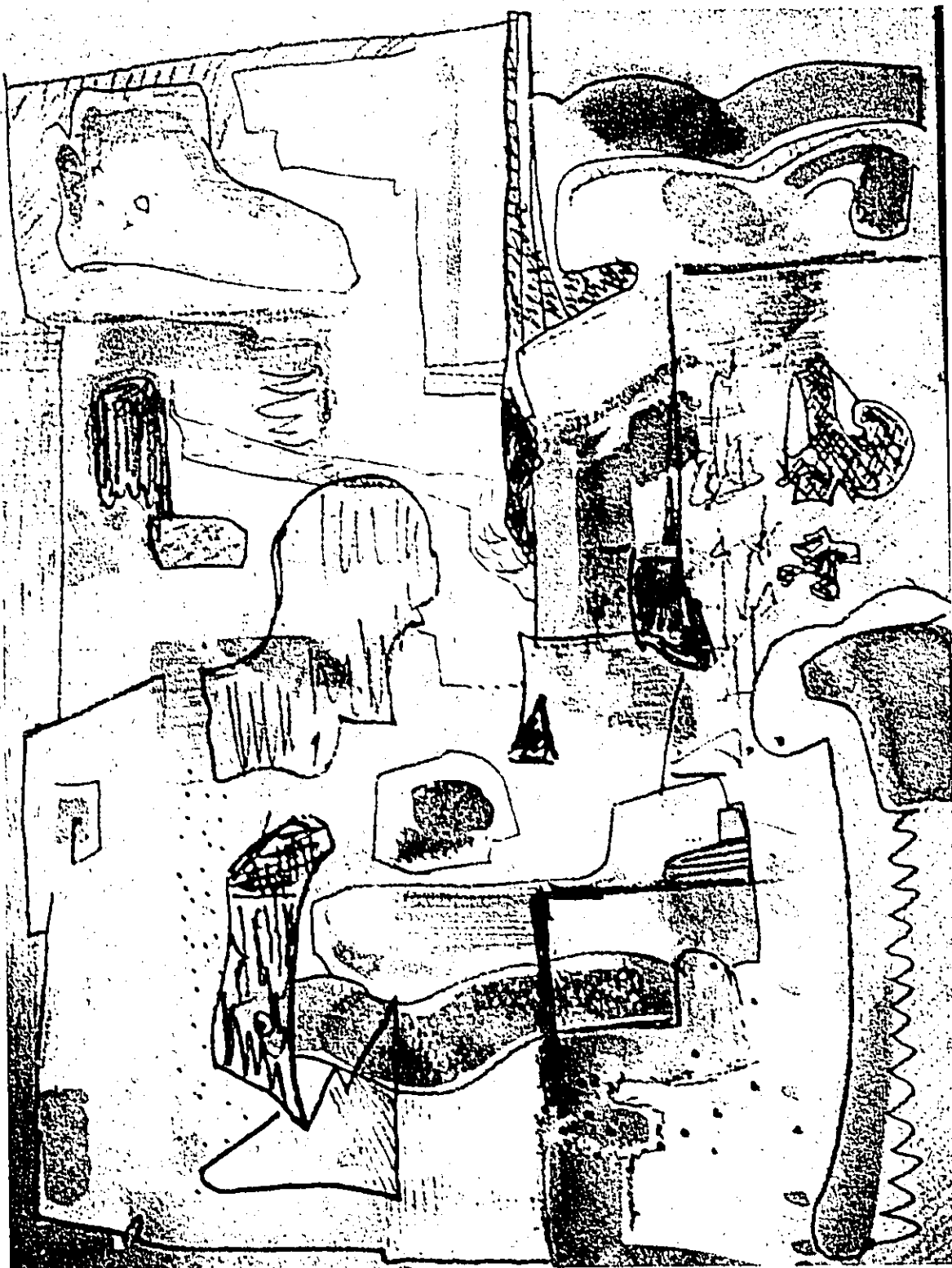


Fig. 5: Alexandra Luke, Automatic Number 52, 1948-50.

