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AUGUST 19, 2022

# ALEX COLVILLE'S RADICAL REALISM

*Next week marks the birthday of Canada's famed Maritime painter. To celebrate the occasion, we're turning to ACI's publication Alex Colville: Life & Work, where author Ray Cronin explores the artist's enigmatic scenes that consider relationships between nature and machines, humans and animals, and order and chaos.*

Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Alex Colville, C.C. (Companion, Order of Canada), 1986, photograph by Harry Palmer.

Next Wednesday, August 24 is the 102nd birthday of the remarkable realist painter Alex Colville (1920–2013). His famous works have had a legendary impact and have been referenced in such Hollywood films as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). Born in Toronto, Colville spent most of his life in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, where he produced realist paintings—often featuring his family (in particular his wife, Rhoda), the local landscape, his pets, and other animals. As he explained, "In a sense the things I show are moments in which everything seems perfect and something is revealed." Colville developed his approach to painting not long after serving in the Second World War. For him, art became a method of creating order from chaos. The excerpts below, drawn from the Art Canada Institute book *Alex Colville: Life & Work* by Ray Cronin, trace the trajectory of the painter's extensive career, from his beginnings as a war artist to his status as one of the most highly influential and internationally recognized figures in Canadian art.

**Sara Angel**
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

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# INFANTRY, NEAR NIJMEGEN, HOLLAND

Alex Colville, *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

In *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946, Canadian soldiers walking through the mire of the Scheldt estuary in Holland are depicted as a series of plodding figures, weighed down by the horrors of battle. One of Colville's earliest paintings, it was created during his time as an official war artist. He enlisted in the First Canadian Army in 1942, the same year he graduated from Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, and married Rhoda Wright, whom he had met as a student. This work foreshadows concerns seen in his more mature compositions, including his obsession with geometry, with a strong diagonal form cutting across the canvas. The war had a great impact on Colville, who documented his observations in Yorkshire, England, in the Mediterranean, and at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany between 1944 and 1946.

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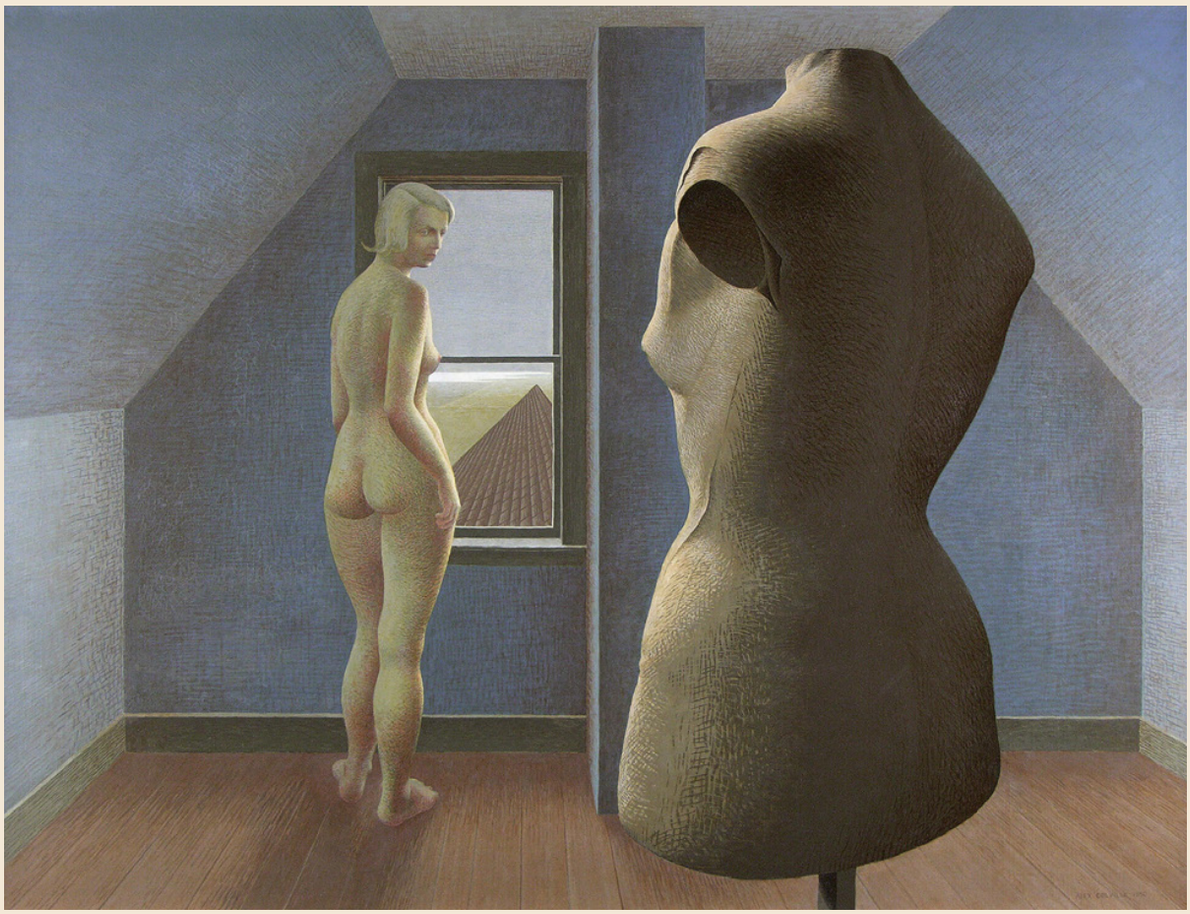
# NUDE AND DUMMY



