Jori Smith: A Contextual Analysis

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Abstract

Jori Smith has long lingered in the shadows of her contemporaries, little recognized by scholarship or academic investigation. She was an important painter whose contribution to the development of modernism in Quebec and Canada has only recently resurfaced and been publicly acknowledged. Ahead of her time, her decision to bridge both linguistic communities in Quebec informs her work making her a unique subject of study from both professional and social perspectives. Smith fully integrated herself into Quebecois culture, living and painting in a community to which she was not native, leaving us with a visual and textual record of great historical value. As her work straddles both linguistic solitudes of Quebec, it poses interesting questions on the role of the artist as ethnographer and the role of portraiture as the embodiment of greater social meanings than mimetic likeness. The fact that her work is both unique and original and has been overlooked for so long underlines the patriarchal character of the metanarratives that have informed the Canadian art historical canon over the past century.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the artist herself. It has been an honour and a privilege working with her and I can easily say that knowing Jori Smith has added a dimension to my education that no institution could provide. I would also like to thank Talbot Johnson for his benevolent kindness and unique perspective.

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Abbreviations

CAS - - Contemporary Arts Society

AAM - - Art Association of Montreal

EBA - - Ecole des Beaux Arts

Introduction

While Jori Smith (1907-) is mentioned repeatedly throughout Canadian art historical scholarship, her position as a woman and an artist has rarely been addressed in any significant detail. This thesis will serve two purposes: it will add to the body of work specifically dealing with the artist, and it will propose the artist as a legitimate subject for further inquiry. Smith made invaluable contributions to the development of Canadian art during the 1930s when interest in the figure came very much to the fore. Her work surfaces time and again in contemporary reviews, movements and forums where the artist was active as an important contributing member of the Canadian art scene. Jori Smith, a notable figure in twentieth-century Canadian art history, is best analyzed using a multiplicity of different approaches. Straddling two languages and two cultures, Smith's work is the result of her unique position as a bilingual female artist. As such, it demands a multifaceted approach in order to understand and articulate the historical, sociological and personal grounding of her work. To do so I have drawn on ethnography, psychoanalysis and several feminist modes of interpretation in order to propose various strategies for interpreting Smith's work.

Having heard a brief mention of Smith in an introductory Canadian art history course, and having been dissatisfied with the small amount of information available in the accompanying text to the course, I set out to find more information about the artist. It quickly became apparent that scholarly writing

about Smith was rare. However, because she was from my own home of Montreal, I tried to locate her, only to discover that Smith had lived less than ten minutes away from my own neighborhood in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue for over ten years. Good friends of my parents had, in fact, attended the same parties as Smith, and my parents remember her as a lively and animated octogenarian.¹ I eventually contacted Smith and upon meeting her realized that, despite the generational gap, we had a lot in common. We were both artists of Irish and English descent, raised in predominantly French areas of Montreal, who felt a strong rapport with the Québécois. We immediately became close friends and every visit home to Montreal included a visit with Smith.

The most important body of information for this study was provided by the artist herself. As we became very close throughout this project, her interviews were an invaluable source, not only because she could relay her own understanding of her work, but because she brought a sense of immediacy to many of the writings from the 1930s. I was privy to a lot of information, both personal and historical, and have sought to view this material as objectively as possible. Fortunately, Smith kept a diary her entire life, in which she wrote a large amount of autobiographical prose. She was also an avid letter writer and careful enough to keep all the letters that she received. Both the diaries and

¹My mother's first recollection of Jori Smith was looking for her coat and hat at a Senneville party. She walked into the bedroom where all the winter garments had been deposited, only to find Smith in the midst of trying on various coats and hats to choose which style pleased her most.

letters are now on file at the Library and Archives of Canada. This information not only provides backup material for interviews, but gives a sense of Smith's immediate reaction to events in her life. Her writing is, in fact, so compelling that in 1997 a text that she had written in 1963, on the subject of her life in Charlevoix County, was published without any editing [see Appendix].

Apart from recently published texts that deal with the period of the 1930s, the general lack of secondary studies required that my analysis depend on primary sources: specifically, newspaper articles from the period in question, interviews with the artist, as well as her own writing and the extensive archival material in her fonds at the Library and Archives of Canada. While the newspaper articles were informative about how she has been constructed as a subject, most often in relation to her husband the artist and ethnographer Jean Palardy, they also served to reinforce the fact that, in the media, she was always considered both talented and successful starting from her early school days at the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

One of the reasons that Jori Smith has been neglected as an artist is that the period of the 1930s itself has been poorly documented until relatively recently. We can also assume that her self-imposed isolation between 1950 and 1970 and the more visible impact that abstraction had upon the Canadian art scene have obscured her achievements. Regardless of these details, the body of literature that looks at the period of the 1930s, whether in isolation or within

the larger context of a Canadian art history, has insufficiently documented her particular contributions. I am referring specifically to the canonical surveys of Canadian art history such as Dennis Reid's *Concise History of Canadian Painting*, Russell Harper's *Painting in Canada: a History*, David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff's *Contemporary Canadian Art* and even Maria Tippett's *By a Lady*. While almost all scholarly texts on the subject acknowledge Smith as one of the artists involved in the modern movement in Montreal during the thirties, she has yet to be documented extensively. She was one of the artists to leave the École des Beaux Arts because of its traditionalism, and was both a pioneer of new ideas in Canadian art and an important interpreter with an original approach to portraiture.

The literature I have used to analyze my subject encompasses many fields and deals with selected aspects of Smith's work. While I look at portraiture, ethnography, community art and psychoanalysis, the work that bears directly on my subject needs further qualification. For the period of the thirties two key texts have been consulted, as well as a handful of shorter essays. Esther Trépanier's *Peinture et modernité au Québec 1919-1939* is the most complete and in-depth analysis on the interwar years yet to be published. Coupled with Charles C. Hill's catalogue, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, one is given a very interesting and critical look at the development of modern ideas during the decade, as well as critical insight into how the period has been

constructed in Canadian art historical discourse.

Hill's was the first text of its sort to deal with the decade of the thirties as a period of significant artistic development. Hill presents the reader with a most thorough piece of research that details the period, critiques how it has been constructed, and brings to light issues that may be of further research interest.

Trépanier uses her own extensive research on the period, as well as Hill's text, as a point of departure. She states that while the trajectory of Canadian art is often recorded in relation to the developments in European art, this is an inadequate approach because one must examine the social and cultural bearings of the area to fully understand the discourse underpinning artistic practice.² Trépanier's book, published in 1998, offers an even more synthetic and in-depth analysis of the period, bringing more critical attention to the art of the twenties and how it influenced the innovative undertakings of the next decade.

Of the small amount of published information that deals with the artist directly, two of the most complete sources are an article by Rosalind Pepall in the 1997 catalogue *Jori Smith, A Celebration*, and Edith-Anne Pageot's 2000 article, "Jori Smith, une figure de la modernité picturale québécoise. Étude d'un cas: le portrait d'enfant." Pepall's 1997 catalogue is particularly useful in tracing biographical information about the artist, while the Pageot article provides a more

²Esther Trépanier, *Peinture et Modernité au Québec 1919-1939*, (Québec: Editions Nota Bene, 1998), 11.

focused look at Smith's portraits of children. It also raises several interesting points concerning child portraiture during the early twentieth century, while locating the artist's works in a socio-historical context.

Jori Smith has certainly proved to be a highly interesting subject. She has led a long, at times very hard, and at other times extremely fruitful, life. Today her one-room apartment in Westmount, Montreal is a small memory theatre of her life's work, with paintings from all periods of her career hung in salon style from floor to ceiling, wall to wall. To honour this life of achievement she has recently been awarded both Quebec's Médaille, given by the National Assembly to honour citizens of achievement, as well as the Order of Canada. Over the years she has silently carved out for herself a place in Canadian art history.³ In 1987 at the age of eighty she wrote a brief synopsis of her life story in which she observed: "I've noticed during my long life that those who do take themselves seriously, think themselves geniuses, invariably succeed. Pellan for instance, Cosgrove, Borduas, all very conceited. Contrast them with me who was totally negative about herself and understand why I never made it. The big league."⁴

In 1997 Smith was quoted in the *Montreal Gazette* as saying "I am not a famous painter. I have always been in the shadows and liked it that way."⁵ Why did Jori Smith never "make it"? Or, more accurately, why did she think that she

³ Julian Armstrong, "A Lifetime in Art" *The Montreal Gazette*, 9 May 2001.

⁴ Jori Smith, Autobiographical Sketch. February 1987, MG30 D249 vol.19, Library and Archives of Canada (LAC).

⁵ Dorota Kozinska, "A Life in Art" *The Montreal Gazette*, 25 January 1997.

had not acquired any form of fame or prestige, when many would argue that she had? Clearly the honours that she has received in the past decade and a half have proven her wrong. This recognition, however, did not miraculously manifest itself as due payment, as perhaps it should have. It was the result of concerted efforts by one woman, Juliette Lassond, a “cell-mate” of the same retirement residence, a connoisseur and collector, who made a point of lobbying for some public recognition of the artist. Had a kindly neighbour, a woman of influence, not noticed her, would Jori Smith have received the recognition she so clearly earned?

Jori Smith has exhibited her work both inside Canada and internationally. She was recognized and admired during her most prolific period in the 1930s as instrumental in the development of progressive new painting, an elite reputation she maintained for years. Therefore, the key question is: under what conditions does an artist of such repute become so thoroughly removed from academic scholarship and public renown?

While it has become usual to point the finger at the patriarchal underpinnings of academic ideology, there seems little else to explain the erasure from the historical record of Smith's once lively and critical following. As Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker made clear in their book *Old Mistresses*: “the way the history of art has been studied and evaluated is not the exercise of

neutral 'objective' scholarship, but an ideological practice."⁶ Was it simply the intervention of Juliette Lassond that brought much deserved and delayed recognition to the artist? How is it that male contemporaries such as Goodridge Roberts or Phillip Surrey, who were ranked below her at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and had equally successful careers, have not, themselves, been consigned to obscurity?

The professional differences that set Jori Smith apart from her male contemporaries were her unending interest in portraiture and her gender. Given recent feminist art historical scholarship, her gender is rather obvious as the point on which she "failed" to make the big league, as she put it. Nevertheless, she was at the top of her class at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and, at the time, received higher acclaim than many of her male contemporaries, who went on to lead very public and successful careers. We must, therefore, ask not only about her sustained interest in portraiture and her choice of subject matter, but how her gender impacted upon the outcome.

Jori Smith is predominantly remembered for her portraits of women and children, despite the fact that she painted an equal number of men. Is this possibly due to the fact that her gender places her in a position to be considered only for recognition of these specific genres? As Pollock and Parker stated in *Old Mistresses*: "the social definition of femininity affects the valuation of what

⁶Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), xvii.

women do to the extent that the artists and their subjects become virtually synonymous.”⁷ As for the genre of portraiture, it is a truism to say that Canadian art history is dominated by landscape representations. These were associated with mapping and possessing the land in the post-conquest era and articulating a new nationalism following Confederation, and its significance has only recently been contested in academic scholarship. The 1930s, however, hailed a new interest in figural work that is increasingly recognized in academic scholarship.

As Jori Smith did not follow in the footsteps of the Group of Seven, is it possible that she was accorded a lower status because of her choice of a genre that had yet to establish itself as a legitimate avenue for artistic expression and exploration? By the thirties figural work was becoming increasingly recognized and celebrated as an important genre. Is it possible, likely even, that Smith’s choice of portraiture, and her early success as a painter of children, clouded her later reputation as an artist by relegating her to what patriarchy has assumed to constitute the annals of the “feminine”?

While Smith lived and worked among her portrait subjects in small rural Quebec communities, this aspect of her life is never accorded the recognition that it should have garnered. These days we take our bilingualism for granted as Quebec’s Bill 101 has encouraged a level of cultural integration that was not characteristic of the 1930s. At that time, it was certainly unheard of for a woman,

⁷Ibid., 54.

especially an Anglophone, to strive for such a degree of cultural rapport as Smith developed. The divide between the two communities was so great that she was the only woman she knew who spoke both English and French languages fluently and who took great pride in the fact that she was accepted by both groups.⁸

While I do not propose to fully answer the questions I have set forth, I propose to explore these issues through an interdisciplinary framework that can more fully articulate the importance of Smith's position in the art world as a woman and painter, and can highlight the sociological and personal implications of her choice of genre and subject matter. In Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon*, the author approaches her subjects in much the same way as I intend with Smith:

There is a gulf between popular notions of 'art and artists' and the current critical edge of art historical feminist analysis. The program-makers wanted to bring the biography of the artist to life through the works, whereas the feminist cultural analyst is wanting to make work itself vivid by decoding the dynamic process of how meaning is produced and exploring what kinds of readings its signs make possible. In the traditional model, the artwork is a transparent screen through which you have only to look to see the artist as a psychologically coherent subject originating in the meanings the work so perfectly reflects. The critical feminist model relies heavily on the metaphor of reading rather than mirror-gazing.⁹

In addition to reading art works as a sign, interdisciplinary approaches

⁸Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 23 January, 2003.

⁹Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London: Routledge, 1999), 98.

contribute new layers of complexity. The broader interdisciplinary approach is not additional to the analysis of visual culture as practiced by the so-called new art history but allows for the analysis of multiple perspectives. The past thirty years have seen the development, in part through Cultural Studies, of this new strategy into a field of study that bridges disparate disciplines in order to fully elaborate the complexity of specific subjects. In this regard Andrew Milner describes a multiplicity of different strategies that emerge: “[Interdisciplinarity’s various senses have tended to cluster around four main sets of meaning: as an interdiscipline; as a political intervention into the existing disciplines; as an entirely new discipline, defined in terms of entirely new subject matter; and finally, as a new discipline, defined in terms of a new theoretical paradigm.”¹⁰ All four of these sets of meaning are pertinent and can be combined to articulate the specific uses of interdisciplinarity. The fourth and final meaning Milner, proposes however, is less contextually contingent and, in my opinion, best summarizes the state of the arts within the paradigm of cultural studies.

Later in his text, *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies*, Milner further qualifies the term “cultural studies” by defining it as “the social science of the study of the production, distribution, exchange and reception of textualised meaning. I [use] the term ‘social science’ here, not in any strong positivist sense...but in the much looser sense of a discipline, the primary purposes of which are description and

¹⁰Andrew Milner, *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 3.

explanation rather than judgement and canonization.”¹¹ My use of theory in looking at Jori Smith can be classified within this latter definition, because I rely on various disciplines to bring new interpretations to Smith's work and to analyze her omission from art historical discourse.

Arguably it was feminism that pioneered interdisciplinary work by foregrounding issues of power and the subject, as well as relying heavily on post-structuralist approaches. Feminist analysis critiques questions of canonicity, gender politics in society at large, power and how art history, as an ideological construct, has been created.

In her 1995 thesis on the methodology of Joan Borsa and Renee Baert, who discussed art by women, Cindy Stelmackowich stated :

In my opinion, any feminist interpretive framework must be grounded in an interdisciplinary methodology. I will argue that Baert and Borsa, in their attempts to understand the inner workings of artistic innovation, employ an interdisciplinary methodology. I believe that interdisciplinarity allows them to concentrate on generative processes rather than [upon] discourses on art and epistemology that are more concerned with finished products and formal tendencies. By asking crucial questions about and searching for links within paradigms in other fields, disciplines and knowledge systems, their strategies cross over many disciplinary centres. Interdisciplinary practice allows them not only to confront the systems of power and domination within the discipline of art history, but also [to] challenge the assumptions that inform Western ideas, concepts and narratives.¹²

¹¹Ibid., 5.

¹²Cindy Stelmackowich, “Generating a New Interdisciplinary Feminist Framework For Contemporary Canadian Women’s Art: The Critical Practices of Renee Baert and Joan Borsa.” (Ottawa, Carleton University, MA, 1995), xviii.

As Smith's work does not belong to one specific category or school, I have chosen to frame it in terms of her personal experiences and interactions. While her work does respond to many art movements of the day, it cannot be encompassed within these narratives alone, as stylistic approaches perpetuate an ideological practice that feminist art historical discourse rejects. To gain a more comprehensive perception of the issues implicit in her work, one must deconstruct the sociological implications of her career as a woman and the meaning of her work as an ideological practice.

To effectively conduct such a study I have drawn upon theory from several disciplines. As Baert and Borsa both lean heavily on a strategy that creates links among Canadian art history, Women's Studies and Canadian Studies, I have adapted their methodology to analyze certain facets of Smith's work, thereby establishing a productive context from which to view her work. The most interesting facets of Smith's work are the context out of which it evolves and how her life and work straddle both linguistic communities of Quebec. As Smith was an early integrationist with very progressive values, it has been important throughout this study to refer to biographical material so as to establish a geographical, social and psychological context for her work.

How and where does Jori Smith fit into Canadian art historical scholarship? Despite her participation in the early twentieth-century modernist movement in Canada she eludes classification as a modernist. While she

practised certain fundamentals of modernism, her exploration of the avant-garde only goes so far, and in fact, it does not evolve into abstraction as it did for many other artists who like Smith were members of the Contemporary Arts Society during the 30s. It is interesting to note that she fades from the limelight in the 1950s, a time when she did not feel that she was producing art that was relevant, current or avant-garde.