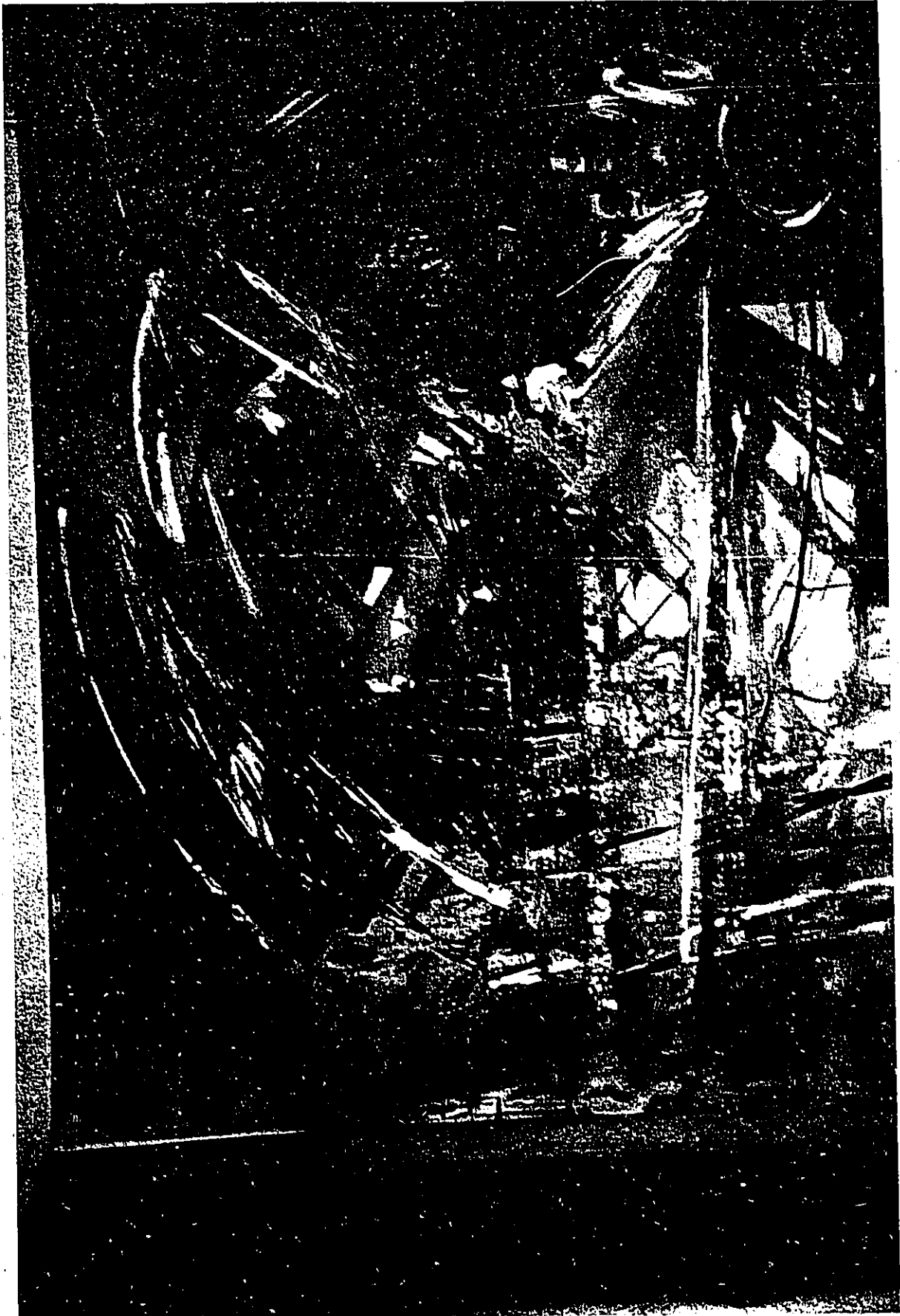


Fig. 6: Alexandra Luke, Dweller in the Ageless, 1963.



Fig. 7: Hortense Gordon, Christmas, Burk's Falls, 1936.



Fig. 8: Hortense Gordon, Light Housekeeping, 1945.

