

Summer Sketches: The artist, alone, makes sense of a creative landscape

By Emily McKibbin

It is this "impressionistic" note, if I may use a term to many ears of frightful import, which enhances the value of his later work. In this subjective mood he will show to many people what they have never seen before. He will open their eyes to the rich colours left by the retreating tide on stone and sand, to masses of foliage silhouetted against the sky, to the sun on grass, to the pleasant line, to sea and shore.

—Harriet Ford, 1894

An artist, aging, returns to the landscape of his youth. Years of acclaim have ebbed into appreciation, but there's a relegation in that, too: an assignment to the past. Younger artists, artists trained in Paris, London, Rome, have begun to grab the attention of a restless audience. This artist's work, once nationalistic, once inspiring, is now out of fashion. The press he gets is positive but underwhelming; at an exhibition of his works in London, a critic writes: "Everywhere and always [he] does his level best. His pictures lack the radiant impress of genius, "the consecration and the poet's dream;" but they attest to the painter's deftness of execution, the equal strength and delicacy of his touch, and, to speak generally, the splendor if not the subtlety of his colour."ⁱ Formerly the first president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Artists, he declines to stand for re-election in 1890.

Had Lucius O'Brien (1832-1899) retired at this precise moment, he would be remembered for his impressive oils and watercolours of Ontario and Quebec made in the years immediately following Confederation; *Picturesque Canada* (1880-1884), his two-volume book project documenting Canada from coast to coast made when the completion of the Canada Pacific Railway telescoped that distance; and his dedicated leadership of the Royal Canadian Academy in its first years. This would be an impressive legacy, but an incomplete one: because in the final ten years of his life, O'Brien embarked on a remarkable project documenting the areas immediately surrounding his childhood home in Shanty Bay. Inspired in part by the Aesthetic movement of the late 19th century, O'Brien worked largely in watercolour in this mature period. Spontaneous and richly coloured, his *plein air* "drawings" of Southern Ontario capture the spirit and energy of high summer afternoons, overcast fall days, and the variegated greens of spring.

Art historian Dennis Reid notes that these late works are "shaped by an understanding of nature as a source of personal history, like an open book of his life."ⁱⁱ *Cows in a Meadow* (1897) shows a low field foregrounded by gently rolling hills, the grass marked here and there by knotty shrubs and white flowers picked out of the grass through careful scratches into the paper. The light is beautiful, softly diffuse; in this long view, the sun shines only on a small pond, and the cows that graze beside it. O'Brien's attitude towards the landscapes of his childhood may be shaped by his mother, who settled with her husband along the shores of Shanty Bay in the early 1830s. On one such June afternoon, she writes of "a low flowery point where the children were in ecstasies and where the rose-scented air was most grateful to my senses,"ⁱⁱⁱ a passage that could easily be lifted to describe this scene. That O'Brien was one of these children is significant: his early life was shaped by the landscape, but also the approach that the O'Briens took to settling it. His father, Lieutenant Edward O'Brien, was one of the many half-pay officers of the British Army and Navy recruited to act as community leaders in the new settlements springing up north of Toronto, one of several colonial outposts protecting against possible American incursion over the Great Lakes. *Cows in a Meadow* is uncomplicated, this halcyon scene revealing nothing of the turmoil or geopolitical realities of Canadian settlement in this region.

An artist, young, makes sense of a landscape new to him. This is the same landscape that inspired O'Brien, at the remove of more than one hundred years. The things that caught O'Brien's eye are here, but buried under layers of development. While O'Brien sought a naturalistic world untouched and open to Canadian expansion, Garrett Walker's ongoing series *Town and Country* is tuned into other frequencies. Gone are the sailboats and canoes of O'Brien's watercolours; in their place are chip wagons and poutine stops. Where there are lakes, they appear incongruous against artefacts of advanced capitalism: here we see recreational centres and industrially uniform ice fishing tents. Walker's attention to these details reflects his ongoing interest in the contemporary clutter that accumulates over sites of historical significance. Prior to relocating to Barrie in 2013, Walker lived in Toronto where his artistic practice investigated the buried histories of the city. A graduate of Ryerson University's Master of Fine Arts in

Documentary Media in 2011, his thesis work *Toronto Souvenirs* captured the mundane landscapes that coalesced over the graves of cholera victims and paupers, housed munitions workers during World War II, or witnessed Toronto's first aviation tests. He brings this same attention to Barrie and its surrounding areas.

In some respects, Walker's photographs of the area are slower than O'Brien's watercolours. In the digital age, we have a tendency to use our camera phones like sketching pads, capturing the essence of moments rather than composing deliberative scenes. O'Brien's *Sailboat at Muskoka* (1893) is a seemingly quick image, the light muted and the leaves on the far shore dappled a rich, oxblood red. The sailboats here are poised at the edge of a sheltered inlet, their sails apparently slack on the calmly rippled lake. Walker's *Night Ski, Snow Valley, ON* (2016) is a nighttime photograph, taken on a back road leading to a ski hill in Minesing, just outside of Barrie. The shot is lit by multiple, competing light sources: the sky, cloudy and faintly orange, reflects light pollution from the sodium streetlights of a nearby city; the metal halide lights on the course scatter like stars on the camera lens, illuminating the wide, artificial strip of snow cascading down the front of the hill. What Walker captures hints at the sublime, but it's a manmade version. What appears naturalistic reveals human intention on closer inspection. This is not to say that Walker isn't attentive to beauty, or blind to it: consider the blushing peach light suffusing *IBM Data Centre, Barrie* (2015) or *Chip it up, Lakefield* (2016). There is beauty here, and it rewards those who look mindfully.

O'Brien's and Walker's works differ in many respects, but both artists are keenly attuned to the landscapes in which they find themselves. Lucius O'Brien worked *en plein air*, and consequently these watercolours are summer sketches: quick works dashed off outdoors, imbued with the warmth of a season and the chance encounter of a beautiful day. *Summer Sketches* refers to this mode of working, but also this representational style: optimistic, reflective of O'Brien's approach to nation-building rooted in his historical moment. Walker's, less summery, less sketched: here are wintry scenes, but also a sense of the cost of settlement and the historical weight of time.

There is a simultaneity that occurs in exhibitions—historical landscapes can hang next to inkjet photographs, their ink barely dried, and both can inflect our reading of the other. This simultaneity is doubled in this presentation, as the O'Brien watercolours from the MacLaren's Permanent Collection have recently undergone specialist conservation treatment. Years of acid staining have fallen away, revealing landscapes that much closer to O'Brien's intention. Conservators at the Canadian Conservation Institute undertook this work over the course of two years, spending up to 130 hours each on eight watercolours. Familiarity, in this case, bred fondness: as the newly cleaned works revealed the detail that O'Brien layered into his skies, conservators informally dubbed him "Lucius, lover of light." Presented next to Walker's photographs, made within the last three years and printed only recently, one gets the sense that the past is never so far behind us.

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ⁱ Dennis Reid, *Lucius R. O'Brien: Visions of Victorian Canada* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990): 89

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 115

ⁱⁱⁱ Audrey Saunders Miller, ed. *The Journals of Mary O'Brien, 1828-1838* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1968): 240