In an article about a solo show at the Kastel Gallery in 1976 that put Smith back in the public eye, writer Shirley Raphael states that “Artist Smith disappeared from the scene those years ago because she was discouraged, she explained during a chance meeting at the gallery. She felt she wasn’t producing abstract work, and that this was what was emerging - and that there was a definite lack of interest in her work.”¹³ Her work during the 1930s, however, was certainly in the category of what was then regarded as modernist and she was engaged in the avant-garde explorations of that decade.

In Montreal in the 1930s the interest in the figure was regarded by some as a means of expressing socialist ideals during the Depression era. There was a lot of concern as to which direction art would take after the dissolution of the Group of Seven. In a famous series of newspaper articles, three prescriptive views on the future directions of art were presented. One approved the path set by the Group of Seven, another promoted art for art’s sake while a third socialist

¹³Shirley Raphael, *The Gazette* (Montreal) 2 April 1976, 40.

point of view was brought forward, asking artists to concern themselves with the condition of their fellow humans. This particular view, a widely felt sentiment in the 30s, contributed to the liberation and popularization of figural work.

Jori Smith was a strong socialist. She briefly worked for the League of Social Reconstruction, was very involved during the early campaigns of the New Democratic Party, and has always closely followed world events involving herself where she felt she could be of use.¹⁴ In discussion with Charles C. Hill she stated, in reference to the Spanish Civil War, "Oh we were emotionally terribly upset. We lived on the radio. We read the newspapers. For years we kept boxes and boxes of cuttings from newspapers. It was the most moving experience of our lives. It was so terrible, so awful. The history of it today when you read it is heartbreaking, but to have lived through it was more heartbreaking."¹⁵ As a result of these views, Smith not only used figural painting as a means of experimenting with new stylistic conventions, but more importantly found a way of constructing and discovering identities: her own, and those of the individuals in the communities where she lived.

This thesis is composed of three chapters. The first will critically analyze the art of the 1930s in Montreal paying specific attention to the role of portraiture and the status of the landscape, how women impacted the development of a modern style and the importance of John Lyman's artistic as well as

¹⁴Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 2 January 2003.

¹⁵Jori Smith, interviewed by Charles Hill, National Gallery of Canada Archives, 16 January 1974, 35-36.

organizational contributions. In this context, the term modernism will have to be examined and Smith's disposition towards contemporary developments analyzed. Also, I will review how that period has been recorded and how art historical terms have characterized this era as one in which the art community was in crisis. Sandwiched between the Group of Seven and the Automatistes, the art of the 1930s and early 1940s was long neglected by academic scholarship. We cannot deny, however, the importance of the 1930s in the context of its own time and must begin to look at it not necessarily as a period of transition, but as an entity in and of itself, during which different ideas, with an integrity of their own, competed to articulate a new Canadian reality.

The second chapter will look at Jori Smith's work in the Charlevoix region. In this chapter I will use Hal Foster's essay on the artist as ethnographer to demonstrate how Smith was able to document culture beyond her position as an artist. I will also rely upon James Clifford's *Predicament of Culture*, but will explore other ways of looking at Smith's work, through a more contemporary lens. To highlight Smith's uniqueness, she will be compared to André Bieler whose work was similar to Smith's, but without the vantage point Smith had upon her subject matter. In this context Smith's written account of her years in the Charlevoix region of Quebec is not only a valuable historical record, but a document of a culture in the throes of urbanization. Her extended stay in the area can be viewed as a strategy that anticipates the more recent trend toward

community art, as her lengthy residency and relationships with the community she inhabited helped to shape her artistic production.

The final chapter will provide a more introspective look at the artist's own motivation in choosing subject matter. It is my contention that Smith's early negative family experiences, namely her relationship with her mother and her younger sister's death, caused her to use portraiture to explore and develop her own identity. In this chapter, I have applied psychoanalytic theory to the life and work of the artist in order to explain her continual return to child portraiture. In order to support my theory that the artist's representations of little girls are, among other things, representations of her own developmental experiences.

My intention is to provide not simply a chronological account of Smith's participation in the Quebec art community during the 30s and 40s, but to show how her approach to and use of portraiture became a tool to develop her own identity, and further, how the disparate elements of her lengthy career need an interdisciplinary framework in order to fully contextualize, expose and analyze the importance of her work.

Chapter 1 - “Form to form, and ... color to color”

Jori Smith was, without a doubt, one of the most prolific female artists of her time. From the age of fifteen Smith's singularity was evident. She was expelled from High School because of a critical essay she wrote about its pedagogy. Rather than have his daughter humiliated by apologizing to the school officials, her father Jimmy Smith decided to encourage his daughter's longstanding interest in art and enrolled her in art school. Smith began her art education at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM), later known as the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Her experience at the AAM was cut short as financial difficulty closed the school; however, for the few months she was there, she studied under Randolph Hewton and made the acquaintance of Prudence Heward and Anne Savage, who were there to study from the live model. As Smith later reported “Miss Heward went out of her way to be kind and encouraging to me, pathetic young creature as I must have appeared to her.”¹ When the school closed Smith was given a \$50 first place award. Impressed by his daughter's early success, Smith's father decided that she should continue her education at the École des Beaux Arts (EBA) where she immediately entered the Classe Supérieure de la Peinture. Having received numerous awards from the EBA and having been publicly recognized by the local newspapers during her education, she entered

¹Jori Smith, Autobiographical Sketch, February 1987, MG30 D249 vol.19, Library and Archives of Canada, 6.

the professional art scene with acclaim and an institutional reward under her belt.

While Smith would soon fervently reject her academic training, she nonetheless emerged from school as one of the top pupils in her class. *La Presse* art critic Albert Laberge wrote:

Il convient de citer particulièrement une académie d'homme qui a été superbement réussie par nombre d'élèves dont trois: Léopold Dufresne, Frank Iacurto et Marjorie Smith sont arrivés égaux pour la première place. Signalons aussi une étude de femme, vue de dos, à la robe de chambre rose, tombant des épaules, étude signée Smith et enlevée avec une étonnante maestria ...Cet peinture a été achetée par l'hon. Athanase David.²

We must particularly cite an academy of men that was superbly represented by three students: Leopold Dufresne, Frank Iacurto and Marjorie Smith have tied for first place. We must also point out a study of a woman, seen from behind, with a pink housecoat falling off her shoulders, a study that is signed Smith executed with a stunning *maestria* ...This painting has been purchased by the Hon. Athanase David. (My translation)

Commonly described as a portrait painter, Smith's first love was the nude.

While during her career she painted many small landscapes, she invariably returned both to the nude and the portrait as her preferred genres. While figure studies were commonplace in academic education, her interest in the portrait became evident early in her career while studying at the EBA. To be more specific, during her five year stay at the school, she began her lifelong interest in children's portraits, the last human subject to be academically recognized within

²Albert Laberge, "Les travaux des élèves de l'Ecole des Beaux Arts," *La Presse* (Montreal), 3 June 1926.

the genre of portraiture:³

Dans la section de la peinture, notre admiration va toute entière aux toiles de Marjorie Smith qui expose une série d'études d'un rare mérite. C'est sûrement elle qui exécute le plus beau nu de l'exposition, une étude de jeune femme drapée de vert à la ceinture. C'est là un morceau de simplicité classique, d'une ligne harmonieuse, d'un modelé parfait et d'un très joli ton. C'est une oeuvre fortement dessinée et qui a été admirée par tous les visiteurs. Mlle Smith en outre une couple de têtes de jeunes filles très expressives, une frappante et gracieuse étude de jeune fille en rouge qui est superbe dessin au fusain.⁴

In the painting section, our admiration goes entirely to the canvases of Marjorie Smith who is showing a series of studies of rare caliber. It is surely she who has executed the most beautiful nude in the exhibition, a study of a young woman draped in green at the waist. It is a piece of classic simplicity, with a harmonious line, perfect modeling and lovely tone. It is a strongly drawn work and has been admired by all the visitors. Miss Smith is also showing a couple of very expressive heads of young girls, a striking and gracious charcoal study of a young girl in red. (My translation)

While Smith later rejected her academic training referring to it as five years “spent in Rip Van Winkle sleep,”⁵ her stay at the EBA was not in vain. Not only did she prove herself a skilled artist, but she made very important and lasting connections and friendships. Among those whom she befriended while at the EBA were a number of artists who eventually found themselves at the core of the burgeoning modernist movement in Montreal: artists such as Jean-Paul

³Max J. Friedlander, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 237.

⁴Laberge.

⁵Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 2 January 2003.

Lemieux who was her closest friend, Emma Colle, Madeleine Desrosiers, Marian Dale (later Marian Dale Scott), Goodridge Roberts, Philip Surrey, Stanley Cosgrove and Jean Palardy, whom she married at the age of 23.⁶

In 1928 she left the EBA and with some money given to her by her grandmother she and Lemieux went to the Charlevoix region along the lower north shore of the St-Lawrence. She had always had a fond admiration for the French modernist style but emerging from a classical training it would be a couple of years before she was able to shed some of the techniques and habits she had acquired during her five years at the EBA. "How hard it was to get over that dreadful academic training, how it bound us and shut us down, compressed us, put us in chains really, from which we had to tear ourselves in order to find some way of expressing ourselves. Freely."⁷

A handful of the young students graduating from the school at the time clearly felt the need to reject some of their training. However, bound by the shackles of classical art training they were unable to follow through with their desires for quite some time. "We were a nice crowd. Young rebels. We didn't know how to rebel really though."⁸ And it wasn't until artist John Lyman returned from Europe that they were able to see and feel the effects of this need take

⁶Ibid.

⁷Jori Smith, interviewed by Charles Hill, 16 January 1974, National Gallery of Canada Archives, 2.

⁸Ibid.

shape.

After her stay at the EBA, Smith married Palardy and the couple lived hand-to-mouth between town and country. For the earlier half of the thirties the couple spent a great deal of time in Charlevoix painting and hunting for old Quebecois antiques.⁹ As they were unable to support themselves in the city, they lived very cheaply in the country and were able to continue painting. Had they remained in the city they would have been forced into unfamiliar odd jobs in order to stave off utter destitution. They weren't wealthy and at times were very hard up. "Everybody was poor, but nobody was as poor as we were, to the point where we were often without food ... We lived on \$2.00 a week. Fortunately we had wonderful friends who were worried about us. Like the Scotts. I don't know how many times we had dinner there."¹⁰ With \$2.00 a week they were able to paint, just about keep body and soul together, and save up enough money to move to the country where they could paint.

When Smith graduated from the EBA in 1928 she and her peers found themselves in a precarious position, caught between Quebec regionalism and the Group of Seven. The education of the EBA was still a classical art training and students were not encouraged to experiment with contemporary trends. While there were no organized forums for the younger generation of artists to

⁹Jean Palardy, *Les Meubles anciens du Canada français* (Montreal, Cercle du Livre de France, 1971).

¹⁰Hill, 15-16.

discuss their work, they had get-togethers that served the same purpose.

The Inter-War Years

Smith is now recognized chiefly for her work in the thirties despite the fact that she went on to paint for another seventy years. Perhaps one of the reasons behind her obscurity in later scholarship is the fact that the decade of the thirties itself was neglected as a period of study until quite recently.

One of the key weaknesses in canonical art historical scholarship is its ineffectiveness when there is no clear school or group to which to attach a name. Where no terminology exists, the measure of a creative art historian may be an ability to fill in the gaps and create an illuminating theoretical framework. This lacuna in art historical scholarship becomes apparent in any study of the thirties in Canada. Sandwiched between the Group of Seven and the Automatists, it has often been regarded as a period of confusion, lacking direction and without a clear agenda.

If anything, it is these periods in between that are even more interesting. Once a dominant school is established and an agenda set forth it almost becomes a comfortable elitist endeavour. Without the comfort of renown and purpose, artists must negotiate and renegotiate their way, taking nothing for granted in their search for professional recognition. According to John Lyman, founder and president of the Contemporary Arts Society (CAS), the thirties were

a period when serious changes took place in the Canadian artistic community and individual artists had to work without the comfort of a stable ethos. Alluding to the ascendancy of the Group of Seven in the 1920s and his own perception of art after a lengthy exile in Europe, he wrote: "The talk of the Canadian scene has gone sour. The real Canadian scene is in the consciousness of Canadian painters, whatever the object of their thought."¹¹

A review of newspaper articles from the period indicates that contemporaries viewed this period as a time of instability and disorientation that had set back the "progress" of Canadian art. Writing in 1938 Graham McInnes, a well known critic and writer, remarked that "There is a widespread opinion among those who take an interest in the development of Canadian art that for the last five years it has been languishing in the doldrums ... There is no lack of activity, but there appears to be a serious lack of direction."¹²

A review of how the period has been recorded in scholarship from the 1920s on affirms the view that the inter-war years were seen as a time of shifting tendencies and conflicting views. In the opening lines of his 1975 catalogue entitled *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, Charles C. Hill states:

The thirties in Canada lack a definite image in the history of Canadian art. While the twenties are dominated by the Group of Seven and the forties by the explosive development of the

¹¹ John Lyman, "The Montrealer," (February 1938).

¹² Graham C. McInnes, "Canadian Art," *Queen's Quarterly* 45, 2(1938): 239.

Automatistes, the thirties only raise the names of a few isolated artists. In fact when the exhibition [of Canadian art in the 1930s] was first considered, it was felt to be an arbitrary chronological imposition on actual artistic developments.¹³

Hill goes on to specify that his research yielded “certain characteristics” that were “reaffirmations of earlier trends and the beginnings of other developments that were to find their fruition in the next decade.”¹⁴ It is important to note that this climate of uncertainty is identified both in the immediate reactions of the critics during the thirties and repeated in a work that undertakes to document the period in hindsight.

Esther Trépanier’s *Peinture et Modernité au Québec 1919-1939* of 1998 and Charles C. Hill’s catalogue for the 1975 National Gallery of Canada exhibition *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* both acknowledge the difficulty in describing the thirties as a period, but go on to break it down both thematically and chronologically. This two-sided approach not only gives us a well-rounded idea of the direction of art, but helps to create a sense of what was considered “modern” in the thirties and how the social climate helped to determine the direction of those initiatives.

The twenties in central Canada saw two dominant painting schools. Inspired by Impressionism and its subsequent developments, Quebec artists like

¹³Charles C. Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 11.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

James Wilson Morrice, Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté, and Maurice Cullen experimented with complementary colors and atmospheric effects while painting the Quebec countryside. In Toronto by 1920, the Group of Seven was poised to find a place in Canadian art with a made-in-Canada painting style, that nevertheless owed much to Art Nouveau and Scandinavian influences. While their influence and popularity were strongly felt throughout English Canada, their ascendancy was not accepted in Quebec to the same degree because of a different cultural emphasis.

The question of nationalism in art had been an issue of importance in Quebec long before the establishment of the Group. The significant difference was what form this ideological underpinning would take, as the concept of “nation” was radically different for the Quebec regionalists as opposed to the Group of Seven:

Au Québec francophone, en effet, la question du nationalisme et du régionalisme en art, de ses bienfaits comme de ses méfaits, celle de la constitution d'un milieu “national” de l'art étaient déjà à l'ordre du jour bien avant la fondation du group ontarien. On ne perçoit donc pas le nationalisme du Groupe de Sept comme “novateur”, d'autant plus que l'imaginaire visuel que le Groupe des Sept incarnait sous le concept de “nation” ne correspondait pas véritablement à celui des Canadiens français.¹⁵

In effect, with its downfalls as well as its successes, the question of nationalism, regionalism and the construction of a “national” milieu in art had, in francophone Quebec, already been on the agenda prior to the foundation of the Group of Seven. The

¹⁵Trépanier, 33-34.

nationalism of the Group of Seven is and was, therefore, not seen as innovative just as the imaginary visual that the Group incarnated under the concept of nation didn't really correspond to that of the French Canadians. (My translation)

The newspapers in the thirties make clear that there was a lot of confusion as the Group of Seven announced its dissolution. What direction would Canadian art take? If artists and critics were confused, then the audience was even more so, as stylistic trends began to breed a visual language foreign to Canadian audiences. While the Group of Seven and the Quebec regionalists adapted techniques that had been used by the French and English modernists of the later nineteenth century, their subject matter was so attuned to the notion of a national style that Canadian audiences gradually developed a sustained engagement with their work and writers like Fred Housser mythologized their centrality in the development of a truly Canadian School.

The idea that the art of the Group of Seven represented a national style was highly controversial in Quebec, however, because their vision was seen as pre-cultural.¹⁶ The Group's tendency to ignore the figure was, even before the Depression, highly criticized. The fear that Canadian art would go the same way as that of Europe towards abstraction was felt and the lack of understanding

¹⁶ Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Painting in the Thirties in Quebec," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 3(Fall 1976):20, states that there was a blatant effort to either completely ignore the cultural landscapes or sublimate them to the geographical setting. Often painters had to ignore the presence of culture in the Quebec landscape to contrive work that met their ideal. For a more recent reference on this topic see Esther Trépanier, "The Expression of a Difference: The Milieu of Quebec Art and the Group of Seven." *The True North, Canadian Landscape Painting 1896 - 1939* (London, Lund Humphries, 1991).

between audience and artist increased.¹⁷ As the American critic, Howard Wilson, wrote in 1935:

In former days [the artist] found it extremely difficult to represent, in a still life, the symmetry of a vase and its aerial perspective. Not so nowadays - no symmetry is required anyway, and not being sure what aerial perspective is, he quite rightly leaves it out. But, by doing so, his mentors tell him that he is getting the vaseness of the vase ... The amount of muck that is sold in New York alone is staggering. Many fear that this horrid disease will infect this country. I doubt it. That which many mistake for the first symptoms of fever is merely adenoids; perhaps not even that - just girlish naughtiness.¹⁸

It wasn't simply a case of adenoids or girlish naughtiness. With the migration of artists from Paris to New York to escape World War II, the United States was soon touched by the fever of modernism. Howard Wilson's article condemning modern art is evidence of a public resistance to early modern forms in the United States, an attitude also typical of Canada in the 1930s.