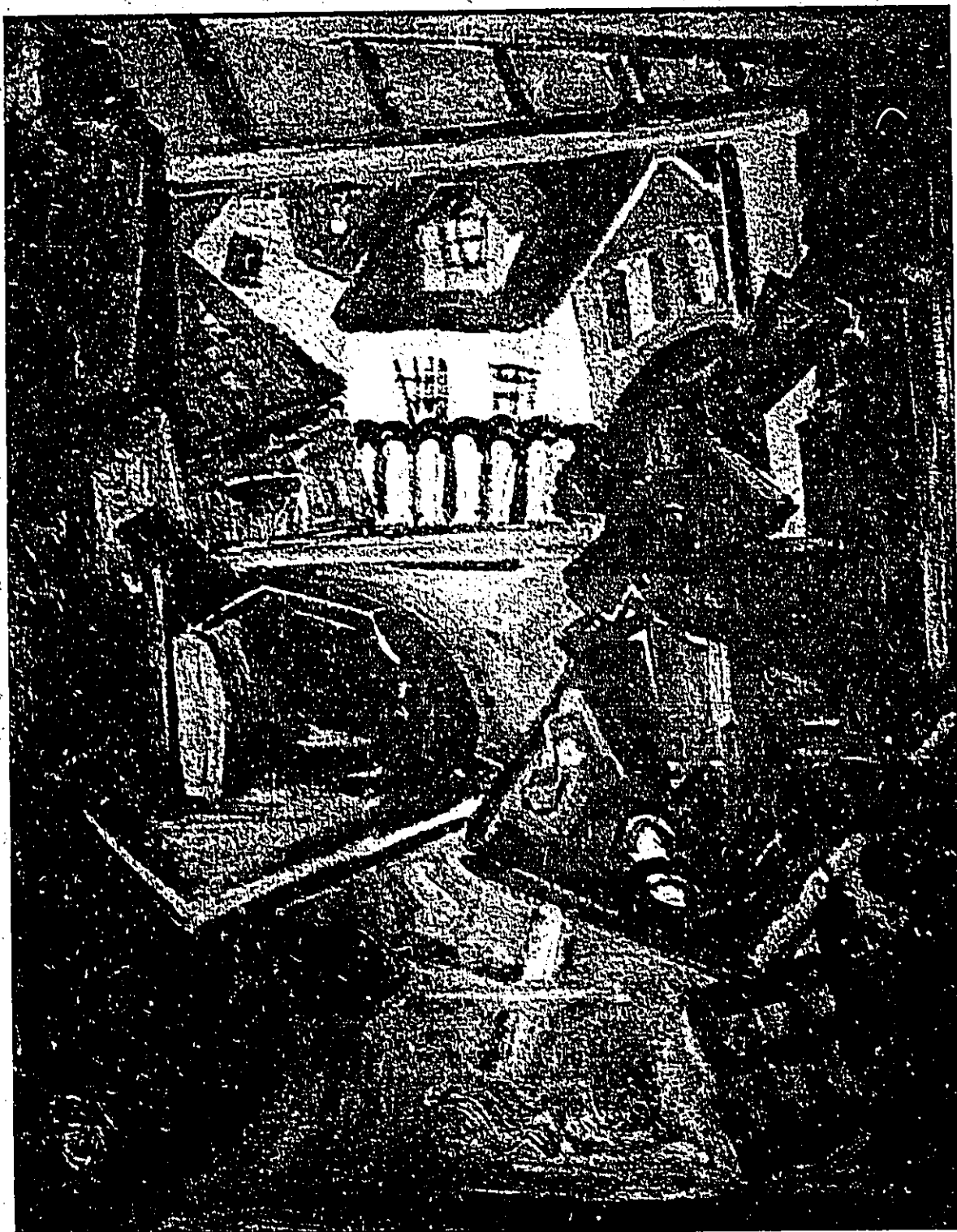


Fig. 9: Hortense Gordon, Studio Interior Abstraction, 1948.



Fig. 10: Alexandra Luke, Chalk Lake Road, 1936.