Alex Colville, *Nude and Dummy*, 1950, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John.

After the war, Colville began teaching at his alma mater, Mount Allison University, where his students included now acclaimed realist artists Mary Pratt (1935–2018), Christopher Pratt (1935–2022), and Tom Forrestall (b.1936). Initially, Colville found little time to pursue his own creative practice, but by 1951 he had secured his first solo show at the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, which included his earliest mature work displaying his own style, *Nude and Dummy*, 1950. The scene is situated in an attic (specifically a room in Colville's Sackville home), one strangely empty of any objects except the lone female figure and a dressmaker's dummy. Standing at the window, the nude woman looks back over her shoulder. The painting marked the first time Colville used an underlying geometric skeleton to construct his composition, and also demonstrates his interest in imbuing the everyday with heightened tensions.

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# HORSE AND TRAIN

Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Among the most recognizable images in Canadian art today, Colville's *Horse and Train*, 1954, presents a locomotive turning a curve just seconds before its light illuminates a dark stallion. The clashing binaries of nature and machine, order and chaos, the waking world and the realm of nightmares are all at play in this simple, indelible picture. It is tempting to view this small panel as a response to Surrealism, with its jarring juxtapositions, but *Horse and Train* had its genesis in a poem by South African writer Roy Campbell (1901–1957), who wrote, "Against a regiment I nominate your brain. And a dark horse against an armored train." Colville completed the painting at a time when he was exhibiting regularly at commercial galleries in New York and Toronto, and major institutions like the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa were beginning to acquire his work.

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# FAMILY AND RAINSTORM

Alex Colville, *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955, ominous clouds appear on the horizon as a mother opens a car door for her son and daughter, and with each figure in the composition looking in a different direction, their faces hidden, the effect is mysterious. The picture is all the more enigmatic when we try to decipher what object the woman holds behind her back. As with other works Colville produced in the 1950s, this painting shows the themes he would pursue for the next six decades: his family, his home, and the environs of Sackville or Wolfville. Canada Post featured *Family and Rainstorm* on a stamp in 1982.

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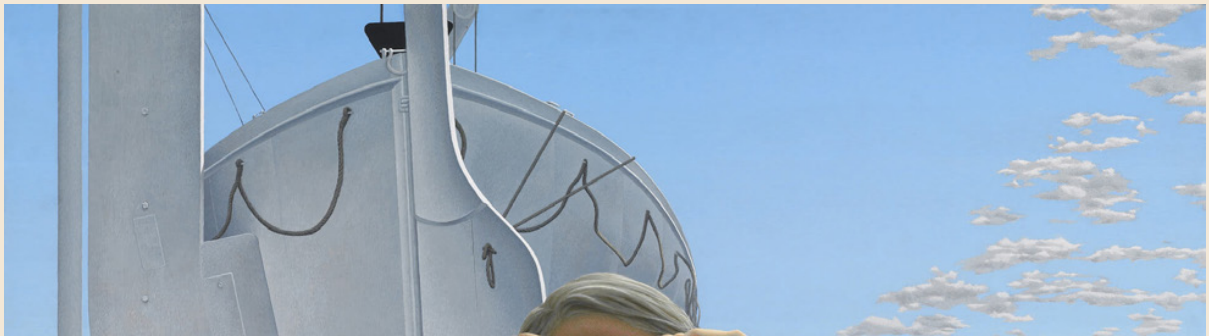
# TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND



Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Colville showed this work at the prestigious 33rd Venice Biennale. By the early 1960s, his artistic career was thriving, allowing him to resign from teaching at Mount Allison University to devote himself to painting. The scene is situated on the top deck of a P.E.I. ferry, where a woman looks directly at the viewer through a pair of binoculars while a man sits behind her, his face blocked from view by her body. Colville described this piece as a contrast between what he calls “the searching vision of the female” and the “stupid and passive” approach of the male gaze: “The woman sees, I suppose, and the man does not.” *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, inspired American director Wes Anderson to restage the scene in his film *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), and it is also referenced in Vancouver-based artist Jin-me Yoon’s (b.1960) series Long View, 2017.