In Canada the early twentieth-century experience according to the well-travelled American critic Jehanne Bietry Salinger (mother of Presidential Press Secretary Pierre Salinger), who then resided in Canada, consisted of "those who gradually came under the influence of the Seven, some for better, others for worse; and those who went on painting Barbizon, Dutch or Impressionist pictures

¹⁷While American art did influence the course of Canadian art it is important to note that despite the Armory Show in 1913, an exhibit that showcased European modern art, Americans were interested chiefly in regionalism until WWII brought expatriates from Paris to New York.

¹⁸Howard Wilson, "Why do they Paint?" *The Curtain Call*. (Dec. 1935): 13

or weak imitations of Royal Academy paintings.”¹⁹ While this characterization oversimplifies the issue, it demonstrates what some critics and the public at large thought significant. By the 1940s, seven years after the publication of Salinger’s article, it was clear that artists could be divided according to their national or international affinities, one group working in a regional genre seeking conscious nationalism and the other opposed to it.²⁰

In a 1943 article entitled *What’s Wrong with Canadian Art?*, Barker Fairley stated that the problem was no longer a lack of artist groups, but a lack of momentum.²¹ While this is easily contested, he goes on to explain that the Group of Seven liberated the landscape, but also created an atmosphere in which other artists felt that there was nothing left to do. Fairley points to a general perception in the artistic community that alternative genres needed to be set free.²² “It’s the human subject, the human face, the human figure, whether alone or in groups or in crowds, in town and country, in war and peace, in life and death, that is the real central subject of art, as it is of poetry.”²³ The shift to figural subjects during the thirties gradually displaced landscape and set in

¹⁹Johanne Bietry Salinger, “Comment on Art” *The Canadian Forum* 11(January 1932):142-143.

²⁰Walter Abell, “Canadian Aspirations in Painting” *Culture* 3 (June 1942): 170. While I have further simplified the division of artists into categories these categories can be further deconstructed and split into smaller groups that worked along different ideological veins but toward either a national or international influences.

²¹Barker Fairley, “What’s Wrong with Canadian Art?,” *Canadian Art* 6, no.1, (autumn 1948):25

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

motion an acceptance of new genres that included cultural representations as equally important for artists in Canada.

While there was a tendency to be either national or international in one's source of inspiration, the reality in Quebec was that the development of a national style implied a specifically Québécois national style. At the EBA in Montreal, a campaign in support of Quebec regionalism was spearheaded by principal Charles Maillard and this remained a sacrosanct subject as more and more graduates from the school, including Smith and her close friends, rejected this notion as it ideologically aligned itself, whether consciously or not, to the aims of the past:²⁴

Si le paysage avait aussi constitué au Québec, par exemple, ou en Ontario, les bases d'un art régional (qui dans ces deux cas précis prétendaient également, pour des raisons diverses, avoir le statut d'art "national"), il n'en demeure pas moins que la lutte contre le régionalisme et le nationalisme en art s'était amorcée dès les années vingt et trente au Québec (un peu plus tard en Ontario) et que les questionnements formels propres à la démarche moderne avaient déjà, à l'aube des années quarante, modifié considérablement la pratique artistique, particulièrement au Québec.²⁵

If the landscape had constituted, in Quebec and Ontario, the basis of a regional art (which in both of these specific cases pretended, although for different reasons, to have the status of "national" art) it is of no lesser consequence that the struggle against regionalism and nationalism in art had, in Quebec, begun in the twenties and thirties(a little later in Ontario) and that formal questions about the

²⁴Fr. Couturier, "Reponse a M. Maillard," *Le Devoir* (Montreal) Wednesday 28 May, 1941.

²⁵Esther Trépanier, "Les Solitudes Canadiennes - réflexions a partir de quelques publications recentes," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 16, 2 (1995): 77-87.

proceedings of modernism had, by the beginning of the forties considerably modified artistic practice, particularly in Quebec. (My translation)

While both groups, the academies and the Group of Seven, were attacked by many in the artistic community for their emphasis on national style, the points of dispute differed greatly, so the rejections of both ideologies need to be examined separately.

Clearly the rejection of the Group of Seven owed a lot more to the social climate in the thirties than the rejection of the academies did. The Group was criticized for not being concerned with the condition of humanity at a time when economic instability was a harsh reality. The debate surrounding the academies was later and very public. In fact it found its way into local newspapers. Maillard, the director of the EBA in Montreal, firmly believed that a school must be Canadian through and through as the graduating students would have to find gainful employment in Canada:

L'École des Beaux Arts doit être essentiellement canadienne, car ses élèves sont appelés à faire leur vie dans leur pays au milieu des leurs...Pour prouver que c'est l'intention de l'école de donner à ses élèves l'enseignement le plus complet possible et en même temps leur fournir les moyens de s'établir, a ajouté M.Maillard, à partir de la semaine prochaine on y fera du vitrail d'art, afin qu'une fois sortis de l'école ils ne soient pas relégués au dernier plan, dans les ateliers de vitraux, où les ouvriers syndiqués font un tout petit accueil aux diplômés des beaux arts.²⁶

The School of Fine Arts must essentially be Canadian as its students are called to make their living in their country amongst their own. To prove that it is the intention of the school to give its

²⁶Charles Maillard, "Notre école des beaux arts doit être canadienne," *La Presse* (Montreal), 5 May 1930.

students the most complete education and at the same time provide them with the tools to establish themselves, added M.Maillard, starting next week we will study the art of stained glass, so that once graduated they aren't relegated to the last rung, in stained glass studios the unionized workers will make a small welcome to the graduates of Fine Arts. (My translation)

Along with traditional teaching techniques, there was an attempt to raise traditional Québécois crafts to a professional level.²⁷

While the artists in Montreal had openly rejected the training of the academies as early as 1930, the public critique of this ideology came with Père Couturier's 1941 newspaper article, which observed that the old techniques were failing and that new methods needed to be implemented in order to keep up with the shifting tendencies in modern art:²⁸

nous avons cessé de déplorer les méthodes d'enseignement de ces "Écoles" et qu'il nous a fallu des années pour nous en dégager, pour en oublier les formules et les habitudes, pour nous en désintoxiquer ... Nous voulons simplement rappeler que les vrais maîtres de l'art contemporain ont tous été étrangers à ces milieux-là et qu'il n'y a donc rien de sérieux à en attendre ici, si l'ont continue à être fidèle à un esprit et à des méthodes qui on fait faillite partout ailleurs.²⁹

We have ceased to deplore the teaching methods of these "schools" as it has taken us years to distance ourselves, to forget the formulas and habits, to disintoxicate ourselves ... We simply want to remind that the real masters of contemporary art have all been foreign to those environments and that there is, consequently, nothing serious to wait for here, if we continue to be faithful to the spirit and the methods that have failed everywhere else. (My

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Going to briefly outline Pere Marie Allain Couturier's role

²⁹ Fr. Couturier

translation)

And so it was within a spirit of rebellion that the modernist movement grew in Montreal, fighting the overtly self-conscious nationalism of the art scene and the academies in Quebec.

John Lyman's return from Europe was most fortuitous for the young artists of Montreal. Lyman, a Quebec painter himself, believed that, because of the overwhelming popularity and focus upon the Group of Seven and the dominance of the landscape in Quebec painting, younger artists needed an established forum and context in which to discuss their work. He acted as a senior advisory artist holding unofficial salon style meetings in his studio at the top of Linton Street.³⁰ Smith was always actively involved in the art community and within a month of Lyman's return from Europe, the two met and instantly developed a close friendship. In 1938 she was the only woman member of the Eastern Group of Painters founded by Lyman. It was not an ideological group, but rather a grouping of artists with similar interests, "just painters who sympathized with each other, and liked each other's work."³¹

Then in 1939 during a January meeting in Lyman's apartment the Contemporary Art Society was founded.³² Again Smith was one of the few

³⁰Hill, 12.

³¹Hill, 21.

³²*The Contemporary Arts Society, Montreal 1939-1948*, Christopher Varley, ed., (Edmonton, Art Gallery, 1980), 12.

founding members who were female. Following a British model, Lyman felt that there was a need for a forum in which issues surrounding art could be discussed: “We badly need in Canada something in the nature of a contemporary arts society which would give encouragement to artists who have not the material advantages of regimentation.”³³ The CAS was important for a number of reasons: it organized disparate artistic forces in the community forcing artists out of their relative isolation, it made a deliberate attempt to bridge both linguistic communities and finally the CAS encouraged public involvement through an emphasis on public education and a membership not restricted solely to artists.

The creation of the CAS in 1939 responded to the needs of the artistic community in Montreal and brought their concerns to the attention of the public. By giving artists a recognized organization to which to subscribe and a forum in which to develop their ideas, the CAS not only connected artistic practice with intellectual interchange, but politicized the modern movement, breaking new ideological ground and paving the way for pure abstraction.

While there were groups of individuals meeting on a regular basis to discuss their work, it was not until Lyman’s return to Canada from France that these groups took shape and became officially and publicly visible. Much is owed to John Lyman, both as an artist and as a critic. A contemporary of the Group of Seven, he brought artists out of their ideological and physical isolation

³³Ibid.

and gave them a forum in which to express their concerns.

A close friend of Jori Smith's, Lyman was also an associate of James Wilson Morrice, and had studied with their mutual colleague Matisse prior to returning to Canada.³⁴ While he originally left Canada because his work was so poorly received, during his self-exile Lyman's concerns lay chiefly in the manner of painting, rather than in the subject matter depicted. He is often quoted as having underlined the relationships of "form to form, and of colour to colour."³⁵ He did not believe in the iconoclastic tradition-breaking side of modernism, but he felt that the recognition given to the Group of Seven ultimately had had a repressive effect on the art scene.³⁶ Lyman's contribution to art criticism published in the pages of *The Montrealer* helped to foster a climate sympathetic to the goals of the young and upcoming generation of artists in Canada.

While Lyman was a talented artist himself, his chief contributions to Canadian art history were organizational in nature. He briefly opened a school of his own, held informal salons for both French and English artists during a time when the two communities rarely met, was the founder of the Eastern Group of Painters in 1938 and, last but certainly not least, was the founder of the

³⁴Lyman had left Canada twice because his work was so poorly received.

³⁵*The Contemporary Arts Society*, 8.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 6. See also Louise Déry, "L'influence de la critique d'art de John Lyman dans le milieu artistique québécois, de 1936 à 1942" (Laval, Université Laval, MA, 1982), Louise Dompierre, *John Lyman 1886-1967*, (Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1986).

Contemporary Arts Society in 1939.³⁷

Lyman had returned to Canada for a second time at a very crucial point. Interest in French modernism was growing among younger artists in Quebec and his experience was invaluable because his was a voice of sympathy rallying artists interested in exploring modern art.

Modernism

As modernism is a fluid term that denotes a wide range of different issues, I have selected Esther Trépanier's definition of modernism as a starting point from which to explore this era in Canada. In the introduction to her book *Peinture et modernité au Québec 1919-1939*, Trépanier defines modernism as:

Un processus historique qui renvoie au-delà des phénomènes de la mode, de la succession des "ismes", aux nouveaux paradigmes dans le champ du savoir. Au-delà de l'idéologie du progrès qui est une des premières manifestations de la modernité, la compréhension de ce processus de la modernité doit aussi s'inscrire dans le cadre des transformations structurelles profondes qui affectent, avec le champ social, celui de la connaissance et de la culture.³⁸

A historical process that goes beyond the phenomena of style, the succession of "isms," to the new paradigms in the field of knowledge. Above and beyond the ideology of progress which is one of the first manifestations of modernity, the understanding of the process of modernity must also inscribe itself in the framework of profound structural transformations that affect, along with the social field, the field of knowledge and culture. (My translation)

³⁷Ibid., 12.

³⁸ Esther Trépanier, *Peinture et Modernité au Québec 1919-1939*, Québec: Éditions Nota bene, 1998.

By the 1870s, interest in the French Academies had become intense in Canada and artists began crossing the Atlantic for artistic training and apprenticeships with french modern artists. It was the influence of these academically trained artists that helped to initiate new ideas in Canada though it would be another thirty years before their ideas gained momentum among art students trained by this first generation of academics like William Brymner and Robert Harris.

The 1920s were without doubt a decade in which the foundation for the later modern movement was laid. At the time the work of the Group of Seven, as well as the work of the Quebec regionalists, was discussed by the critics as being modern. This is no surprise as the art was different from that which had preceded it. Hence the critics of the day applied the terminology of modernism to describe its novelty. By the thirties, however, the linear progressive paradigm of modernism decreed that the work of the twenties was passé. The dominant landscape idiom and its nationalist mythology had become an ideological academy that began to establish itself as a tradition:

En effet, le nationalisme en art a fini par peser ici d'un poid qui est celui de l'académie et de la tradition!³⁹

In effect, nationalism in art finished by having the same weight as the academy and tradition. (My translation)

Canadian modernism or the aesthetic of art for art's sake came to the fore as a movement distinct from nationalism based in landscape or regionalism, and

³⁹Ibid., 34.

gained impetus in the forties paving the way for abstraction. As Esther Trépanier observes:

Cette période fut celle des combats contre l'académisme et le nationalisme étroit, mais aussi celle des luttes émancipatrices livrées par une minorité agissante de critiques et de peintres au nom de la liberté de l'expression artistique.⁴⁰

This was a period of struggle against academicism and nationalism but also a period of emancipating debates generated by a minority of critics and painters in the name of the freedom of artistic expression. (My translation)

The advent of new ideas in Quebec and Canada during the thirties was not only stylistic, but ideological. The shift away from landscape subject matter, as well as the rejection of conservative teaching in the academies of Montreal and Quebec, was accompanied by a desire on the part of artists like Paraskeva Clark, Marion Scott and Alexander Bercowitch to create art that was more socially responsible. They sought to represent life as it was experienced by the average Canadian. As there is no clear break from one practice to the next, details of this change are predicated heavily upon the social climate of the inter-war years and the determination of a handful of individuals intent on establishing what they saw as a modern tradition for Canadian painters. In fact the roles of art and artist were on the negotiating table with claims to ascendancy being asserted by several groups and individuals.

Role of the Artist

⁴⁰Esther Trépanier, *Peinture et Modernité au Québec 1919-1939*, 10.

While the idea of the international art movement had begun to divide the Canadian artistic community in the 1930s, the chief social concern during those years lay in the role of the artist and the function of art. In a famous series of articles, Bertram Brooker, Elizabeth Wyn Wood and Paraskeva Clark put forth three different views on what art should be. While Brooker heralded the post-war ascendancy of art for art's sake, Clark with her background of post-Revolutionary Russian art and artists was vehement about the social and individual realities, while Wyn Wood articulated the nationalist approach to subject matter that had dominated the 1920s.⁴¹

With the economic crisis of 1929 the market for art waned.⁴² The inspiration for many Canadian artists of the time came from work produced south of the border, which paradoxically was rampantly regionalist in flavour. While some were not taken with Clark's ideas, because they felt that socially engaged art ran the risk of seeming propagandistic, others believed that there was no more honorable a cause for art than the human condition. In Clark's words:

Paint the raw sappy life that moves ceaselessly about you, paint portraits of your own Canadian leaders, depict happy dreams for your Canadian souls. But if you cannot do all this, for it is a new and difficult problem, at least have the grace to refrain from being scornful of those who do, those who are saying necessary things, and proving of immense value to their time. Think of yourself as a human being, and you cannot help feeling the reality of life around

⁴¹*Visions and Victories: 10 Canadian Women Artists 1914-1945*, Natalie Luckyj ed. (London: London Regional Art Gallery, 1983), 17.

⁴²Paraskeva Clark, "Come out from Behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield," *New Frontier*, 1, 12 (1937): 16-17; Elizabeth Wyn Wood, "Art and the Pre-Cambrian Shield," *The Canadian Forum*, (Feb 1937): 13-15.

you, and becoming impregnated with it.⁴³

This need to visually elaborate upon the expressions of humanity found its resolution in the resurgence of the figurative genre.

The Human Figure

The urbanization of the thirties, led to an interest in city values and problems.⁴⁴

At the same time the issue of social class was a vital component because the privations of the Depression era generated a debate about social and economic conditions. Similarly the controversy between Elizabeth Wyn Wood and Paraskeva Clark was one having to do with different backgrounds and different values. The whole enterprise of art was being debated, as was the position of the artist and the role of art in society because of the depressed economy of the inter-war years. Social and political issues and large ideological differences that had dominated the post-revolutionary period in Russia again assumed importance with the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, and the Spanish Civil War, itself a prelude to the Second World War. In such a context, the human figure became the new subject of artistic investigation, just as landscape had been for the Group of Seven. The human figure and themes of daily life emerged as the latest subject of artistic undertakings. The social

⁴³Paraskeva Clark, "Thoughts on Canadian Painting," *World Affairs* 8, 6 (February 1943):1.

