

INTERVIEW OF MAURICE STUBBS

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Interview of Maurice Stubbs conducted by Grace Bedwell and Kimberly Barton, MA candidates in the Department of Visual Arts, Western University.

KB: You began painting from a young age in Australia. What drew you to this medium of watercolour as opposed to sculpture for example?

MS: For one thing, painting in watercolour is probably the cheapest way to go. And when I started painting of course the war had started and it was almost impossible to get watercolour paper. As well my sister was an artist and she was the eldest in my family. I used to see her work; she had a studio in Geraldton in West Australia. She also worked in watercolour. The first lesson that I got from her was when she took me out sketching and I made what I felt was a landscape.

She said to me, "What colour is the sky?"

I said, "Blue."

She then told me, "Have you ever looked at the sky, well look up and look."

Of course when I looked it was almost white. So my first lesson, which I have never forgot, was to look more carefully at everything and never take anything for granted. I like the simplicity of watercolours, which is not always easy to achieve.

GB: In your artist statement written July 1998, you stated, "A landscape is expressing a long relationship to the natural environment, taking many forms, a connection between light, space, colour, and form as a metaphor for our changing culture or simply as a record of a particular place and time." What is your view of landscape and has it changed?

MS: Well I never looked at landscape in any sort of category. I like to be challenged by the landscape. I prefer the landscapes that are big expansive fields. That poses the challenge of how to create a landscape out of that and what is interesting about it even though it appears so dull. I enjoy that challenge. Landscape, still life, and figures are not separate to me. So I often create landscapes with figures in them. They are not figure paintings or landscapes: they reside somewhere in-between.

GB: Explain more about some of the things that makes your perception of landscape so personal and unique?

MS: I suppose that, because I've moved around a lot when I was younger particularly and also had tried different jobs in order to do that, that I don't see the world as black and white. I wasn't happy about the high school I went to and I couldn't leave fast enough. When I left in grade nine *that's* when my education started.

Nonetheless, my own perception is wrapped up with all the things that I have done before and that I appreciate, especially all the different colours. In Australia for example where I

grew up in West Australia, the ocean is absolutely crystal clear. You can see quite deep down, every fish, really everything that moves. And so often I would just dive down and look at all the fish and all the things going on. The water was so clear and clean and their reflections and all the sun shining down. Our family lived very close to the ocean, so every morning our entire family would go for a swim. I cannot say that perception is one thing; it is a very personal experience. I suppose that is the key to it. So my perception of the world I suppose in regards to landscape painting is just all my background and things I have looked at.

When I was on a trip to Scandinavia, I went with a friend. We had bikes and stayed at youth hostels. We went through Denmark, Norway, and then into Sweden. In Sweden we realized we did not have any money left and we thought we better change that. So we got off the train and went into a labor exchange and got a job on a farm. The farmer treated me as a resident artist; he did not want me to do any farming. He actually just wanted me to paint. So I ended up with a number of paintings of their children and portraits as well as landscapes. It all started because his older sister had asked me to make a design for this serving plate. So I did an aboriginal design, something a little different for them. She came back from the shop with numerous plates, very happy with the design. Anyways, all of those things and journeys go towards perception.

KB: I would like to ask you about one of your paintings in particular, *Summer (1983)*. I find that many of your watercolour paintings like this one seem to capture an ephemeral moment. Can you describe some of the ways or techniques you use to achieve this?

MS: Well, it's basically a wet and wet technique. I look for welcome accidents in my paintings and how I can use them. I'm not the only one. This has been around for centuries. And of course one of the main influences right from the early days has been Cézanne. I appreciated English watercolourists that you can see in some cases with [my] earlier watercolours. Turner was an early influence along with the school of watercolourists in England, including John Cotman. I like the simplicity of watercolours, and it's not always easy to get something that's interesting and, at the same time, simple so it's a bit of a clash there at times.

KB: Is it intentional that you try to capture a fleeting moment, or is it more incidental in your work?

MS: I often used to go with Roly Fenwick up to his cottage and we would leave about four o'clock in the morning, and deliberately, so we could see the sunrise, and study the pre-sunrise. A lot of paintings of those early mornings would be so simple and, on the other hand, quite effective because they were showing just one little part of it. Snow is another thing that, of course, is fairly new for me and I like snow scenes, again because of the simplicity of shapes and things.

GB: I found the *Newfoundland Ikon, The Kyle* (1997) an anomaly because of its depiction of the ship. What prompted this painting and do you think it still illustrates your thoughts on landscape?

MS: I went to Newfoundland out of curiosity with Roly Fenwick. We were on our way to Labrador, but we got held up at Gros Morne. It is such an amazing picturesque place. I saw this ship; it had just been tied in the dock as a memorial. I thought that was pretty unusual. It was the only ship that carried passengers and goods to supply all these little towns in Newfoundland. I decided to sit down and take a sketch of it and then I went back and made the painting.

KB: Some of your paintings like *Yellow and Green* (1993) have quite an impressionistic quality. What is it that interests you about relationships of light and colour?

MS: Colour has always interested me and I know that colour in Australia is much stronger than it is in Canada. In Perth, the average amount of light in a year is incredible, something like 340 days of clear skies. So there's just colour everywhere, and the colour is exaggerated because of the strong sunshine. In a lot of these [tropical] countries, you'll notice the artists do very strong colours, at least by Western standards. People might not believe the colours are like that, but they are, they're very strong. I noticed that when I first came to Canada, that people thought my colours were too strong, and that I exaggerated them but I did not. I've never been able to predict a watercolour, or what I want it to look like when it's finished. And sometimes it's even better than you thought it would be, because you just don't, or can't, take everything into effect.

GB: In your artist statement from July 1998 you expressed, "Both memory and intuition have important roles in developing atmosphere, and clarity of colour in my landscape..." How is this embodied in the work *Road to 'The Rock', Georgian Range* (1991)?

MS: This painting depicts a typical road that goes to Roly Fenwick's cottage. It ends at the lake; I did several paintings of it. It's hard to say what drew me to it. I remember getting up at three o'clock in the morning and going to the rock, looking at the rock at a time of day where it was still almost dark. I've always been interested in the unusual way of looking at things. Sometimes people see this method as unconventional and non-traditional.

KB: What has been your greatest motivation to continue in the tradition of landscape painting?

MS: I have studied the history of art and it is quite interesting sometimes to read about artists who are going on at a steady sort of rate and then suddenly have a burst of energy and things change. I was reading a book called, *Old Masters in Old Age* and it did not include masters like Picasso because he was too young. A doctor who is also an artist wrote the book and he has exhibited his paintings in the United Kingdom. A more or less

comical take on artists in their old age looking at how they think and feel. I thought it was interesting, because when they were interviewed almost all of them said similar things which was, "If we have five more years, we will understand what we are doing and we will get there at last." This idea of being just on the point of succeeding in their careers as artists but they just needed more time. And I think this is what most artists think that they need, just a couple more years. So I have given up trying to foresee what the future has for artists or the appreciation of artists or how it is all seen in the end.