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# PACIFIC

Alex Colville, *Pacific*, 1967, private collection.

A highly cinematic painting, *Pacific*, 1967, depicts a male figure looking out over an ocean, while a handgun lies on a wooden table that has a ruler along one side. The man seems relaxed, yet the weapon creates a foreboding tension. Colville developed the dramatic composition in 1967–68 while he was a visiting artist at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Art historian Helen J. Dow reads the gun and the table with its built-in measuring rod as symbolizing justice—the sword and scales substituted by more prosaic emblems. Whether this image is one of indecision or certainty, hope or despair, can only be decided by the viewer. With Colville's virtuosic talent evident in works like this one, accolades continued to accumulate for him throughout the 1960s, including election to the Order of Canada in 1967.

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## CENTENNIAL COINS

*Colville Mackerel 6066 (Dime)*, 2013,
photograph by William Eakin.

*Colville Wolf 6275 (Half Dollar)*, 2013,
photograph by William Eakin.

In 1965 Colville won a competition organized by the Royal Canadian Mint to design six coins commemorating Canada's one hundredth anniversary of Confederation. The series depicts a Canada Goose (one dollar), a wolf (fifty cents) (right), a wildcat (twenty-five cents), a mackerel (ten cents) (left), a rabbit (five cents), and a dove (one cent). "It is a question of finding images which are worthy and appropriate for use in celebrating our country's Centennial," Colville explained, "[to] express not merely some particular time, place, or event, but a whole century of Canada, and even more; natural creatures provide this enduring and meaningful continuum." The artist's centennial coins can be thought of as the largest-edition Canadian artwork ever made and the most widely disseminated.

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# REFRIGERATOR

Alex Colville, *Refrigerator*, 1977, private collection.

In 1973 Colville and his wife moved to Wolfville, Nova Scotia, a small university town much like Sackville, and there, in his late fifties, he created his most controversial work, *Refrigerator*, 1977. The painting depicts a nude couple in a dark kitchen standing around their fridge. The man drinks a glass of milk; the woman is at the open door, considering her options. Three cats gather at their feet, hoping for some food or drink, or merely attention. Historically in Western painting, the female nude is ubiquitous. However, the full-frontal male nude is decidedly less so. Here Colville presents a domestic scene that is distinctly contemporary. “For some viewers, this ‘familiarity’ is taken too far,” writes art historian Mark Cheetham. Most likely Colville did not intend for *Refrigerator* to shock the public, as the relationship between husbands and wives is a constant theme he explored in his art.

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## CYCLIST AND CROW

Alex Colville, *Cyclist and Crow*, 1981, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

A prime example of Colville's elevation of the everyday into images filled with potent symbolism is *Cyclist and Crow*, 1981. Though the female rider embodies summer's delight, the slight lead of her opponent—the crow drifting just above her sightline—introduces an element of unease into a blissful afternoon. Colville used a camera to capture images he might borrow elements from months or even years later when working on one of his paintings, yet he did not merely replicate the photographs. "As a good realist, I have to reinvent the world," the artist said. As a result of Colville's conceptual approach, what might otherwise be a quotidian scene becomes a subtly ominous work of art that leaves viewers with more questions than answers.

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# TRAVELLER

Alex Colville, *Traveller*, 1992, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Arguably the best-known artist in Canada at the turn of the twenty-first century, Colville maintained a national presence with four museum exhibitions, two of which toured the country. Then in his seventies, he continued making haunting pictures like *Traveller*, 1992, that explore the themes of his earlier works in new ways. This painting presents the perspective of a man, possibly the artist, driving a car and approaching a figure whose face is obscured by the rear-view mirror. The uncertainty of the person's identity, and the mystery behind why they are standing alone in this largely deserted, snowy landscape, is at the heart of the tension in this piece. The dramatic encounter between a living being and a machine recalls Colville's *Horse and Train*, 1954, although this scene and the questions it raises are firmly grounded in the everyday.