⁴⁴Marielle Aylen, *Interfaces of the Portrait: Liminality and Dialogism in Canadian Women's Portraiture Between the Wars*. Ottawa: Carleton University, MA, 1996: 2.

climate had created an atmosphere in which figural work was liberated and legitimized and figure painters were able to use their genre to articulate larger sociological concerns, such as the human condition and the distress of the socio-political situation.

Female Artists in the Inter-war Years

Female artists in the 1930s in Canada faced several challenges. Brought up at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were raised by mid to late Victorian women whose ideals certainly did not include having bohemian, artistic daughters. Before attempting to make waves upon the art scene, women had to negotiate the duality of being a “proper lady” and being an artist. Those characteristics tied to creativity had previously been labeled as masculine and so the real challenge was to establish careers that would not necessarily offend social convention, but allow access and acceptance in a field dominated by men.

Women played a very important role in the development of modern art in Canada. Not only was there an unsurpassed number of women practising professionally in the 1930s, but their voices were heard loud and clear in art criticism. They did not restrict themselves solely to the production of art, but made it their responsibility to affect the direction that modern art would take. As mentioned earlier, the heated debate between Clark and Wyn Wood is a key example of how women actively verbalized the ideological concerns of the inter-war period.

A commonly asked question to which there seems no clear-cut answer is, “under what conditions did women find it possible to take on professional careers as artists?” Was it stubbornness and hardheadedness, a network of supportive family and colleagues, or was each woman an anomaly with specific conditions that allowed for her to become a professional artist? While a definitive answer would essentialize the problem, it is clear that men could move with relative freedom between the public world and private sphere in order to create themselves professionally, whereas women had to face certain social barriers in order to acquire any degree of recognition at the outset of the twentieth century.

Prior to Smith’s emergence as a professional artist, the women of the Beaver Hall group had studied in Montreal between 1920 and 1924. They have been described as a non-partisan group of pioneers in the modernist figurative tradition of Canada.⁴⁵ Unlike their contemporaries, the Group of Seven, who had positioned themselves to support a nationalist ideology, the women and men of the Beaver Hall group banded together out of “friendship and economic necessity.”⁴⁶ As stated by Edwin Holgate:

We had no officers...we had no manifesto, we had nobody to do battle with, the battle had pretty well been won by the Group of Seven for their ideas, and ours were quite similar attitudes, and the dust had all subsided. But it was a question of getting studios, working space, and keeping the prices down, because none of us was flush. And this was one way of cooperating, grouping together and taking over a house, instead of little bits of individual dribblets

⁴⁵Aylen, 172.

⁴⁶Ibid., 173.

here and there scattered around. And there was a certain cohesion that automatically develops in a case like that, when a number of people get working together. There's a bonhomie that spreads through the building.⁴⁷

While these artists were astute to create a supportive network, the generation that followed them saw even more individual women without this type of support gain public acclaim as serious professional artists. The evidence of this has not only found its way into contemporary art historical scholarship, but was widely evident in newspaper and journal articles of the period. In a 1933 article entitled "Femmes peintres dont l'art est virile," well known art critic Reynald observed:

On a toujours accoutumé de dire en argument à tort ou à raison contre les féministes outrancières, que la femme ne s'est pas taillé une place comparable à celle de l'homme dans le domaine des arts libéraux, la peinture par exemple. Mais l'argument, si argument il y a, n'a rien à voir chez nous, d'abord parce-que la grande peinture n'y existe pas trop, tout comme elle tend à subir des éclipses ailleurs, ensuite parce que, pour des raisons que nous n'entreprendrons pas d'approfondir ici, les artistes canadiennes révèlent des talents aussi fermes dans l'ensemble que ceux de nos peintre masculins.⁴⁸

We have always been accustomed to argue, for or against, the feminists, that women haven't carved a comparable place to men in the field of the liberal arts, painting for example. But the argument, if there is one, has no relevance here as "mannered" painting doesn't have a strong presence, just as it tends to suffer from eclipses elsewhere, further, and for reasons we cannot expound upon here, Canadian female artists reveal talents as strong as their male counterparts. (My translation)

Most importantly the inter-war years are pivotal in the active and very significant

⁴⁷Ibid. See also Francis K Smith, *Andre Bieler: An Artist's Life and Times*, (Toronto: Merritt Publishing, 1980), 71.

⁴⁸Reynald, "Femmes peintres don't l'art est virile," *La Presse* (Montreal), 10 February 1933.

participation of women in the new figural movement. Jori Smith was highly involved in this discourse, a contribution that retrospectively must be described, evaluated and recognized.

Chapter 2 - Artist in residence

While Jori Smith's best known body of work, as represented in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, consists of portraits of young children, an equally important aspect of her production is the work she produced in Charlevoix County; a body of work that depicts the social relations, customs and rituals of rural Quebec in the 1930s. These paintings, coupled with the book Smith wrote and published in 1998, *Charlevoix County*, offer fascinating glimpses of the rural culture of Quebec during a period of economic transition, when small farmers were being forced off their land into urban areas in search of work. Jori Smith firmly believes that one day her book will be used as a source of local Quebec history. And she is not far from the truth. While her book provides a detailed description of the customs, traditions and values of the small communities that lie along the lower north shore of the St-Lawrence, it also has wider connotations for Quebec and Canadian history, as the memoir of a sophisticated urban visual artist who witnessed a major transformation in rural Quebec. Jori Smith's paintings and memoirs were an articulate testament and can be viewed as unintentional ethnographic documents, offering a small but detailed portrait of one rural Quebec community.

Jori Smith's paintings from this period following the modernist view, would be understood as an instrument used by the artist to forge and discover her own identity. A postmodern gloss, however, would suggest that they record a socio-

cultural situation. To evaluate these debates and understand Smith's contribution to art in Canada, one has to closely examine the culture and the power relations that surrounded her.

There are several factors which make these works extremely valuable and plausible as ethnographic texts. At the outset Jori Smith never intended to create historically pertinent documents. Only in retrospect did she realize their value. While this is one factor that sets Smith apart from the traditional ethnographer, it is an interesting starting point as it clearly demonstrates that Smith's subject-position was one that never intended to record anthropological information for future purposes. She was an accidental ethnographer, an eye-witness with another mission, that of exploring and discovering her own identity.

To contextualise this argument I propose to use Hal Foster's article *The Artist as Ethnographer* to demonstrate the unintended ethnographic implications of her work. Furthermore, I will draw upon James Clifford's *Predicament of Culture* to show that while there are many similarities between traditional ethnographic work and what was produced by Smith, hers goes beyond that of the traditional ethnographer, yet has great ethnographic value. The latter field of study is bound up in interpretive texts that take on a certain authority, but Smith's paintings and book can also be regarded as valid texts. A comparison will be made between Smith and the ethnographer of the thirties, as well as with our understanding of ethnography today.

While at the EBA, Smith had met her future husband Jean Palardy, son of Québécois parents, who had been born in San Francisco and moved back to Quebec with his family at the age of eight. Their match was made by Québécois artist Jean-Paul Lemieux, who convinced Smith to spend some time in Chicoutimi, where he knew Palardy to be. At first the couple was determined not to marry; however, under the pressure of Mrs. Palardy the bohemian lifestyle was foregone.

As the Depression was not kind to artists, the couple decided to leave Montreal and move to the Charlevoix to avoid the high cost of living in the city. Palardy's growing interest in old Quebec furniture led them to scour pawn shops and old farmhouses in the area for bargains to be resold in the city for a small profit. Palardy had learnt how to read hallmarks and made a deal with Birks to sell second-hand silver.¹ During one of these trips in search of furniture and silver, they realized they could stay in rural Quebec for a very small amount of money. The couple made money in the city, then spent months at a time in Charlevoix.

For her part Smith subsisted on her artwork, making pastel portraits for \$10.00 apiece. After they had saved approximately \$140 each, the couple returned to Charlevoix, where they could live during the winter and spring.² The

¹Smith, personal interview with the author, 2 January 2003.

²Ibid.

couple stayed in farmhouses with families for \$2 a week, each, for rent and food. "Here everyone was poor, so our poverty went virtually unnoticed. In retrospect, it seems incredible that we were charged only \$4 per week for room and board - and this for the two of us. How on earth could these people have managed to make any profit at all from us? Yet they seemed delighted to have us with them, even grateful."³ Smith and Palardy lived this way for six years from 1930 to 1936, returning every now and then to the city to generate enough capital to live and paint.

During the thirties, it was common practice for artists to venture out to the Charlevoix region for painting sojourns. Tourism was spreading throughout rural Quebec and communities increasingly played host to outsiders. Early in her book, *Scenes of Charlevoix*, author Victoria Baker states:

After 1850, improved means of transportation and a growing tourist class began to attract many itinerant painters. The popularity of the region, notably after 1900, was such as to finally assure its place in the cultural history of Quebec, both for its native artisan production and its prominence as a pictorial source of inspiration for the work of Canadian artists.⁴

Many artists worked in the Charlevoix when Smith was there and her production could easily be grouped with that of the other tourist artists, painting traditional country scenes. However, there are three features which distinguish Smith's work from that of her contemporaries: she was a woman, she was an

³Jori Smith, *Charlevoix County* (Ottawa: Penumbra Press, 1998),15.

⁴Victoria Baker, *Scenes of Charlevoix* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux Arts de Montréal, 1982),13.

Anglophone and she became a long-term fixture in the community, where she observed intimate personal and family dynamics that would have been inaccessible to the tourist painter or even to a long-resident male artist like her husband, Palardy. In order to highlight these differences, I will compare Smith's work to that of some of her contemporaries who painted in Charlevoix.

Like her contemporaries, Smith went to the Charlevoix region primarily to paint. Her collection of works from this period portrays a small, friendly, welcoming community, engaged in a range of activities including day-to-day chores and social customs. Her personal experience as an urbanite with an unhappy family background structured the way she looked at relationships and values, specifically gender roles, domestic labour and home craft production. As a non-ideological, non-aligned feminist, Jori Smith is a paradoxical subject, who held some very traditional and conservative views on the one hand and was at the same time a very liberated woman for her time.⁵ For instance, Smith's representations of family life and individual family members often seem to contradict her belief in the rights of women, a fact which nevertheless allowed her to empathise more effectively with her female subjects.

In 1974 Hal Foster wrote an article entitled, "The Artist as Ethnographer" in which he proposed a framework for contemporary artists who create cultural

⁵I use the term "non-ideological feminist" because Smith never verbally expressed highly politicized views on the role of women, but she has always lived in such a way as to suggest that feminism was a political lifestyle choice.

expressions that speak of and about a community.⁶ He claimed that the artist may be understood as removed from society and thus has a different vantage point from which to observe and record culture. This analysis of cultural expression can be viewed in two ways. First there is the case of the artist producing texts that deal with his/her own culture and second there is the case of the artist producing texts that deal with another culture.⁷

Smith doesn't fall nicely into either category. As she grew up in an unhappy family, she felt disconnected from her primary source of entry into society. When she discovered art at the age of fifteen, she found a way to connect with the society that surrounded her and consequently used her creativity to build a cultural identity for herself. In this way art became her window on the world and she developed friendships with her French-Canadian classmates, eventually discovering an identity very rare for a woman of the 1920s, a bilingual position in a divided society.

Foster begins his article with Walter Benjamin's idea that the advanced artist intervenes to "transform the bourgeois apparatus of culture."⁸ The framework he proposes can in part be used to analyze Smith's work in

⁶Hal Foster. "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The Traffic in Culture*, eds. George E. Marcus et al. (London: University of California Press, 1995): 302-309.

⁷The ideological dangers in the second case have been exposed by Edward Said in his analysis of derogatory orientalism as an expression of nineteenth-century imperialism.

⁸Foster, 302.

Charlevoix. As Smith was not of French-Canadian descent she ran the risk of falling into the second category of artist as cultural other. However it is Foster's contention that all artists stand apart from society, critiquing it from the standpoint of an outsider. In his analysis of Benjamin's "Author as Producer" and his own ideas of the artist as ethnographer, Foster observed:

Basic assumptions with the old productivist model persist in the new quasi-anthropological paradigm. First there is the assumption that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more that this site is always located elsewhere, in the field of the other ... Second there is the assumption that this other is always outside, and, more, that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture. Third, there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity, and, more, that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it.⁹

Foster explores the nuances of these definitions, which in Smith's case must also be looked at a little more closely. Smith was developing her own identity during this time in Charlevoix. Having recently married a Québécois, she had aligned herself with the French-Canadian tradition. She does not dispute that she was "other" in this community, however, having spent such a long and intimate time with the inhabitants of the concessions, she and her husband became part of the community; an exotic facet, but a fixture nonetheless. The lives and traditions of the people she depicted became so internalized, such an important part of her life, that "other" is perhaps too strong a word for her role,

⁹Ibid.

especially given its potentially derogatory implications. Clearly Smith was different, but not so different as to be looked upon as standing apart from the traditions and customs of the community in Charlevoix. She knew the language and customs and ate at their dinner tables every night.

Nevertheless it was her position of difference that allowed her to be accepted. Furthermore, according to Foster, it was this position of difference that granted her access to transformative alterity. An Anglophone woman who shared both solitudes in Quebec and predominantly chose to portray the culture of the other linguistic faction, her position of difference gave her work insightful significance, promoting a very positive message.

Smith was a curiosity to the people of Charlevoix. A married woman without children, she clearly had different aspirations than the women of her age in the community:

I was also a curiosity and an object of pity to them because although married six months, I showed no signs of pregnancy. Pauvre madame. Poor madam indeed - poor them! Never had I seen so many pregnant women. In every house we entered, there would be a woman either recovering from a lying-in or about to produce at any moment.¹⁰

What remains important, however, was Smith's ability to be accepted, despite the variant linguistic, religious and lifestyle difference that she represented to them. As Smith was well ahead of her time, it was not her deliberate intention to

¹⁰Smith, *Charlevoix County*, 19.

advocate integration between the two linguistic spheres. She was acting personally, not politically. Her choice of lifestyle and subject matter were idiosyncratic, but alone were testaments to her revolutionary beliefs in bridging the two communities.

While Smith can be looked upon as a participant-observer or experiential ethnographer and her texts as interpretive ethnographic documents, her engagement with the community she inhabited demonstrates a dialogical art practice. Even if her work can be read comfortably in the category of artist as ethnographer, her residence in the community was not based upon a desire to document her subjects in paint for future sociological reference. Rather it was a fortuitous result of (i) her desire to continue working as a painter during the Great Depression and (ii) her poverty. Ultimately her choice of subject matter, often interior scenes of women [fig. 1], while implicitly ethnographic, were regulated by the activities of the inhabitants and were based upon a humanist concern and a desire to understand her own position in the society of rural and urban Quebec, more than any market-driven or documentary forces.

Upon entering a community the ethnographer is identified as a researching subject. Smith was viewed as a painter and not as a distanced researcher. As a painter she was viewed as an oddity and an outsider, but never in a suspect light. When she witnessed Barbeau's interactions with the community, she noticed a difference between the way they treated him and the

way they treated her:

Sometimes during the days we spent endlessly drawing out the storytellers or listening to the singers, there were moments when these people would suddenly interrupt their story or their song to embark on some tangent of personal interest to them. Whenever such digressions would occur, a look of patient boredom would come over Marius' face, as if he were thinking "Get on with it, get on with it." Personally, I often longed for these digressions to go on forever, so colourful and amusing were they. But, no, for Marius, it was strictly business; no personalities, *s'il-vous-plait*. Whenever one of our hosts became aware of Marius' impatience or flagging interest, they would react with surprise and discomfiture. To their minds, it was inconceivable that this kind, erudite stranger, who asked so many questions about them, would not be interested in whatever sidetrack their narrative might take. They seemed puzzled and a bit regretful that the pleasant remembrances Marius' questions had evoked would have to be put aside because of their guest's special and strangely business-like interest in other matters. But, in their unfailing politeness and hospitality, they would invariably do just that. I always had the feeling that, after we had left, when they were once again "en famille," they would summon forth those reminiscences that Marius had spurned as too personal, too idiosyncratic for his research and regale one another with tales of long-forgotten exploits, feuds and romances. ...Perhaps amongst their own kind, they were more communicative, but with educated strangers, such as Marius, they were reserved, as if conscious of differences in social status and schooling. (They had gotten used to us, I suppose, because our obvious poverty made us "one of them.")¹¹

Not only does Smith diverge in approach from the ethnographer, but this passage demonstrates that her extended exposure to the people of the community gave her added insight into their personalities, desires and joys.

No one ethnographic text speaks for a whole culture: Jori Smith's work is

¹¹Ibid., 63-64.

no exception and touches only a few of the domestic aspects of the Charlevoix. While the work speaks of a culture that was not her own, it equally articulates her own beliefs and difficulties in negotiating a position for herself as an artist in Quebec and as a professional woman in a small, traditional, agrarian community. Rural Quebec, then ruled by the Catholic clergy, was hardly an easy place for a bohemian woman artist to settle. The fact that she was so successful in gaining acceptance must be attributed to her personal strength and charm, as well as to the generosity of the community that adopted her. Jori Smith and her husband were originally viewed as outsiders, but with time, permanent settlement, and extensive contact, both came to be regarded as members of the community.

