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Abstract

This dissertation concerns the relation between eroticism and nationalism in the work of a set of English Canadian artists in the mid-1960s and 1970s, namely John Boyle, Greg Curnoe, and Joyce Wieland. It contends that within their bodies of work there are ways of imagining nationalism and eroticism that are often formally or conceptually interrelated, either by strategy or figuration, and at times indistinguishable. This was evident in the content of their work, as well as in the models that they established or suggested for interpreting it, and is present in more and less overt forms as ways of imagining an English Canadian nationalism that surrounded them.

The dissertation contextualizes the three artists in the terms of erotic art prevalent in the twentieth century, and makes a case for them as part of a uniquely Canadian mode of decadence. Constructing my case largely from the published and unpublished writing of the three subjects and how these played against their reception, I have attempted to elaborate their artistic models and processes, as well as their understandings of eroticism and nationalism, situating them within the discourses on English Canadian nationalism and its potentially morbid prospects. Rather than treating this as a primarily cultural or socio-political issue, I treat it as both an epistemic and a formal one.

The artistic material discussed consistently revels in irony, negativity, sarcasm and parody, treating abstraction, politics, and pornography on an exchangeable footing. It frequently mocks or derides the sociological value of art while simultaneously positing itself as a nationalist art. This, paradoxical or absurd though it may be, I think is important, because it demonstrates a need to shift from reducing nationalism in its artistic expression to a mode of meaning production and community formation, to recognizing that it can be, and was, something quite different.

For these three artists, nationalism was conceived not so much as the affirmation of a living community but of its deadness, noting its *irreality*, celebrating its destruction, or satirizing whatever values it could claim. Eroticism was consistently treated as a form of fragmentation or self-erasure and tied to deliberate abjection. In Curnoe, Boyle and some of the other Regionalists, art was a radical materiality that denied any privilege to meaning or experience, denigrated the value of the viewer, and perverted a rational sense of representation. In doing so it effectively treated the subject as another machine for processing matter, and refused it narrative substance. With Wieland, something quite different occurred. She created a hyper-symbolic mode of imagining the world that derided the subject and its phenomenal life as little more than excrement, and treated the symbol or stereotype as the vessel of a holy, transcendent reality.