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# DOG AND GROOM

Alex Colville, *Dog and Groom*, 1991, private collection.

Colville frequently painted his pets, as in *Dog and Groom*, 1991, which portrays the artist at home with his docile canine. More broadly, animals play a key role in his work, often standing in as a counter to human figures to signify an essential binary, such as human/animal or, perhaps more accurately, culture/nature. Yet his daughter, Ann Kitz, told curator Andrew Hunter, “He wasn’t sentimental about animals, but he thought that they were essentially good, and he didn’t think that people were inherently good.” For Colville, humans think, animals act, and in their juxtaposition something important about the world can be expressed. The artist has said, “To me the presence of animals seems absolutely necessary. I feel that without animals everything is incomplete.”

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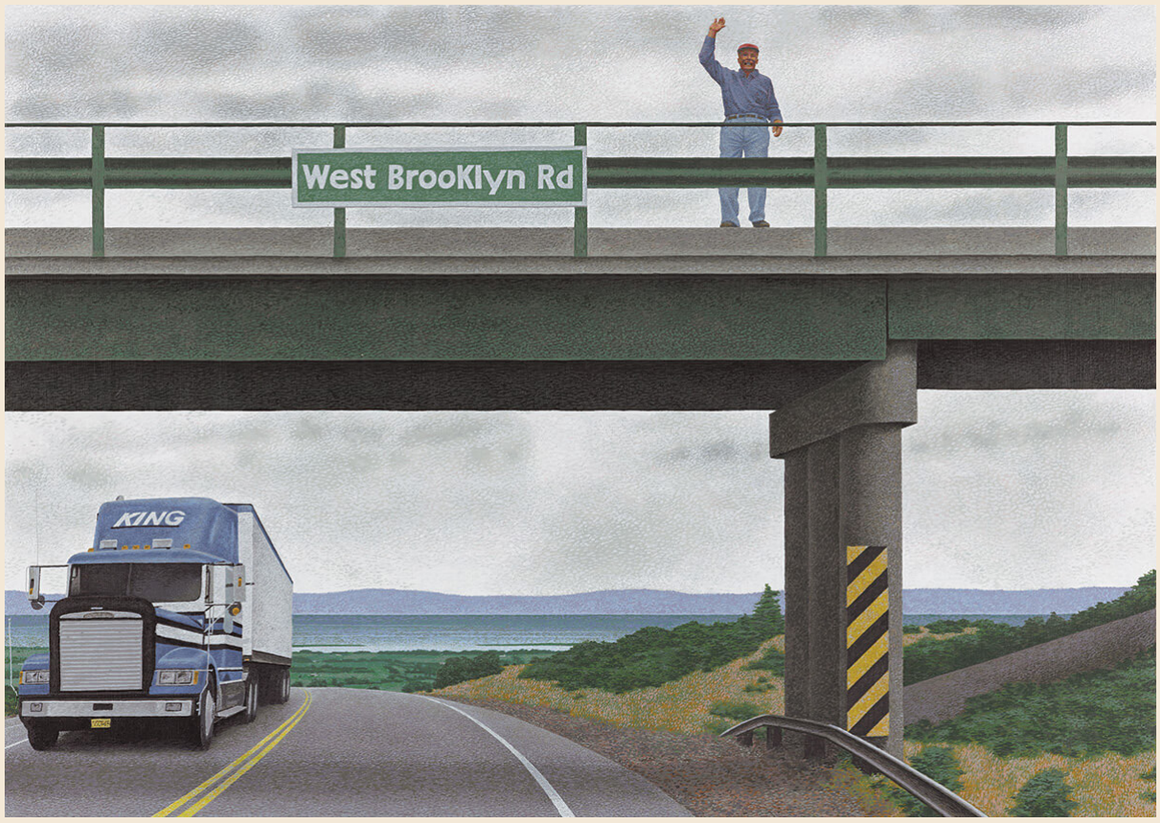
# WEST BROOKLYN ROAD




Alex Colville, *West Brooklyn Road*, 1996, private collection.

Colville always sought the universal in the particular, which lends his work its great power. The scene in *West Brooklyn Road*, 1996, is on Nova Scotia Highway 101, where for years, an intellectually impaired man, Freddie Wilson, waved to drivers as they began the long turn into the Annapolis Valley. In this painting, though, the waver is not Wilson, but the artist. As such Colville presents an image of himself as an outsider watching the passing pageant of life. The renowned realist painter Mary Pratt, Colville’s former student, remembered of the artist, “He showed me you could just look at the world in its wonderful simplicity and find in that simplicity lots and lots to think about.”

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