Smith displays a clear level of precision in the details she reveals about the culture that she recorded. In 1920, fieldwork by ethnographers rarely exceeded two years.¹² All told Smith spent much longer in Charlevoix, because she lived there continually throughout the 1930s, bought a house in Petite-Riviere in 1940 and consistently returned there over 30 years. Ethnographers were and are expected to attain a level of linguistic proficiency in the language of the culture they seek to observe, so as to achieve a level of cultural familiarity. Smith was as proficient in French as she is in English and when addressing bilingual listeners she will jump, back and forth, from one language to the other without hesitating or noticing. This shows the degree to which she internalized

¹²James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 30-32.

the culture she witnessed or experienced on a personal level.

Ethnographers generally focus on certain issues to reach their conclusions. While Smith did tend to focus on particular issues, her extensive exposure enabled her to tackle any issue she found relevant. Essentially, there was a shared sphere and shared experience. As James Clifford has noted: “Participant observation obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as an intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation. It requires arduous language learning, some degree of direct involvement and conversation, and often a derangement of personal and cultural expectations.”¹³ When Smith originally started painting in the Charlevoix, she never thought she would eventually buy a house in the area and become a member of the community; she simply went there to find subjects to paint.

While the dominant mode of fieldwork is “you are there... because I was there,” whereby the viewer comes to share the observer’s frame, Jori Smith’s art seems to work in an opposite relationship: ‘I was there... because you were there.’¹⁴ The reason she kept returning repeatedly to the Charlevoix was, as her paintings and book demonstrate, not because of the beautiful vistas or the bountiful ethnographic work to be exploited, but rather because of the character of the people. Her writing, while somewhat sentimental, describes in an

¹³Ibid., 24.

¹⁴Ibid., 22.

“objective” fashion within a “subjective” frame. This is an important point of ethnography, as subjectivity, while important to acknowledge, is not the overriding principle in scientific documentation. Details are revealed in a manner that does not cast criticism on the particular way of life. Smith, while offering her opinion, describes the events she experienced in an objective fashion.

While her work can be construed as ethnographic, she is radically different from traditional ethnographers and as such her work must be viewed slightly differently from official ethnographic texts. While the ethnographer always ultimately stands apart from the culture he/she observes, Smith continually returned to and stayed in touch with the people she met and grew to love. Traditional ethnographic texts tend to have a generalized reportorial tone whereas Smith's work, as a result of her modernist viewpoint, is undoubtedly a personal articulation.¹⁵

Smith's engagement with the people of rural Quebec produced more than figure studies with aesthetic or ethnographic value. Her work is based on a mutual interchange of cultural values and shared experience. While the product of her engagement with the particular culture has ethnographic elements, her work can also be seen as an early form of community art by which an artist enters a community and creates art that is the result of a dialogical exchange

¹⁵Ibid., 39.

between that artist and the community.¹⁶ Indeed some of her most interesting work relies on the dialogical exchange she experienced with the inhabitants of the rural concessions. She borrowed values from them in order to illuminate her identity and in return, inadvertently gave them a glimpse of the life of an urban woman and artist:

Coming as we did from the city - and from the 20th century - there were many kinds of information and advice that we would have gladly shared with our new friends and neighbours to help them improve their living conditions. But, despite our concern and good intentions, helping them in this way proved to be difficult.¹⁷

Efforts to educate their hosts on issues such as medication or birth control were ephemeral, and hence their only contribution to the communities was their art work.

In her description of life in Charlevoix, Smith indirectly discusses how she was a source of inspiration for young naive painters in the area:

Full of colour, life and warmth, Mary's paintings recorded in loving detail the events, sights, and experiences of the world around her - the waterfall, a picnic in the apple orchard, the postman arriving by sleigh on a snowy day, or the family seated around the table on a festive occasion. When she learned of our own interest in painting, she begged us to teach her. Since we had no intention of influencing her own vision, we drew up a list of colours she could send for. It was after she started using these colours that she began doing those vivid, luminous still-life paintings of flowers and

¹⁶While I draw a comparison between the work that Smith did in the Charlevoix and community art, there are obvious differences that set the two apart. Whereas in community art the artist is seen as the stimulus to the community's artistic production Smith's work is a reaction to a community that, for her, provided the stimulus for artistic production.

¹⁷Smith, *Charlevoix County*, 25

interiors for which she became so well known.¹⁸

Smith's work may not fall into the category of community art that we know today; however there are still certain characteristics in her practice that lend themselves to this type of interpretation. At its simplest, community art relies entirely on dialogical exchange. It is this type of mutual communication that is essential for any community art project and it was this type of exchange that enabled Smith to catch a glimpse of happy family life and create the works in the manner she did.

Community art, while unnamed or non-existent in the 1930s, today is structured in somewhat rigid terms. An artist is invited into a community for a given period of time and, through a process of mutual communication, a body of work evolves that is seen to be an expression of that community. The artist is a vehicle and enables a form of artistic expression that is seen to speak for the community as a whole. The difference between Smith's work and that of the present-day community artist is quite noticeable, because the work of the community artist is said to speak *for* the community whereas Smith's work speaks *of* a community, though with time, it may come to speak *for* it.

The main similarity between Smith's work in the thirties and community art today is the artist's reliance upon the community to create artwork. Needless to say, Smith would likely have continued as a successful painter without ever

¹⁸Ibid., 28. Smith is referring here to Mary Cecile Bouchard who has been recognized as one of Charlevoix's talented naive painters. She also became very close to and influenced the Simard sisters who have achieved similar recognition.

setting foot within Charlevoix County; however her experience in that community not only provided rich subject matter to paint, but gave her an interesting backdrop against which to define herself, discover her desires and forge her identity. Not only did she rely on the community to grow as an artist, she needed the community to grow as a person. Her work can, at once, be seen to define her inner psychological battles as well as to shed light on a socio-cultural situation of a community.

As a woman from the lower class of the dominant Anglophone culture, Jori Smith is both colonizer and doubly marginal, a position that deserves special recognition. She worked to be accepted within the status quo of the art school community, then discarded it. Her work in Charlevoix provides a visual account of a community of which she was not a part. While some would compare this to the work of Emily Carr, Smith constructed herself differently, because she inhabited the communities she represented and eventually found herself to be a valued member of those communities. In fact the process Smith went through to create her work is more akin to that of André Bieler, although her unique social position deserves a more focused investigation. In order to demonstrate this I will provide a comparison with André Bieler whose work in Charlevoix is in many ways similar to that of Smith.¹⁹ They were both drawn to the area because of its

¹⁹Smith's and Bieler's works are not stylistically akin, Smith painting in a modernist style and Bieler in the genre of regionalism, I draw the comparison between the two in order to highlight how Smith's interaction with the community affected her final production.

inhabitants, social customs and way of life. Hence a comparison of the two serves to demonstrate the ways in which Jori Smith's position was unique and how this affected her treatment of the figure.

Smith's rapport with the Francophone community is perhaps not surprising, given her working-class background, and the political situation of those Depression years. The fact that Smith was an Anglophone and a painter, an unusual profession for a woman at the time, meant she was able to move freely from one community to the other without the pressure of tradition and convention to hold her back. And as the art community was not structured by class, she moved freely from one context to another, weaving her way through the different cultural communities without constraint.

Despite the colonial beginnings of the French presence in North America, after the British conquest of 1759 the Québécois became an economically, politically and ideologically colonized culture. One cannot ignore their imperialist beginnings, however, as Linda Hutcheon points out in an article entitled "Circling the Downspout of Empire," "[There is a] very real sense of cultural dispossession and social alienation in Quebec."²⁰ The social and political relations between the French and English in Quebec were, in the 1930s, full of animosity and defined more clearly by class struggle. The English were largely ignorant of Québécois

²⁰Linda Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout of Empire," *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 132.

culture and saw the French primarily as the workers in their factories and the labour source for their domestic services. Author Hugh McLennan, a friend of Smith who was empathetic to the political situation of the Québécois, in the first pages of his 1945 book *The Two Solitudes* wrote:

Down in the angle at Montreal, on the island about which two rivers join, there is little of this sense of new and endless space. Two old races and religions meet here and live their separate legends, side by side. If this sprawling half-continent has a heart, here it is. Its pulse throbs out along the rivers and railroads; slow, reluctant and rarely simple, a double beat, a self-moved reciprocation.²¹

With external reference points in France and England, these two solitudes negotiated cultures for themselves apart from and in resistance to each other. It is easy to view the tension between the English and the French as clear-cut. If we further analyze the possible variants of this relationship, however, we can see how Smith was able, as an Anglophone, to successfully integrate herself in to Québécois culture.

Jori Smith made her first visit to rural Quebec when she was twenty-one, accompanied by her closest friend and fellow student, Jean-Paul Lemieux, and his mother. They spent the summer of 1928 in Les Eboulements near Baie-St-Paul, painting, hiking and improving Smith's French.²² During the twenties and thirties the Charlevoix region in Quebec hosted many artists and remains today a

²¹Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Bryant Press Ltd., 1945), 4.

²²Jori Smith, *Autobiographical Sketch*, February 1987, MG30 D249 vol.19, National Archives of Canada, 8.

site for a thriving artistic sub-culture, still studied in symposia and workshops. While the art produced in Charlevoix in the 1930s was mostly landscapes and villagescapes, Jori Smith's personal perspective and technical approach can be seen as radically different from that of her contemporaries and precursors.

As American regionalist artist Thomas Hart Benton observed, "The culture of a society is the way that society lives - all of it. The expression of that culture can only be the outcome of intimate first-hand acquaintance with life in that society. Cultural expression cannot be borrowed; it has to be made."²³ There are many artists whose work in Charlevoix could easily fall into the category of regionalism and, in Foster's terms, ethnography. André Bieler, for instance, spent a great deal of time there painting scenes of everyday life. Many of his works can be seen, in hindsight, as documents of the rural way of life. While he slightly pre-dates Jori Smith, both were in the area at about the same time and on certain occasions shared meals in farmers' houses.

Bieler's work has been characterized as demonstrating a "growing sense of identification without any hint of sentimentality," which makes the Swiss-born artist perhaps more of an ethnographer, because his works are less romanticized and have a distance that is not so evident in the work of Smith. Her work is sentimental and she endows her subjects with the sense of compassion that she felt in the shared experience of living with them.

²³Francis K. Smith *André Bieler: an artist's life and times*, (Toronto, Merritt Pub. 1980), 89.

Smith and Bieler came onto the art scene at the waning of the landscape tradition. By working consistently with the human figure, their work attempts to correct some of the oversights of that earlier tradition. While they were both predominantly figure painters, their respective bodies of work do not fall into the same category.

Some members of the Group of Seven, specifically A.Y. Jackson, also went to the Charlevoix region to paint. However, Jackson's work focuses entirely on the unpeopled landscape and blatantly ignores the presence of the culture in that landscape. While he did include buildings in his landscapes, figures were rarely represented, an issue that became an important bone of contention for scholars in Quebec. In the words of F-M. Gagnon, "the pre-cultural vision of the [Group of] Seven might have appeared to overlook Quebec's cultural contribution at a time when its position as a dominant culture conferred a special urgency to the problem of French identity."²⁴

The works of Smith and Bieler, on the other hand, came out of the regional tradition of Quebec painters like Marc-Aurele Fortin or Clarence Gagnon, who highlighted the cultural landscape:

As if to fill the void created by the Group of Seven, Quebec painting emphasized cultural traits and used nature only as its backdrop...
The village with its main street, its inhabitants and the horses and

²⁴Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Painting in the Thirties in Quebec," *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 3(Fall 1976): 5 and Esther Trepanier, "The Expression of a Difference: The Milieu of Quebec Art and the Group of Seven," *The True North, Canadian Landscape Painting 1896 - 1939* (London, Lund Humphries, 1991).

sleighs are frequent subject matter; the Laurentians serve only as background. The emphasis now lies upon the human element - an environment modified by culture - and not upon the bush or virgin soil.²⁵

Bieler's work is largely figural, but incorporates elements of landscape for background purposes and aesthetic reasons. His figures are located in the landscape and there is a balanced relationship between figure and background:

The island [Ile d'Orleans] itself and the St-Lawrence and the hills on the other side all form undulating horizontal lines. I needed figures, because you couldn't possibly just go on painting landscape ...but of course, the very strong shapes of the hills and the river are magnificent as ties to figures, so that probably there was a happy choice of taking a slightly difficult landscape but a good one to be used with figures.²⁶

Smith's work removes the figure from the landscape. Landscape is never a background element in her figural work, which typically has flat patterned backgrounds with groups of figures most often set in interior scenes. Perfecting a deep-seated interest in humanist issues, Smith was concerned not with the relationship between figure and landscape, but rather between figure and figure [fig. 1].

Living among the families who were the subject of her paintings, to a certain degree she had to comply with what was expected of her gender: "I often felt a trifle cheated at being shunted off with the 'womenfolk' as by now I had

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Frances K. Smith, 58.

been more than familiar with the chatter typical of such gatherings. Straining to catch snippets of conversation from the male enclave, I used to wish my ears could stretch clear across the room."²⁷ It was this proximity that gave Smith access not only to the dynamics of family relationships, but a unique urban perspective on gender roles as well.

Brought up by a late Victorian mother, she was well used to the prescribed gender roles of the time; however, her mother had harboured nothing but resentment towards the female gender role she felt herself forced to fulfill. The women in Charlevoix, conversely, did not seem dissatisfied by their lot in life and saw their work as vital and necessary.²⁸

Smith's painting *Rose and her mother, madame Louisa, wife of Eloi Tremblay* [fig. 1] is the depiction of a mother and daughter in a small seemingly cozy interior. The warmth of the colors and representation of space indicates that the relationship between the two figures is a happy one. The daughter stands in the foreground a few feet in front of her mother, who looks upon her fondly. It is a calming scene and the figures are enveloped in a warm atmospheric glow of oranges and yellows. The serene happy looks on the faces of the mother and daughter would seem to indicate a naturally harmonious

²⁷Smith, *Charlevoix County*, 84.

²⁸Smith does not look back on her childhood with altogether happy memories; specifically her relationship with her parents. By Smith's account her parents were unhappily married and her mother, having married for stability and to please her own mother, transferred this discontent to her relationship with her children.

relationship, unlike Smith's own experience.

Living in the Charlevoix gave Smith a glimpse of how happy families could behave and function. Her painting *Veillee chez Eloi Tremblay* [fig. 2] is a depiction of a typical festive gathering of Charlevoix. The *veillées* were the frequent social events in the small concessions where most, if not all, of the families from the community would gather in one house to socialize and entertain one another. The scene is peopled with adults, children and babies. While often the sexes would segregate themselves, the main event of such a night was when everyone crowded around and each took his/her turn to sing or dance in order to entertain the rest of the group. While Jori experienced the stability of the family unit in Charlevoix on an individual basis, she was also able to see, in these instances, how the family unit functioned on a social level. By contrast Smith's family was distant and there were no close relations between siblings and parents.²⁹

We cannot draw a clear comparison between Smith's family and the families of the concessions because each grew out of different economic and social situations, which in turn involved different values and lifestyles. However, Smith's own experience drastically affected the way in which she viewed family life in the Charlevoix and ultimately contributed to her attitude about motherhood and the way she depicted scenes of family life.

²⁹This is true with the exception of her relationship with her younger sister Eunice.

Also at issue in this context is the status of domestic work in Jori Smith's view of the family unit. With the shift from agrarian to industrial society, the work of the domestic labourer was devalued. In a 1992 article entitled "There's no Place like Home," filmmaker, programmer and writer Cara Mertes quotes the nineteenth-century writer and feminist Charlotte Gilman on the subject:

The phrase "domestic work" does not apply to a special kind of work, but to a certain grade of work, a state of development through which all kinds [of work] pass. All industries were once "domestic," that is, were performed at home and in the interests of the family. All industries have since that remote period risen to higher stages, except one or two which have never left their primal stage.³⁰

Mertes goes on to explain that:

Gilman's recognition that the repetitious physical labour performed in the home was still "primal" and never effectively industrialized reveals a hierarchy in which domestic labour was the lowest, most undervalued form of work in American society. "Primal" work in fact defined the lives of the vast majority of American women.³¹

While domestic labour stayed in its primal phase, the attitudes that accompanied it shifted along with the rest of the society to create a negative interpretation of work done within the home. The negative attitude towards this type of work was a new development. Prior to the major shift in economic systems, such work was viewed as essential and was, for some, a source of pride.

With a mother who had been resentful of her position in the household

³⁰Cara Mertes, "There's No Place Like Home," *Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Centre, 12 June- 14 August, 1992), 61.

