

Publishing Art Books in Atlantic Canada
By Ray Cronin

Art books represent a significant area of publishing in Atlantic Canada. From the by-now familiar coffee table book, to zines, exhibition catalogues, histories, and artist's books, the number of books featuring Atlantic Canadian art grows every year.

The most common type of art book is the exhibition catalogue, which probably dates back as far as the first exhibition in Halifax (and in British North America), an 1839 show featuring highlights from local collections and artworks by students of W.H. Jones, Dalhousie College's drawing master. Such catalogues were simply lists of artists' names, titles of works, and prices if for sale. For over 100 years such lists represented most publications on art in Atlantic Canada.

What was almost certainly the largest of these was published in 1949 accompanying the exhibition *200 Years of Art in Halifax: An Exhibition Prepared in the Honour of the Bicentenary of the City of Halifax, N.S. 1749-1949*. At fifty-six pages the catalogue was as lengthy as the exhibition's title. It was ambitious for those days, but as the show featured almost three hundred artworks, listing them took a fair amount of space. The catalogue has a brief forward by the exhibition's organizers, an uncredited foreword, and a list of works. It also features short biographies of all the artists represented, compiled by organizer and Dalhousie professor Alex Mowat. The show was a survey, featuring works from as early as 1749 and some so current that may well have still been wet (a supplement inserted in my copy of the catalogue lists twenty works added to the show after the catalogue went to press).

200 Years of Art in Halifax is modest by today's standards, most of its few illustrations are in black and white, and there is little text. Indeed, it was very much a souvenir, something to have had in hand while perusing the exhibition. The one colour illustration, of A.Y. Jackson's *Entrance to Halifax Harbour* (1919), is tipped in (glued in after the catalogue was printed) as a frontispiece. The painting wasn't even included in the exhibition. Perhaps the Tate balked at sending it to an exhibition held in a high school.

Most exhibition catalogues today bear little resemblance to this piece of history. *Future Possible: An Art History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (The Rooms and Goose Lane Editions), published in 2021, is fully illustrated in colour and boasts 312 pages with eighteen texts and essays. Other recent publications, such as monographs on ceramicist Walter Ostrom and photographer Ned Pratt, are a more typical length, each between 120 and 180 pages. In addition to accompanying exhibitions organized by art galleries, these three books share their co-publisher, Fredericton's Goose Lane Editions.

Goose Lane has been working with art galleries for over twenty years, and this spring they are publishing four art books, collaborations with the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, York University, and the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. *Generations: The Sobey Family & Canadian Art* (the only one of the publications for which a pdf was available for advance viewing), documents a touring exhibition of historical and contemporary Canadian art drawn from the collections of the Sobey Art Foundation, the Empire Company, and individual Sobey family members. It has six essays on the historical context of the Sobey collection, and an interview with Kent Monkman, an artist who has received significant patronage from the Sobey family. As a catalogue the 1949 Halifax bicentenary publication bears as much relationship to *Generations* as a paper airplane does to a jet.

While the book accompanies an exhibition, with its numerous illustrations and thoughtful essays, it can stand alone. "The perspective that we brought to art book publishing," Susanne Alexander, Goose Lane's publishers recalls, "was that a book shouldn't be so tied to an exhibition that it couldn't be understood or appreciated outside of the gallery context."

There is little fear of that happening with *Generations*. The various essayists use elements of the Sobey collections to examine Canadian art history, as well as current trends in contemporary art. Art historian Jocelyn Anderson, for instance, in her essay "Patriotic and Artistic: Canadian Painters and the National Challenge," looks at the challenge artists had in the first decades of confederation to create a Canadian style in the face of a long European tradition, while John Geoghegan, in "Making the French

Connection: The Group of Seven and Quebec Painting” looks at the influence that painters from Quebec such as James Wilson Morrice had on the Group of Seven and their evolving Canadian style. Thoughtful and informative, these texts, and the essays by Michèle Grandbois, Ian DeJardin, and Sarah Milroy, reward reading whether one sees the exhibition or not.

Goose Lane Editions have been publishing art books since 1991, but it was their third book, *The Art of Mary Pratt* by Tom Smart (co-published with the Beaverbrook Art Gallery), that launched them into art publishing. “It was the turning point for us,” Alexander remembered. “We went from what I would describe as small art books addressing a local or regional audience to a large book suddenly addressing a national audience.” The exhibition toured the country, making Mary Pratt a household name in Canada. It also opened doors across the country for Goose Lane. “It brought our work to the attention of other galleries and museums,” says Alexander.

Goose Lane is not alone in such partnerships, but the model, successful as it is, is hardly the only approach to art book publishing. Photographer Thaddeus Holownia, for instance, uses his Sackville, New Brunswick-based Anchorage Press to publish books of his large format photography, such as *Headlighting 1974-1978*, published in 2021. Many artists also use the book as their art form, creating unique or extremely limited edition works that are displayed in art galleries rather than sold in bookstores. This spring Breakwater Books will be publishing a trade version of a book in this tradition—*Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge, Volume II* by Newfoundland artists Pam Hall and Jerry Evans.

Technology has made an outsized impact on producing art books, particularly in the area of illustration. The days of tipping images into books are long gone (except in some artist’s books), and full-colour books are now the norm. Since 2019 another advance, print-on-demand, has been utilized by Torbay Bight Press to produce a series of books featuring the work of contemporary Newfoundland artists. There are three books in the series, with the latest featuring St. John’s painter Emily Pittman. *Someday Homes Fill My Dreams* pairs images of Pittman’s paintings with poems by the artist, providing an

intimate glimpse into her thought process, evoking the world she so ably creates in her images. This fall the fourth book, featuring the work of painter Mike Gough, will be published. Rex Passion, publisher of Torbay Bight Press, explains that this series is meant to serve the artists. “It was never meant to be a commercial success,” he says, “I just want to get the stuff out there.” There are no curatorial essays; in the series, Passion explains, he strives to connect the artists voice to their artworks.

Art books play an important role in the art world. “Exhibitions are ephemeral,” Susanne Alexander notes, “but books are lasting.” More and more, art books are playing an important role in publisher’s lists, as well. “We’ve found that the market for art books is growing,” Alexander says, something that bodes well for artists and art-lovers in Atlantic Canada.