

Patricia Bovey -- 'Calligraphic Influences: Ben Wasylyshen & John King: With Winston Leathers & Aliana Au.' 2014

The following are excerpts from the exhibition catalogue *'Calligraphic Influences: Ben Wasylyshen & John King: With Winston Leathers & Aliana Au'* (January 2014) written by Patricia Bovey. The exhibition is at the Buhler Gallery, St. Boniface Hospital, Winnipeg, Manitoba from February 6 to May 25, 2014.

Patricia Bovey, FRSA, FCMA, is the Project Lead for the Buhler Gallery as well as an art historian, writer and consultant in the arts. She has worked in the art museum sector for many years and is a former director of The Winnipeg Art Gallery (1999-2004) and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (1980-1999).

“The ability of calligraphy to convey emotion as well as the individuality of expression captured the interest of twentieth-century American Abstract Expressionist painters, especially Robert Motherwell. His work was to play a significant role in the development of abstraction in Canada and Motherwell was one of the key inspirations for Winnipeg’s John King.

This exhibition therefore ties these international elements together within Winnipeg’s art scene. Winnipeg may be isolated geographically; it has never been isolated Update magazine, The Edmonton Art Gallery; Feb 1987. (Continue reading >>) artistically or intellectually. Many international ideas have been further developed and redefined in Manitoba’s capital city to make a distinctive mark on Canadian art as a whole. Drawing from the Chinese and Japanese calligraphic traditions, for instance, King and Wasylyshen have each created compelling works, contemporary in execution and approach, evoking the rhythms, senses and harmonies of the prairie landscape and life.

For King and Wasylyshen, both accomplished painters, the use of calligraphy has been simultaneously conscious and sub-conscious. Their joy in the freedom and lyricism of brushwork is clear. Yet neither of these artists is a pure calligrapher. Nor is either tied to a specific Asian spirituality which is often expressed through calligraphy. However, both artists employ the knowledge and power of line to explore the rhythms, space and sense of this place, the prairie, in a manner that gives their subject a ‘lift’. While they both use rich colours, it is the line and force of their brushwork that takes the viewer through their space, their compositions and beyond. Despite their common interest in expressive automatic painting and fluid compositions, the work of Wasylyshen and King, however, is quite different. ...

John King is a Winnipeg-based abstract painter who graduated in 1971 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Manitoba. After teaching high school art in Winnipeg for several years he moved to Edmonton, where for the next seventeen years he experimented with various approaches to painting. He received a Master of Visual Arts Degree in Painting from the University of Alberta and later worked at the

Edmonton Art Gallery and the University of Alberta's Department of Art and Design. Since returning to Winnipeg in 1991 King has focused solely on his painting and developed his unique visual language built on his interest in abstract expressionist painting and East Asian calligraphy. American abstract expressionist painter Robert Motherwell is one of his idols.

As King notes in his artist's statement:

My paintings are essentially silent statement that should not require any explanation or narrative. They're partly about the personality and behavior of the visual elements – line, shape, colour, texture and value – and how they interact. My paintings are also about allusions and references that appear unconsciously and spontaneously as I paint. Once a painting is finished I often discover that it reminds me of places or events from my past.

As much as possible, I paint intuitively. A state of confusion is often embraced. Most aesthetic decisions I regard as tentative. I paint mostly by trail and error, improvising and trusting my subconscious to guide me until I finally discover a painting that feels authentic as well as visually sustaining.

My brushstrokes point to an influence that has inspired me for as long as I can remember: East Asian calligraphy. Why I find it so fascinating remains a mystery, but there's no doubt the influence has been profound. I find each calligraphic mark or brushstroke has its own personality. It can be powerful or gentle, evocative or provocative. It can fight or blend with the surrounding background. In some paintings the brushstrokes may appear to sit in a space that is flat or decorative. In other paintings the brushstrokes may appear to rest in a space that is deep and illusionistic, reminiscent of a seascape or a prairie landscape.

John King was employing the art of calligraphy in his work as early as 1982 with *Prairie Sea*, an acrylic on paper. Colour is absent, the background being beiges, greys and white giving the sense of the prairie sky with a storm on the horizon. An energetic black brushstroke suggests its path and strength. His recent works such as *Churchill Night*, *Sky Rust*, and *Eagle Red* show the power of feelings he captures in response to the prairie landscape with its inherent moods. These three paintings were done in 2013 and are all acrylic on canvas. *Churchill Night* is of a similar colour palette to *Prairie Sea*. One sees the horizon, activity in the night sky, birds and clouds, with the fluid yellow/white line providing a window, light, movement – all with one stroke. The brush held varying amounts of paint and the artist shifted the position of the brush to give different kinds of energy to the strength and force of the line. In *Sky Rust* and *Eagle Red*, he uses strong colours – primarily red. The lines in the former are repeated horizontal strokes, which push the boundary of the painting beyond the frame. In the latter, a less peaceful work, the agitation of the black brushwork in the background is contrasted with the power of the larger white image superimposed over the work. There is a feeling of peace in much of King's work; humour in some; and a sense of agitation in others. The balance of line, colour, movement, and the repetition of individual elements are strong in each. One feels the emotional energy of his gestural marks. His colour field

backgrounds form the basis for these lyrical abstractions. The automatic action of his brush becomes an extension of his arm. King's physical act of painting creates the resulting energy in these canvases with their expressive, rhythmic moods. The effect is the creation of personal feelings within the viewer about the emotions conveyed rather than a specific definition or representation of particular narrative details.

Motherwell said: "Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is the real subject, of which everything he paints is both an homage and a critique, and everything he says is a gloss." Both Wasylyshen and King carry "the whole culture of modern painting in their heads", but they do more. They also carry the understanding of the principles of earlier cultures as they each adhere to the principles of traditional calligraphy: the natural balance in the individual marks themselves and the balance of composition as a whole. Straight lines are strong and clear; curved lines softer and fluid. Both artists incorporate variations of line thicknesses and quality; and both imbue their work with rhythm. These principles have enabled them to create poignant works, sensitive to their time, place and perceptions.

One can think of calligraphy in terms of music or dance. These Winnipeg artists certainly evoke both music and dance. While maintaining compositional order and structure, they simultaneously break free expressing individual vitality. Every brushstroke is clearly articulated and integrated into their dynamic and balanced whole.

It was British Columbia artist Jack Wise who challenged me many years ago to look at the power calligraphy has had on western Canadian art. Wise had spent considerable time working in India at the monastery of the Dali Lama, and his intuition as to the role of calligraphy for present day artists, though ahead of his time, was right. We see this in the compelling work of Ben Wasylyshen and John King. Calligraphy is indeed an essential element in their contemporary expression, and it has been in the development of the visual language of many Canadian artists, including Aliana Au and Winston Leathers. The power of line is as strong as the power of colour in evoking emotion, in portraying space and distance, in detailing the particular, and in defining time."

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