³¹Ibid.

and seemingly miserable about having to depend upon a man she didn't love, it does not come as a surprise that Jori Smith should be a sensitive reporter of the agrarian community where both facets of gendered labour were appreciated and where work was treated as art. As her comments about perennial pregnancy demonstrate, she was very much aware of some of the drawbacks of her gender in that community, but on the whole approved of the privileged status of domestic work and the mother/wife's ability to take pride in the domestic arts.³² In more general and gender-neutral terms, the roles of individuals in agrarian communities were more determined and the individual had a greater sense of a prescribed role in society as a whole, not simply in terms of family relations. As stated in 1949 by Edward Sapir:

A genuine culture refuses to consider the individual as a mere cog, as an entity whose sole *raison d'être* lies in his subservience to a collective purpose that he is not conscious of or that has only a remote relevancy to his interests and strivings. The major activities of the individual must directly satisfy his own creative and emotional impulses, must always be something more than a means to an end. The great cultural fallacy of industrialism, as developed up to the present time, is that in harnessing machines to our uses it has not known how to avoid the harnessing of the majority of mankind to its machines.³³

Growing up in the city, Smith always knew how her family was socially

³²This is not to say that women resent the domestic labour services they provide within the home; however, Smith's personal experience with her own family and with the agrarian families underlines how one would lament the loss meaningful labour.

³³Edward Sapir, "Culture, Genuine and Spurious," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 316-317.

positioned. When her family was well off, a maid was hired to undertake the domestic labor. When times were tough, however, there was no maid and Smith's mother was in charge of the upkeep of the house. During these times, Smith recalls her father's dissatisfaction with the state of the house.³⁴ As a result, one of Smith's great aunts moved in with them to help with the household chores.

What is important is Smith's early exposure to the negative view of domestic labour within a capitalist urban context. It was her mother's dissatisfaction with her own gender role, as well as her father's dissatisfaction with her mother's performance, that caused Smith to portray agrarian family life the way she did. In her earlier writing she states that:

Objects of beauty in the household were also objects of necessity, which they were obliged to create with their own hands and their own ingenuity, following traditional designs and patterns handed down from one generation to another. Many years later it was a source of great sadness to watch as increasing prosperity and contact with the "modern world" seduced them into abandoning these old ways. In barely more than a decade, many of the ancient cultural traditions, in all their beauty and simplicity, had felt the onslaught of radio, television, and the automobile, and were replaced by a taste for all that was worst in modern design.³⁵

Having lived among several families for nearly a decade, Smith goes on to note:

Eloi's wife, Louisa, who excelled in the domestic arts, was fanatically devoted to order and calm. She worked from morning to night; never once in all the time I knew her did I ever see her simply

³⁴Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 2 January 2003.

³⁵Smith, 18.

sit and daydream. Every moment of the day she was allocated to some duty or chore, which was reflected in the immaculate state of the premises ... By winter's end, there were bolts of linen and homespun runners and bedspreads of catalogue, and woollen blankets, the most beautiful of all. Everything was splendid, just splendid. All the colours were home-dyed, and how vivid they were! All the designs were a blend of tradition and individual inventiveness; that is, the motifs used would follow the traditional patterns, but the choice of colours and their arrangement would be of Louisa's own design ... Not satisfied with a full day of work, Louisa would spend long evenings - and they were long, for we supped at five o'clock - knitting and mending. I'll never forget the socks she made for Eloi!³⁶

It is hard to say whether or not her scenes of family life are romanticized. It might be more accurate to say that Smith's view of the agrarian family unit and inter-familial relations were sentimentalized because of her own unhappy family memories. As a result, the agrarian family is presented as naturally happy and joyous.

In creating such views of the agrarian family, Smith does not cast an inaccurate light on the reality of the situation. While she was definitely an artist and not an ethnographer, her work deserves special attention for two reasons. First, her method breaks the normal mode of production by moving into the realm of the ethnographer. Second her empathy and long-term residence in the communities she depicted gives her work greater meaning as she herself had a deeper understanding of her subjects than most tourist painters of the period. As quasi-ethnographer and community artist, she has simply created a positive

³⁶Ibid., 41, 42.

text that presents one of the many facets of rural life.

Chapter Three - A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Smith's Young Girls

*Your character
hanging on the wall
stares out at me. Mine,
by virtue of colour,
form and line,
has stuck you there.
We are in league
against time, you and me.
Each a new start,
I work passionately,
at your portrait,
and mine.¹*

Written by the poet Philip Stratford for his close friend Jori Smith, these few lines eloquently sum up the strength of the artist's painting career. A little over a year ago, when her eyesight had deteriorated beyond what her craft demanded, the dynamic ninety-seven year old had at last to give up working on her portraits. After years of painting the world she inhabited, all the while representing herself, she became her own immortal subject, whose identity was studied and restudied throughout a career of visual exploration. Her paintings are, at once, the legacy of a time past and of its people, past and present, who survived the rise and dislocations of industrialism, the depredations of capitalism and the shifting attitudes of cultural communities. An Anglophone "other" among a predominantly French-Canadian rural culture and "othered" not only by her gender, but also by ethnic origin and class, Jori Smith recorded what she

¹Philip Stratford, "Colour, Form, Motif, Character" a poem for Jori Smith, *Jori Smith, A Celebration*, (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 1997), 1.

experienced, all the while using her somewhat removed perspective to explore her own identity and those of her sitters in a community hovering between the innocence of one era and the ignorance of another.

In a recent interview, the artist and I were discussing some of the works that hang on her walls at home. As we took down a still life of a bowl of apples, she exclaimed, "There I am, that's all me!"² While at first I did not quite understand what she meant, thinking that the obscure regions of the canvas concealed her shadow cast upon the bowl, I later realized that the artist sees herself in her work, even in a bowl of apples. Her work is a reflection of her life, her personality and her identity. If Jori Smith sees herself in her still life, then she most certainly sees herself in her portraits of other people.

Beyond mimetic likeness, the figural genre has larger theoretical implications. Portraits embody many meanings. During the thirties the figure became an avenue through which to explore social commentary in art, using new forms of artistic expression. I believe Smith's figural works to be much more than the images of a sitter; they are portraits of a society, of individuals, but most importantly in the words of Oscar Wilde, "every portrait is a portrait of the artist."³ Smith's portraits of little girls are as much about the artist herself as they are about social conditions. This hardly comes as a surprise, because Smith is a

²Smith, personal interview with the author, 3 March 2003.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 11.

most existential person, a self-taught intellectual, who left school at fifteen to discover herself a talented artist. Her travels, her personal intellectual undertakings, such as extensive reading and teaching herself several foreign languages, have all fused in her pursuit to discover herself.⁴

Smith always worked from living subjects and rarely spent more than two hours on a single portrait.⁵ While she did use her artistic talents to maintain herself, the pieces that have received recognition, including her portraits of young girls, were not commissioned. Smith greatly disliked portrait commissions, as demonstrated in one piece of prose that she wrote:

The whole thing bored me, had been boring me for weeks and now this ignorant woman wanted me to fatten the neck, give him glasses and repaint the shirt. I wish I had studied plumbing...I was actually happy, that is until I switched on the light and saw the portrait accusing me of prostitution. I turned it to the wall.⁶

In a climate that was favourable to portraiture, Smith found in the genre a way to express herself, reflecting upon her own unhappy life experiences. At a recent symposium on portraiture, Sandra Paikowsky pointed out that “As conditions of art patronage changed, the aesthetic concerns of the artist took precedence over the social desires of the sitter. In particular, twentieth-century portraits describe

⁴If there was anything Smith did as much as painting, it was reading and writing. She also taught herself Spanish and Italian during her travels.

⁵Smith, personal interview with the author, 3 March 2003.

⁶Jori Smith, Family Souvenirs, Mother, November 1967, MG30 D249 vol.19, file 19/24, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

the change from the concept of the portrait as a picture *of* someone to the image as a metaphor *for* someone.”⁷

Two such portraits of young girls are *La Communiant*e [fig. 3] and *Rose Fortin* [fig.4]. The title of the first, like those of many later portraits, does not reveal the identity of the sitter. As Paikowsky points out, “The strategy of the unnamed sitter can be linked with the tenets of modernity and the artist’s concern for the metaphoric meaning of a portrait as a paradigm of contemporary life, rather than focusing on individual aspects of daily existence.”⁸ While the portrait of Rose Fortin clearly states the sitter’s name, the work, I believe, is still a metaphor, given what are clearly references to the details of Smith’s life.

Freud suggested that while producing art work, there are unconscious motivations at play. He further believed that the affective experience of such work on the intended audience is characterized by a similarly unconscious process: “in my opinion, what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist’s intention, insofar as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it...What he aims at is to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the

⁷ Sandra Paikowsky, “Defining Portraiture,” Symposium: *Portraiture Between Narrative and Abstraction*, The Portrait Gallery of Canada/The National Archives of Canada, The University of Ottawa, (March 1, 2003).

⁸Ibid.

impetus to create.”⁹

The first time I saw a Smith painting I was taken aback. It was during an introductory Canadian art history course. The fact that I can’t remember the other slides shown during the class points to how affective an experience my encounter with this work was. The difficulty with the aesthetic experience is how to articulate what happens when a work “moves” you. At times, this is simply a conscious attempt to characterize an intangible, almost unconscious feeling.

The work that initially caught my eye was a portrait of a young girl entitled *Little Girl in Blue* [fig.5]. While the formal play between the patterned texture of the painting and the figure itself was quite stunning, there was something beyond technical or stylistic devices that struck me and, to this day, remains with me. I can’t quite pinpoint what it was about the painting that fascinated me, but I was immediately compelled to hunt down more of the artist’s work. This was no easy task, but when I had finally located a catalogue from one of Smith’s shows, I was struck by the number of her portraits that affected me in a similar manner to *Little Girl in Blue*.¹⁰

Aside from a few still lifes and portraits of adults, what stood out for me in the catalogue were the many portraits of serious young girls. None of them looked particularly happy and I could not help but feel slightly unnerved by the

⁹Ellen Handler Spitz, “A Critique of Pathography, Freud’s Original Psychoanalytic Approach to Art,” *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art* (1985), 1:8, quoting Sigmund Freud etc.

¹⁰Jori Smith, *A Celebration*, Rosalind Pepall ed., Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 1997.

severity of the expressions of the faces. The text in the catalogue offered no speculative interpretation of the artist's motivation in creating these disquieting images. But there had to be a reason why the artist returned to the same type of image, cast in the same psychological mould. What I did not know at the time was that the last stanza of the poem on the first page of the *Jori Smith, a Celebration* catalogue, quoted above, was my first clue to understanding Jori Smith's motivations.

While best known as a portrait painter, no one has yet tried to understand Jori Smith's devotion to the genre of portraiture. Most of the texts that deal with her exploration of portraiture are cursory and yield little insight into the artist's fascination with the human subject. An article written in 2000 offers the most extensive look at her portraits.¹¹ While making a brief allusion to the notion of a collective unconscious, it reveals what is perhaps the most commonly held assumption: that the artist used portraiture as a way of dealing with the humanitarian concerns about time and location:

Portraiture became an important vehicle for Jori Smith. Through it she expressed her personal vision, which was shaped by an empathetic identification with the people who formed the heart of Charlevoix County. An inherent sense of humanity animated these early portraits. Jori Smith's depictions, particularly of children, were conditioned emotionally, in part, by an awareness of the social conditions she saw around her in those years. Many of these early portrait studies evoke a feeling of pathos. They reveal an inner

¹¹Edith-Anne Pageot, "Jori Smith, une Figure de la Modernité Picturale Québécoise. Étude d'un Cas: le Portrait d'Enfant" *Globe3*, 2 (2000): 171-186.

beauty wrought from the often penetrating and always meaningful gaze of the models: a simple beauty wrought from knowledge of the harder realities of life.¹²

This mode of interpretation enlightens us in certain respects beyond assumptions about the artist's personality and empathy for the people of rural Quebec. When her preference for figure studies became clear during the thirties, as it did for many other artists during the same period, Smith was deeply concerned with the human condition. Like Paraskeva Clark and Marion Scott, to name but two, she was politically active. She worked with the League of Social Reconstruction and later volunteered for the NDP. She lived the greater part of a decade amongst the rural poor of Quebec. Her interest in the human figure, however, goes back to her days at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, prior to her own experience of poverty during the Depression. Her commitment to portraiture remained a lifelong exploration. While this interest can be traced through the press back to her school days, it was her personal experience and concern for the human condition that influenced this preference. Beyond the statement that Smith's poverty caused her to invest her subjects with a sense of psychological distress similar to her own, no scholar has attempted to personalize the work nor ask what it was in Smith's own psychological makeup that compelled her, time and again, to return to the figure, and specifically the figure of the child.

What I found in my interviews was that early and grievous experience of

¹²Victoria A Baker, *Scenes of Charlevoix* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal, 1982), 46.

loss may provide a psychological explanation for her continual return to child portraiture. To characterize her life in psychoanalytic terms, she experienced a traumatic event early in life that stayed with her and affected her mental processes for her entire life. This, coupled with a lack of emotional support from her parents, produced repression of a traumatic event that she spent her entire life trying to work out. In this light painting, for Smith, can be seen as a cathartic method of therapy, which eventually helped her to come to terms with her childhood experiences and ultimately helped her reach an abreaction of her repressed emotions, allowing her to discuss her traumatic experience and view it from a different perspective.¹³

Trauma is “an event in a subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.”¹⁴ As a response to trauma, I believe Smith repressed some memories, because she was unable to handle the scope and intensity of what she was experiencing.

Smith herself was and is aware of how powerful a tool painting was in helping her deal with the difficulties she faced. “It’s a long story and I wish I had written it out because I would like it to be known how it is that painting, art, the

¹³The term “abreaction” is commonly used in psychoanalysis to refer to the point where a patient is consciously able to deal with the full scope of the traumatic experience. J.B Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, W.W.Norton and Company Inc. 1973), 465.

¹⁴J.B Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, W.W.Norton and Company Inc. 1973), 465.

talent that I had within me, really saved me from becoming a misanthrope.”¹⁵

While the pathographic mode of analysis¹⁶ was and has been hotly contested, it seems justified following extensive interviews that suggest a potential psychological sub-text for the portraits:

The idea is that in order to do pathography, one must look carefully and read slowly. One must dwell on detail. One must attend with utmost sensitivity. Since something of the artist has found its way into each work of art...then to seek the former we must deal with the latter. Hence, if my analogy holds, pathography in its effort to penetrate to certain sorts of psychic meaning in works of art is bound to attend to these works aesthetically and - if well done - even to contribute to our awareness and understanding of them...in actual practice, pathography works both ways: works of art are used to penetrate the psyche of the artist, but hypotheses about the artist's inner life are also used to interpret his works.¹⁷

Psychoanalytic theory is an ahistorical, interpretive, open system and as such I have borrowed from various theorists to help develop my argument.

Psychoanalytic theory is typically used to understand art in three different ways.

Ellen Handler Spitz states that, beginning with the artist, psychoanalysis is applied when looking for the “nature of the creative works and experience of the artist.”¹⁸ As we move away from the experience of the artist, psychoanalysis is used to look at the art works themselves and how they may present subject

¹⁵Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February, 2003.

¹⁶The pathographic mode of interpretation sees artwork as a privileged form of neurosis whereby the critic analyzes the work of art in order to understand the inner psychological workings of the artist.

¹⁷Spitz, “A Critique of Pathography,” 13.

¹⁸Ibid., 10

matter, which is best decoded using a psychoanalytic method. Finally, this type of theory is also applied to understand the nature of the viewer's aesthetic experience and response to the work.¹⁹

The body of work to which I turn specifically is Smith's extensive oeuvre of children's portraits, predominantly of little girls. It is documented as early as 1927 that she was exhibiting painted portraits of young girls.

Mlle Smith en outre une couple de têtes de jeunes filles très expressives, une frappante et gracieuse étude de jeune fille en rouge qui est superbe dessin au fusain.²⁰

Miss Smith is also showing a couple of very expressive heads of young girls. In particular, a striking and gracious study of a young girl in red which is a superb drawing in charcoal. (My translation)

Repeatedly, in the press, we read of Smith exhibiting, among other things, portraits of young children. While the writers often remark on the variety of works she displayed, they always focused their attention upon the little girls. In 1938, when Smith was exhibiting with the Eastern Group of Painters, a *La Presse* columnist wrote of Smith's work:

Elle nous revient cette fois, avec des têtes d'enfants pauvres, physionomies aigües de mélancolie et qu'une pitié ardente empêche d'être amères. On ne les oublie plus. Leur inquiétude nous poursuit.²¹

¹⁹Ellen Handler Spitz, *Art and Psyche: a Study in Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics*, 10.

²⁰Albert Laberge, "Les travaux des élèves de l'Ecole des Beaux Arts," *La Presse* (1 June 1927).

²¹Reynald, "Notre Group de L'Est a de l'Ame," *La Presse* (Montreal: 3rd December, 1938).

She returns to us this time with portraits of poor-looking children, sharp melancholic physiognomy which an ardent pity prevents from being bitter. One can never forget them. Their worry haunts us. (My translation)

Again in 1944, another article remarks:

Avec Jori Smith qui s'est toujours exercée au portrait on est entourée dès l'abord d'un rimbambelle d'enfants...Le visage de l'adulte est dans les traits de l'adolescent et les parents se retrouvent souvent dans leur progéniture; c'est pourquoi le visage de l'enfant est irrésistible d'attrait.²²

With Jori Smith, who has always experimented with portraits, we are surrounded by a plethora of children...the face of the adult is in the traits of the adolescent and the parents can often rediscover themselves in their progeniture; this is why the child's face is an irresistible subject. (My translation)

Then, in 1947, remarking on a show Smith held in her own studio, L. Le Marchand made the first step toward something other than humanitarian motivations:

La spontanéité des oeuvres qu'on peut y voir en fait un document unique permettant de pénétrer le secret de cette âme d'artiste. Elle nous fait assister à la lutte peut-être inconsciente qui se déroule en elle. Et l'on peut ajouter que, chez très peu de peintres, la lutte intérieure est aussi vivement marquée...Aussi devons-nous en conclure qu'il se déroule, au fond du talent de Jori Smith, un conflit, une lutte dont l'issue est encore incertaine, amis qui nous promet certainement des oeuvres excellentes, car ces conflits intérieure ne hantent que l'esprit des véritables artistes doués d'une personnalité.²³

²² Charles Doyon,, "Trois peintres et un sculpteur," *Le Jour* (Montreal: 6th May, 1944).