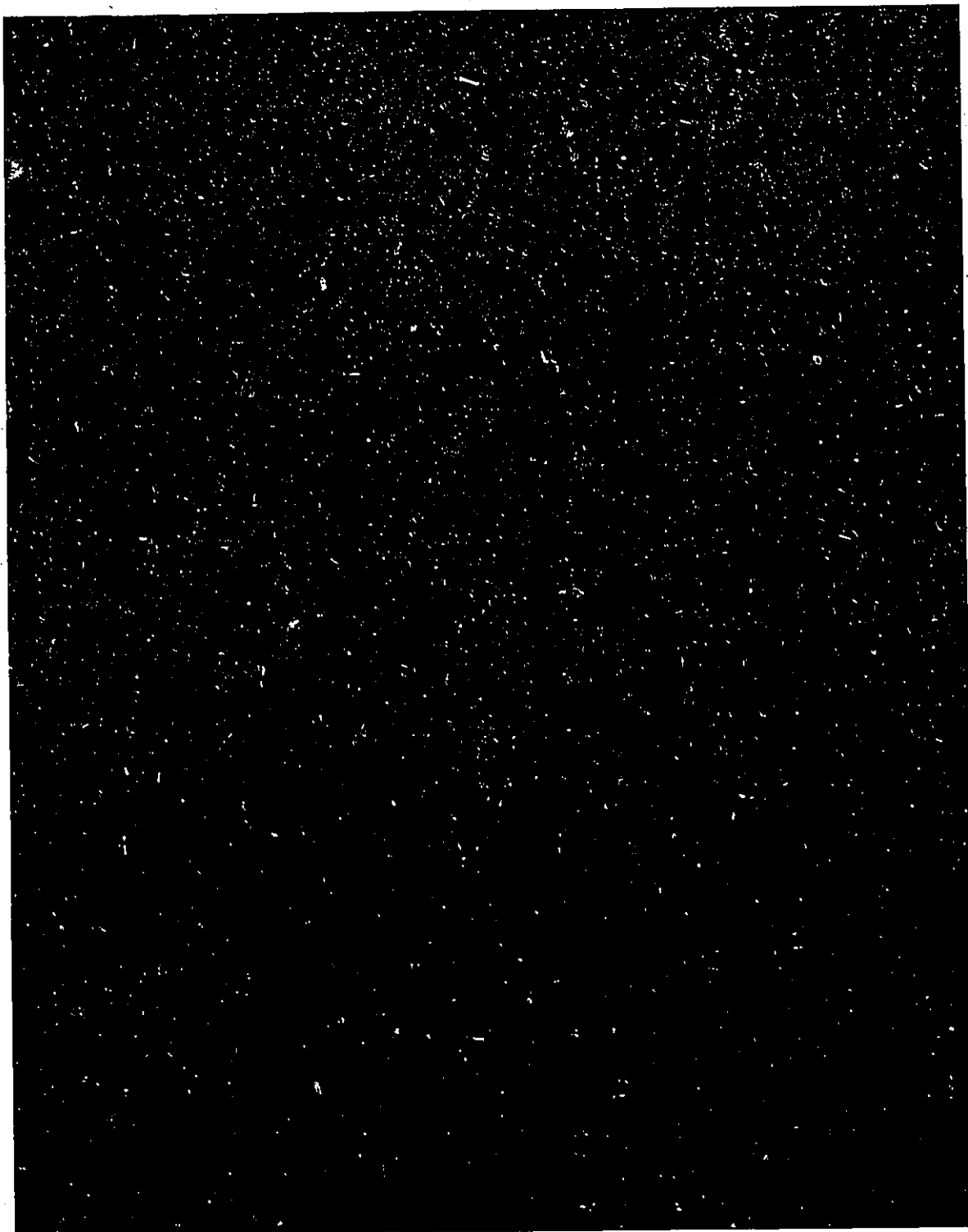


Fig. 11: Alexandra Luke, Moonlight, Banff, 1945.



Fig. 12: Alexandra Luke, Circus, 1948.



Fig. 13: Photograph of Painters Eleven, 1957.