²³L. Le Marchand, "Une double personnalité semble se partager le talent de Jori Smith," *Photo-Journal* (25 December 1947).

The spontaneity of the works that one can see there creates a unique document that permits us to penetrate the secret of this artist's soul. She allows us to partake in what is possibly a subconscious struggle that is taking place within her. We can add that in the case of very few artists is this interior struggle so strongly demonstrated... as well, we should conclude that behind Jori Smith's talent is a conflict whose subject is still unknown and is still unraveling itself. (My translation)

While this early comment on an interior psychological battle underlines the character of her work, the analysis did not go beyond the recognition of some psychological sub-text. No one at the time ventured to connect this psychological undercurrent to the experiences of the artist herself.

Then in 1993 historian Barbara Meadowcroft pointed out in the catalogue of Smith's show entitled *Rediscovering Jori Smith* at the Dominion Gallery that the artist followed a pattern of falling away from the limelight to resurface in approximate ten-year increments. Despite L. Le Marchand's identification of psychological turmoil in the works as well as in the life of the artist, the details remained little recognized, or rather little articulated in a public context, until 1993. In the interim, the superficial statements about her attraction to child portraiture continued.

As early as 1955, during another show at the Dominion Gallery, the press predominantly made notes on Smith's affinity for child portraiture. The *Montreal Gazette* critic noted that "Children as models clearly interest her and she paints

them with understanding.”²⁴ What type of understanding Smith’s work embodies was not discussed. In 1964 an article appeared in the *Montreal Star* remarking “Jori Smith has painted three generations of children at Petite-Rivière in Charlevoix County and loved them all...Although children are her favorite subjects she seldom paints happy children.”²⁵ Finally in 1993, in the catalogue *Rediscovering Jori Smith*, Dr. Meadowcroft shed light on a possible reason for the engagement with child portraiture, taking L.Le Marchand’s speculation one step further by saying that:

She says that she painted the children because the mothers were too busy to sit for her. Maybe so; but Smith has gone on painting children in Montreal, Paris; she is still painting children. In my opinion she is drawn to the subject partly because, like a child, she lives in the “now” and partly because she recalls vividly the loneliness and emotional deprivation of her own childhood. The little girls in Smith’s paintings already know their lot as women.²⁶

The social and political implications of a work of art can be understood to inform its content and Meadowcroft understands and foregrounds her assumptions of Smith’s work in this light. At the same time she flirts with the idea that art, for Smith, has deeper psychological implications. A year later, in a press release for a show of Smith’s work in Baie-St-Paul, Andrew Tibor Princz made an even more direct statement that:

²⁴Anon. “Oils by Jori Smith at the Dominion Gallery,” *The Gazette* (Montreal: 12 March, 1955).

²⁵Zoe Bieler, “Two Generations in Petite Rivière,” *Montreal Star* (18 November, 1964).

²⁶Barbara Meadowcroft, *Rediscovering Jori Smith*, (Montreal: Dominion Art Gallery, 1993).

Portraiture was a means of self-reflection for Jori Smith. Gilberte Simard was painted in 1946; a few months before the death of the young tubercular girl. Gilberte was Jori's favorite model. Her elegant face and large eyes attracted Smith's poetic sensibilities. Her gaze was of a sad child. The death of Gilberte reminded Smith of the sorrowful memory of the equally tragic passing of her sister Eunice at twelve years of age. Witnessing that event marked Jori Smith, and can partially explain her need for painting children's portraits. It was in fact, the process more than the final result, in which she secured the joy of painting.²⁷

As Joan Borsa points out in a 1990 article entitled "Towards a Politics of Location," the ultimate reading of a work or body of art relies on "a critical positioning which provides a sense of place, a context from which to develop our insight, ideas and responses, a strategic site that allows sufficient grounding for specific forms of thought, speech and representation to emerge and gain meaning."²⁸ Borsa goes on further to elaborate this politic of location by qualifying it as "those places we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways, which are as much a part of our psyches as they are a physical or geographical placement."²⁹ While she insists on a cultural reading of art, she also specifies that while location can be understood to be geographical, cultural and political, it is equally important to consider the

²⁷ Andrew Tibor Princz, "Jori Smith 'To Seize the Light I See,'" (Baie St-Paul: Centre d'Exposition, 1994), unpublished Press Release, artist file on Jori Smith, National Gallery of Canada.

²⁸ Cindy Stelmackowich, *Generating a New Interdisciplinary Feminist Framework For Contemporary Canadian Women's Art: The Critical Practices of Renee Baert and Joan Borsa*, (Ottawa: Carleton University MA Thesis, 1995), xvii.

²⁹ Joan Borsa, "Towards a Politics of Location: Rethinking and Marginality," *Canadian Women Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 35.

psychological placement of the artist.³⁰

While painting her portraits and landscapes and living as a part of the rural communities, Smith was essentially defining herself and reconciling her psychological location with her geographical and cultural locations. The product of an unhappy marriage and having suffered a terrible loss at an early age, painting was, in the end, how she was able to develop her own identity and ultimately liberate herself as *une Québécoise*.³¹

Eventually, all the answers to my questions about Smith's continual return to the portrait of the girl were answered indirectly. After months of getting acquainted with the artist and hours upon hours of recorded interviews, I found a potential answer to my own questions, and I say "potential" because I do not presume to speak for the artist. When asked forthrightly why she repeatedly created portraits of sad children, she claimed that "it is a curious things but children in moments of quiet have that kind of sadness in their eyes. I thought about it and I came to the conclusion that it is the mirror of sadness of millions of years of difficult moments." ³² This offers no explanation for her attraction to the subject matter, so we will have to content ourselves with the insights of Dorota Kozinska who in 1997 had asked the artist to explain her work: "Don't try to ask

³⁰Stelmakowicz, xvii.

³¹Smith, Autobiographical Sketch, MG30 D249 vol.19, February 1987, Library and Archives of Canada.

³²Edith-Anne Pageot,, "Jori Smith, une Figure de la Modernité Picturale Québécoise. Etude d'un cas: le portrait d'enfant," *Globe*3, 2, (2000): 185.

her to explain her work. She will probably quote her favourite artist Bonnard, whose influence is visible in many of her paintings. 'How can I explain the work of another when I don't even understand my own?'"³³

As a modernist, Smith herself understands her work as a way of negotiating her own subjectivity, experiences, and constitution. "I think one has to look at oneself. Even if it is banal and ordinary."³⁴ This is just what she did and the result, while not entirely clear to the artist, can be interpreted as a powerful representation of a collective unconscious. While I am proposing that these pieces stem from a personal incident in Smith's life, they clearly tap into something larger as the viewer's response over the decades remains the same, surfacing every time the works are exhibited. As stated by C.G.Jung, "Indeed, the special significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from limitations of the personal and has soared beyond the personal concerns of the creator."³⁵ Making subtle reference to his idea of a collective unconscious, Jung proposes that rather than deal specifically with the psychology of the artist, the artwork, when successful, goes beyond personal trappings to deal with archetypal content, "in its rising above the personal and speaking from the mind and heart of the artist to the mind and heart of mankind."

³³Dorota Kozinska, "A Life in Art," *The Gazette* (Montreal: 25 January, 1997).

³⁴Jori Smith, interviewed by Charles Hill, National Gallery of Canada Archives, 16 January 1974, 9.

³⁵Donald H. Mayo, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 114-115.

Looking at the response to Smith's paintings of little girls over the decades, it seems possible that beyond the personal content, Smith has tapped into a theme that Jung would see as responding to the collective unconscious.³⁶

The primary relationship in Smith's life, her relationship to her mother, was one that was filled with animosity, tension and lack of understanding. It is around this difficult interaction that Smith defines the other relationships in her life. While mother and daughter were very different people, they did share in one another's lives. Neither one wanted to marry, but did so in order to please a parental figure. Eventually both of their marriages fell apart. Smith's recollections of growing-up in a loveless family are centered around her mother, and her father is, at times, heroicized for having to deal with Smith's mother. "No love from either parent. I think my father did love me but he was English. He never showed his emotions, never...my mother was Irish but she wasn't in character!"³⁷

Remembering her mother on her deathbed, Smith recalls her mother's

³⁶It is very possible, likely even, that the image of the young child or sick child is an archetypal image that elicits emotional responses from the viewer because of its universal nature. "The collective unconscious - so far as we can say anything about it at all - appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious...We can therefore study the collective unconscious in two ways, either in mythology or in the analysis of the individual." see Carl Jung, "The Structure of the Psyche," in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) vol.8, par.342. As it is clear that Smith's work holds elements of the notion of the archetypal image, this idea is definitely an area of interest that deserves further inquiry. This chapter, however, is concerned only with the reasons behind Smith's return to the image of the little girl.

³⁷Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

words about her unhappy marriage:

She thought the world of him. "A good man", she said, "A hard worker, you'll have a good life with him." But you know I never knew what it was to be free until he died. He kept me down. I hadn't a word to say ever. A cold man. He hated children. He never kissed you, never held you on his knees. "You never did either", I said, but in an inaudible voice and she went on without noticing anything.³⁸

While Smith's father never outwardly showed any affection for his children, Smith was clearly more affected by the lack of affection from her mother, as this was often a primary subject matter of our interviews. Her father's lack of affection is always excused by his being English or too tired because he had to work. On the other hand, Smith was deeply hurt by her mother's lack of attention:

Our mother never gave us any love, couldn't bear to be touched. We'd put our arms around her and she'd say, "Don't do that to me. I hate it." So gradually we never went near her. She didn't want to be bothered. Her great passion was trash novels. These awful novels where the man gets the girl in the end. Never loved her children...She hated the idea of it, just hated it and yet had children. No wonder she hated us. She didn't hate us, she just ignored us. "I've done my duty," that sort of attitude.³⁹

In response to the lack of affection from both of her parents and two older siblings, Smith developed a deep bond with her younger sister, Eunice, whom Smith recalls with great sorrow, affection and mother-love. When speaking of her sister, she speaks as a mother does about her child and interestingly her

³⁸Smith, Family Souvenirs, Mother, November 1967, MG30 D249 vol.19, file 19/24, National Archives of Canada.

³⁹Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

earliest memories and experiences with art are related to her sister:

At any rate, I loved [Eunice] and my sister loved me. She was just two years younger but she was like my child because I just loved looking after her. Before going to school I saw that she was warmly dressed. We bathed together, everything together. She was like my child and I loved it like that. You know, somebody I could love who loved me...Anyhow we were very happy together. We didn't need a mother. I was her mother, she was my child. Even in school at recess we always met. We had a secret place where nobody else would bother us. I always brought a sketch book with me and I'd tell her stories. You see it was the artist in me coming out and I'd illustrate the stories...I was a natural artist you see and I was telling her the stories, just like a mother would. In fact I was really her mother wasn't I?⁴⁰

During my interviews with Smith she returns, time and again, to this image of her illustrating stories for her sister. Most notable was her sister's demand for drawings of cows: "My sister, you know the one with epilepsy, she loved me to draw cows...She would say "draw me another cow please Marjorie, please." My darling sister, I was her mother really."⁴¹ Unfortunately Jori Smith wasn't Eunice's mother and despite her belief that they didn't need a mother, their mother's indifference was an issue with which the artist grappled until long after her mother's death. Despite her great resentment towards her mother throughout her life, Smith was the only one of her siblings to attend to her mother on her deathbed:

I [would] take her hand, a cold paper-like hand and mechanically stroke it rather than kiss her bloodless cheeks. You are my mother. I do not love you, I have never loved you but I am here

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

now at the end. I am trying to make up for never having felt the slightest tiniest moment of affection since my youth when I gave up trying to make you love me. I forgive you now and try to comfort you by touching you, by stroking your hand. I am washing myself of guilt and my heart is full of pity. Why, poor old creature, all hunched up, wizened and dried up beyond belief, why do you now almost inspire the love you never demanded and never needed?⁴²

Her mother was ninety-nine when she died and Smith, despite her anger toward the woman who never provided for her emotionally, tried until her mother's last breath to reconcile herself to the fact that her mother was unable to respond. While she may have assumed a motherly role towards her younger sister, Smith desperately needed a mother of her own. On the morning of her mother's death, Smith recorded her continuing need and desire for her mother's affections:

I was glad that my mother's misery was now over. A sense of relief and calm floated over me, yet from somewhere deep under the surface of the pond, other emotions were welling up. Why, I wondered, not knowing whether to resist or give in. I had never loved my mother, so this couldn't be some deeply buried grief trying to come up for air, or could it? I was a sensible woman who had long ago come to terms with the total lack of affection and caring that had separated my mother from me, so why were my eyes brimming and my throat constricting? Why was my body now taking over, insisting on expressing feelings (or symptoms, if you prefer) my mind and heart had long ago disavowed?⁴³

In my interviews, Smith's relationship with her mother is often discussed alongside Smith's relationship with Eunice. And it was this relationship that I see to be the root of her compulsion to repeatedly paint little girls. "Then a terrible

⁴²Jori Smith, Family Souvenirs, Mother, November 1967, MG30 D249 vol.19, file 19/24, Library and Archives of Canada.

⁴³Ibid.

thing happened. One day at the age of ten they called me to the office of the director of the school. He said, “you have to take you sister home, she’s been sick.”⁴⁴ Eunice was diagnosed with epilepsy and Jori Smith as her sister’s caregiver spent every hour while not in school tending her sister. Two years after the diagnosis, Smith’s younger sister passed away leaving Smith on the threshold of a very lonely and difficult adolescence. “When my sister died I just went to pieces, I loved her so much, she was my child.”⁴⁵

One of Smith’s ways of dealing with her misery was by eating.⁴⁶ She got fat. Luckily, her father saw her expulsion from high school as an opportunity to encourage his daughter’s longstanding artistic inclinations, a move that not only put Smith in an environment where she began to deal with her pain but a move that further re-inforced the idea of her father as a family hero:

I tell you if it hadn’t been for my father taking me, when I was fifteen, to the gallery where they discovered that they thought I was a genius I don’t know what would have become of me. It saved me really. To be appreciated. To be told that I had great talent, exceptional talent and to win the first prize and everything. That changed me. I stopped eating because eating when you’re fat is just because you are miserable. I used to hide in the cupboard and eat, stuff myself...It was frustration.⁴⁷

Compounded with her inability to deal with her sister’s death and greatly elevating her need to repress the memory, was the lack of emotional support

⁴⁴Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

from her mother and father. In describing the events to me, Smith draws a blank about what happened after she was called into the director's office to take her sister home. "It must have been so disturbing to me then as I can't remember a single thing."⁴⁸ Smith still can't talk about the subject without becoming terribly upset and has only recently been able to speak of it after decades of silence. "I never spoke or wrote about it until this year (2002) and then I told the whole story to P.K.Page, my greatest friend."⁴⁹

"The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the consciousness."⁵⁰ This, of course, does not imply that Smith's psyche repressed the entire memory, but rather that she experienced it as a defence mechanism that protected her from the weight of her sister's death. As Freud has written, "Reverting once more, however, to the opposite aspect of repression, let us make it clear that it is not even correct to suppose that repression withholds from the conscious all the derivatives of what was primarily repressed."⁵¹ In his essay entitled "The Pleasure Principle," Sigmund Freud describes the psychological process as one that ultimately seeks pleasure and the avoidance of pain. He states that:

⁴⁸Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Laplanche, 392.

⁵¹Sigmund Freud, *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (London, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974), 14: 149.

We take it for granted that the course of mental processes is automatically regulated by the “pleasure principle”: that is to say, we believe that any given process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with the relaxation of this tension, i.e. with avoidance of “pain” or with the production of pleasure.⁵²

The reaction to a traumatic event is repression, whereby some or all of the event is relegated to the unconscious in order to avoid the pain of reality. Further to this, repressed or unconscious memories move in the direction of the conscious mind as if needing to be worked out, sorted and finally accepted.

Eunice’s death not only traumatized Smith, but coloured the way she viewed her mother. Smith’s anger towards and disappointment in her mother surface time and again. From my experience, however, she never steps back to consider her as an unhappily married woman instead of her mother. Given the evidence in her interviews, Smith’s father was just as unemotional towards his daughter as her mother. In her descriptions of them both, however, the mother is clearly painted in a darker light while the father is heroicized, as he is the one who brought her to art school. According to Freud, “it is possible for the instinctual representative to be split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on account of this intimate connection, undergoes idealization.”⁵³ In this light we can view Smith’s relationship with her mother as a physical manifestation of the repressed memory. Rather than accept her sister’s

⁵²Freud, 141

⁵³Freud, 150

death, Smith views the tragedy as being symptomatic of her mother's inability to give her children physical and emotional care.

Smith was obsessed with painting young girls from her early school days and constantly returned to the subject without explanation. In relation to trauma, this can be characterized as a compulsion to repeat "an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype; on the contrary, he has the strong impression that the situation is fully determined by the circumstance of the moment."⁵⁴

Smith's insistence that she was drawn to painting young girls because their mothers didn't have the time to sit for a portrait, while true on one level, doesn't necessarily explain why she was more drawn to young girls as her subjects than young boys. Along with the compulsion to repeat an action is its physical manifestation, termed "acting out," which, according to Freud, is an "action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and phantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character."⁵⁵ A 1994 press release can be read as recording Smith's awareness of a connection between her paintings of little girls and the death of her sister, though she never actually verbalized it and never saw the psychological pattern.

⁵⁴Laplanche, 78.

⁵⁵Ibid., 4.

In 1946 Smith painted the portrait of Gilberte Simard, the young tubercular girl from Petite-Riviere-St-Francois. In the 1994 press, release Andrew Tibor Princz notes that “Her gaze was of a sad child. The death of Gilberte reminded Smith of the sorrowful memory of the equally tragic passing of her sister.”⁵⁶ In psychoanalytic terms, this refers to deferred action. As explained by psychoanalytic writer J.B. Laplanche, “Experiences, impressions and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. This may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness.”⁵⁷

While some people never come to terms with their trauma, Smith was lucky enough to find in painting a way of working through the issues locked in her unconscious. She never consciously made an effort to come to terms with Eunice’s death, but the passage of time led to a healing process that manifested itself in and through her work.

As early as 1949 Smith set to work on a painting that ultimately gave her the ability to talk about her traumatic experience. In my first interview with Smith, I asked her about a large canvas of a cow that dominates her apartment. She was very excited that I should inquire about that particular painting and immediately launched into its history. I had noticed that there were three dates

⁵⁶Andrew Tibor Princz, “Jori Smith “To Seize the Light I See,””(Baie St-Paul: Centre d’Exposition, 1994). (Press Release)

⁵⁷Laplanche, 111.

in the bottom right hand corner of the piece and had correctly assumed that it had been developed at three different points in her life. She began the piece in the forties when she had fallen in love with the picturesque village of St. Irénée. She had rented a little shack perched on the hillside of the coast in St. Irénée and every day would drive her Volkswagen beetle out along the St. Lawrence to set up and paint:

I thought I'll come here one day and paint the village, it's so beautiful. I was there for two weeks...Anyhow, this cow, every day would come up to visit me. All day, she'd work her way up, eating and she'd land up at my door. And I thought "gee that's a nice cow, I've always loved animals; I'll call her Bessie." So I thought why don't I paint her? She's my model. She's right there every day on the dot, 4 o'clock. And so I painted her on that big canvas. But the fence wasn't in. I put it in storage, I wasn't happy about it. It was in storage since 1949. Every now and then I would take it out, put it on the wall and wonder, "what the hell will I do with it?" It's not finished, it's empty, just lying there and then one day, just five weeks ago, I thought, "I'll put the fence, why not? It made the painting."⁵⁸

While I didn't immediately see the significance of this cow, it became clear to me after weeks of interviews and time spent with Smith. Later in another interview, while talking about her sister, Smith confessed:

I never spoke about that, I never told anybody about Eunice until just lately. It was the cow. It made me unburdened. Isn't that funny, eh? It comforts me. My other paintings, I don't look at them anymore. The cow I look at all the time because it makes me smile. I say, "my she would have loved that. She would have said, "oh what a beautiful cow Marjorie, paint me another." So anyhow this cow released me you know, I could cry but I hadn't the terrible

⁵⁸Jori Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

suffering that I had because I remember how good I was to her.⁵⁹

Bessie [fig.6], the painting of the cow, like the memory of her sister, haunted her for years, sitting in storage, incomplete until 2002, when it stimulated the abreaction of her repressed feelings. In Freudian terms, Smith experienced an emotional discharge whereby she was liberated from the affect attached to the memory of her sister's death.⁶⁰

Smith did, at one point in her life, consider psychoanalysis because her friend Stanley Cosgrove was being treated by a Dr. Prados. Today, she holds mixed feelings about the psychoanalytic process. She was warned away from it by Dr. Prados and saw its negative effect on Cosgrove:

There's a portrait up there at the end of the wall of Dr. Prados. He was a famous psychoanalyst. He was brought from Spain by one of our biggest doctors here and he went everywhere to analyze sick people who were important. The funny thing is that I said to him, because he was analyzing Cosgrove, "won't you analyze me? I'd be very interested in having you analyze me." He responded, "No Jori, I could never analyze you." "Why?" I said. "You would lose your spontaneity and therein lies your talent."⁶¹

The spontaneous character of Smith's work has often been the subject of comment and the process itself was predominantly a spontaneous endeavor because she often painted with an impulsive instinct. As stated by Ricoeur, "art is both a symptom and a cure...Works of art are not only socially valuable...they

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰LaPlanche, 1.

⁶¹Smith, personal interview with the author, 17 February 2003.

are also creations which, as such, are not simply projections of the artist's conflicts, but the sketch of their solution."⁶² Smith's portraits of young girls can be read as an unconscious manifestation or a symptom of her repressed desire. By that same token, they can also be read as an unprescribed cure that aided in the process of working through her traumatic experience. *Bessie*, in Smith's own words, provided the cure she had sought for decades. While she has become famous for her portraits of sad girls, the process of psychotherapy, which is still highly controversial, may not have provided Smith with the closure that *Bessie* provided, and may even have put an end to her prolonged working out of her feelings through portraits of young girls.

At the outset of this chapter, the general reaction to these portraits was clear. There was always an awareness of the psychological impact of the painting, but no one has yet ventured to verbalize it. Without venturing too far, Edith-Anne Pageot's conclusion on Smith's portraits of children and the notion of the collective unconscious is instructive:

Les portraits d'enfants seraient donc des figures propices à explorer un espace psychologique qui se situe au-delà du conscient. Que ces thèses soient fondées ou non, les oeuvres, nous l'avons vu, sont élaborées de manière à suggérer une dimension de la structure psychique qui dépasse la seule conscience individuelle.⁶³

The children's portraits are therefore ideal figures to explore a psychological space that is situated above consciousness.

⁶²Spitz, *Art and Psyche* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985), 8.

⁶³Pageot, 185-186.

Whether these theses are founded or not, the works, as we have seen, are elaborated in a manner to suggest a dimension of the psychic structure that goes beyond the individual consciousness. (My translation)

While she is not documented as having ascribed to the idea of a collective unconscious, Smith was aware that her work provided her audience with something psychologically tangible to which to relate. In an interview quoted in the press release for her 1994 Baie-St-Paul show, *To Seize the Light I See*, the artist recalls the words of one of her favourite writers: "Proust gives you the implements to discover yourself. As he said: 'Everyman is every other man.' If I know myself, I know you too. Because we are all alike. The same impulses, the same desires. The same pain, the same joys. And so the thing is, in life; is to discover yourself. Because that's what art is really, isn't it?"⁶⁴

Smith's works are honest portrayals of her perceptions. To return to Philip Stratford's poem, each day for Smith was a new start, a re-entry into the creation of her own self-portrait partially through her experience of portraying others.

⁶⁴Quoted in Princz

Conclusion

“I have lived a very long life and you know what’s funny? I have enjoyed the last fifty years the most!”

A topic that repeatedly surfaced throughout my experience with this subject was how the artist used art to build her identity and how she found in it a way to understand family experiences around her that were lacking in her childhood. Now, at the age of ninety-seven, blind and mostly deaf, she no longer has any living relatives. As she was and still is hypersocial, Smith remains in close contact with the people she befriended during her long life. As her own experience with her immediate family was essentially difficult and painful she found in her creativity a way to surround herself with people for whom she cared. I became, during the brief period of this thesis, the latest pseudo-family member in her life.

My first encounter, as with all subsequent visits with the artist, was like no other I have ever experienced. Not knowing what to expect, I rode the elevator up to her apartment only to discover at the end of the ride that we were in fact in the elevator together. After I introduced myself to her, she latched onto my arm and whisked me away into her apartment, thus beginning an experience that would prove to be unforgettable.

Once in her gallery-like apartment I discovered a ninety-six year old brimming with an overwhelming and charismatic bonhomie that filled the room.

We immediately became great friends and I returned time and again for what literally became a journey through the century as she told me of her friendships with P.K. Page, the Trudeaus, Hugh MacLennan, and of living with Mordecai Richler, to name but a few. As a star-struck historian I was fascinated and, over the two years that I have studied her life and work I have had the privilege of developing an important friendship that will not soon be forgotten.

What I thought to be true at the beginning of this project and what has clearly asserted itself in this paper is that Jori Smith's multi-faceted career deserves more thorough examination. As I tried to accommodate as much as I possibly could, I realize now that each of the topics that the three chapters cover could easily be elaborated into theses in and of themselves, proving the success of my original intention: to create a text that can act as a springboard for future research and academic investigation on the subject.

Not only could there be more research conducted in the three areas that I have chosen to analyze but a more in-depth feminist analysis of Jori Smith is certainly needed. As her marriage to Jean Palardy is still an emotional topic, I have refrained from using it extensively as subject matter because my proximity to the artist may have clouded my objectivity. However, it was perhaps the most important relationship that she developed and eventually it would be of great interest and socio-historical importance to analyze how this relationship affected her artistic production and the choices that she made.

Given her enthusiasm for life and art at the age of ninety-six, one could only imagine what a force she must have been throughout the years. Over the weeks and months of the past two years I have visited her as much as I possibly could, always trying to give something back to her, as she had from the outset made this project such an incredibly rich and exciting topic for me. We went on a picnic together in the Morgan Arboretum where we had both spent a great part of our west island lives; we visited her old home in Senneville and shared in many meals together.

Jori Smith is a celebrated and successful artist, a self-taught intellectual and a politically-minded integrationist. For a woman who lived during the earlier half of this century, she chose a lifestyle and set of values that were well ahead of her time. Disillusioned with the academic training she had received while at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Smith was by the 1930s an outspoken modernist, flouting convention and developing a style to accompany her beliefs and explore her surroundings. Her portraits, landscapes and most of all her book on the Charlevoix region are representational in their approach but multi-dimensional in result. They reveal both the details of life in rural Quebec and the perceptions of a well-travelled, dynamic woman with a tremendous ability to enjoy life.

“I paint as some people sing, well or badly as the case may be, but always with joy. For me it is the only way I have of expressing the satisfaction of being

alive.”¹

¹Zoe Bieler, “Two Generations in Petite Riviere,” *The Star* (Montreal) 18 November, 1964.

Appendix

Notable dates

- 1907** – Born in Montreal on January 1st to James Thurston Smith and Naomi Neal.
- 1919** – Eunice Smith, Jori's younger sister, dies of epilepsy.
- 1922** – Studies at the Art Association of Montreal for three months under Randolph Hewton
- 1922** – Begins her training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts
- 1926** – singled out by critic Albert Laberge as one of best three students at the school. Wins several prizes (Prix du directeur des beaux arts, First Prize for oil painting from life, First Prize for drawing from life, Higher Course and First Prize for drawing classical studies.
- 1927** – Wins Second Prize for oil painting from life, and Prix du Ministre for best student
- 1928**– Wins prix exceptionnel for general proficiency, a prize for vacation work and first prize and honours in painting and drawing. Participates in Art Association of Montreal Spring Exhibition. She continues to exhibit with them annually until 1934. Visits Les Eboulement with J-P. Lemieux and his mother.
- 1929** – Goes to Chicoutimi to paint and meets up with Jean Palardy.
- 1930** – Marries Palardy at Murray Bay (La Malbaie). Sets up JANS a commercial art studio with J-P. Lemieux and Palardy. Remains in operation for three months before closing.
- 1931** – First joint exhibition Palardy/Smith.
- 1931-33** – Resides in Charlevoix County
- 1933** – Exhibits with 10 other painters at the T. Eaton Company
- 1934 -1935** – Changed her name to Jori and went to France, England and Spain.

- 1937** – Exhibits at Montreal Arts Club Exhibition *Canadian Group of Painters*. Second joint exhibit with Palardy, Kerhulu Restaurant, Montreal. Solo show in Toronto at the Picture Loan Society.
- 1938** – Exhibition of the Eastern Group of Painters at W Scott and Sons, Montreal. Palardy quits painting. Smith paints mural for Mont Tremblant Lodge, Quebec.
- 1939** – Contemporary Arts Society exhibit, Stevens Gallery, Montreal.
- 1940** – Smith and Palardy rent a studio from Albert Laliberté on St. Famille St. in Montreal. Eastern Group of Painters show at the AAM. The couple buys a house in Petite-Riviere-St-Francois.
- 1941** – *Salon des Independants*, Palais Montcalm, Quebec City. *Peinture Moderne*, Henry Morgan Co., Montreal
- 1942** - *Aspects of Canadian Painting*, Addisson Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachussetts.
- 1944** - Smith exhibits at the Dominion Gallery with Jacques de Tonnancour, Sybil Kennedy and Allan Harrison. *The Development of Painting in Canada*, Art Gallery of Toronto.
- 1945** – CAS exhibit, T. Eaton Gallery in Toronto
- 1946** – CAS exhibit. Receives a grant to paint in Haiti. Goes to Europe in the Fall, stays predominantly in Paris and La Gaude in Provence.
- 1947** – *Canadian Women Artists*, Riverside Museum, New York. Spends three months in Guatemala.
- 1949** – *Canadian Women Painters*, West End Gallery, Montreal.
- 1950-51** – Visits Italy and France with Palardy.
- 1952** – Visits Tourette-sur-Loup, France with Gilles Corbeil and continues alone to Ibiza, San Sebastian, Toledo and Barcelona.
- 1953** – Private show at studio on St-Famille of sketches from visit to Europe.

- 1955** – Solo show at the Dominion Gallery. Visits Bern, Frankfurt and Estapola. Wins Jessie Dow prize for best painting in Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Spring Exhibition.
- 1957** – Separates from Jean Palardy. *Five Women Painters*, George Waddington Galleries, Montreal.
- 1958** – Visits Manila and takes a cruise ship from Hong Kong to Nice.
- 1959** – Winter spent in Avignon. Visits Italy. *The Arts of French Canada*, Winnipeg Art Gallery.
- 1963** – Solo show at ArtLenders, Montreal.
- 1964** – Solo show at Galerie XII at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
- 1965** – Visits Italy and Portugal.
- 1966** – Moves to Senneville, Quebec.
- 1967** – *Peinture Vivante du Québec*, Musée du Québec, Québec City
- 1969** – Visits Cap-Ferrat and Burgundy, France
- 1971** – Visits Sardinia.
- 1975** – *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada*, Agnes Etherington Gallery, Kingston, Ontario. *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, National Gallery, Canada.
14 Women Painters, Galerie Gilles Corbeil, Montreal.
- 1976** – *Three Generations of Quebec Art*, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal. *Jori Smith*, Kastel Gallery, Montreal. Gives up the house at Petite-Rivière-St-François.
- 1977** – *Two Women*, Twenty-One McGill Street, Toronto.
- 1978** – *Modern Painting in Canada*, Edmonton Art Gallery.
- 1979** – Solo show at Kastel Gallery, Montreal.
- 1980** – *The Contemporary Arts Society*, Edmonton Art Gallery.

- 1981** – Visits Sardinia and Venice. *Images of Charlevoix*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Solo show at the Kastel Gallery, Motnreal.
- 1982** – *Modernism in Quebec Art: 1916-1946*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- 1983** – Visits Venice.
- 1984** – Visits Ireland. *Jori Smith: Watercolours*, Agassiz Galleries, Winnipeg.
- 1986** – Solo show at Kastel Gallery, Montreal.
- 1987** – Leaves Senneville to live closer to the downtown area of Montreal.
- 1988** – Receives honorary doctorate from Concordia University.
- 1993** – *Rediscovering Jori Smith: Selected Work, 1932-1993*, Restropective show at the Dominion Gallery, Montreal.
- 1994** – *To Seize the Light I See*, solo show at the Centre d'Exposition Baie St-Paul.
- 1997** – *Jori Smith, A Celebration*, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal.
- 1998** – Solo show at the Dominion Gallery.
- 1999** – Show at the Winchester gallery
- 1999** – Published her memoirs of Charlevoix, *Charlevoix County*
- 2001** – Awarded the Medaille by the Quebec National Assembly
- 2003** – Awarded the Order of Canada

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Figure 1 - Rose and her mother, Madame Louise, wife of Eloi Tremblay
1934-35, Oil on board (23.2 x 30.2cm)
Collection of Dr. Joseph Stratford

Figure 2 - Veillee chez Eloi Tremblay, St-Urbain
1934, oil (20.8 x 30.5cm)
Collection of Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery

Figure 3 - La Communiante
1944, oil on canvas board
National Gallery of Canada

Figure 4 - Rose Fortin
1935, oil (50.8 x 40.6cm)
Collection of Talbot Johnson

Figure 5 - Little Girl in Blue
1947, oil on canvas (61.2 x 51.5cm)
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Figure 6 - Bessie
1947, 1993, 2002
oil on board (no dimensions available)
Artist's collection