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The Art of Andor Weininger in Transition

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Oliver A. I. Botar, *A Bauhausler in Canada: Andor Weininger in the 50s*. Oshawa, ON: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-921500-98-8. 280 pages. \$57.95

Oliver Botar's *A Bauhausler in Canada: Andor Weininger in the 50s* offers a richly illustrated biographical study of a European modernist's encounters with the postwar artistic scene in Canada. Based on archival research from the artist's bequest, Botar reconstructs the circumstances of Weininger's engagement with and disappointing rejections within the Canadian art world. His topic is a refreshing take on the usual success stories of canonical artistic figures, as it provides an uncharacteristic story of an artist attempting to make difficult transitions. Coming from the prestigious Bauhaus, why could Weininger not make a name for himself in Canada similarly to his peers Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy who also settled in North America before or during World War II?¹ While searching for the reasons behind Weininger's lack of success, Botar sketches the outlines of the contemporary Canadian artistic changes which the older artist was reluctant, and perhaps, unable to fully engage. Countering other biographers' dispirited pronouncements, Botar defends the Canadian artistic establishment and explains Weininger's failures within the changing artistic scene and the artist's lack of self-promotion. Unlike Bauhaus professors, Weininger relied on creative design without teaching or publishing credentials to support his efforts at gaining acceptance. Through the account of Weininger's personal involvement, we gain an insight into the ongoing shift from artists' societies to the gallery promotion system, a development that reveals the increasing specialization in the artistic field that

was unreceptive to Bauhaus experimentation and its philosophy of the whole man outside the theoretical or scholastic approach.

The book describes the decisive impact New York Abstract Expressionism had on the international art world in the early 1950s, when even an artist garnering Bauhaus principles felt compelled to confront the cult of artistic individuality. In particular, the Toronto-based group *Painters Eleven*, an organization that did not invite Weininger into its ranks, embraced the young North American artists' emphatic rejection of the hegemony of European art.² While trying to make the transition from the Bauhaus and desperately in need of an artists' community, Weininger was reluctant to do the same denial to meet the expectations of the Toronto artistic tastes. His modest-sized works and their lack of gravitas stood in opposition to North American monumentality and grand seriousness appropriate to the tense Cold War political atmosphere. Weininger's art of the time seems to be oblivious to the devastation of World War II. The fact that the artist had fled Germany, the country that had originated the Holocaust, with his potentially persecuted wife, who was partially Jewish, did not lessen the Weiningers' interest in the German language and their favorite school, as Botar states. Maybe trying to "fit in" was not enough at that moment and the Canadian art world expected Weininger to come to terms with Europe's recent past and the ongoing turmoil. Canadian artists were absolved of the same responsibility.

Although Botar perceptively points to these problems, the explanation of Weininger's whimsical approach is left incomplete. Instead of incisive psychological self-analysis or emotional drama, however, what we see in the work produced in Canada involves whimsy abstraction and the clownish in its light-heartedness. Can we attribute any meaning to the artist's avoidance of historical events and personal experiences? It should be noted that Botar successfully accomplished the difficult task of delivering a biography on an artist whose work resists a conducive treatment toward a biographical interpretation. And here one might see a disjuncture between Botar's biographical undertaking and Weininger's impersonal art. Since we have grown accustomed to biography illustrating the psychology of the artist's work, we accept Weininger's artistic approach if only it suggests his longing for the friendly involvement with the famous school. Yet it is precisely Weininger's whimsical style, a legacy of his Bauhaus clown persona that posits a comedic self to link his eclectic experimentation, just as his involvement in the Bauhaus jazz band and theater as master of ceremonies had managed to unify diverse interests at the Bauhaus. Botar does point out that Weininger was shy by nature, but neglects to develop a dialogue with the numerous images in the book.³ Wein-

inger appears to be hiding behind his “clown face” to mask his frustration, darkening a few drawings by pressing a face behind a curtain of black (*Untitled*, 1955, figure 198).⁴ Weininger fails to come to terms with self-promotion as a “genius” adhered to in the era. At the time, unity of the *Painters Eleven* is accepted as a device to promote their personal artistic styles in thriving Canada, not to advocate communal principles central to the Bauhaus.

Chapter five inventively tries to overcome Weininger’s multifaceted eclecticism by establishing his “Canadian style” rooted in biomorphic imagery that would forge a link with a nature-centrist trend in Canadian art.⁵ In turn, in chapter six the discussion triangulates Weininger’s contact with the burgeoning field of Canadian design; Botar convincingly situates the couple’s Bauhaus background in relation to the contemporary developments in Canada, even if they produced only one unrealized chair design. In view of other immigrant artists’ success in Canadian design at the time, the Weiningers’ lack of engagement is explained as missed opportunity in a largely open field, during a period of economic boom. Botar brings his study to a close by proposing that contrary to earlier scholarship, Weininger’s Toronto and later New York periods should be treated as a single continuum, the former serving as an introduction to and “apprenticeship” in North American culture. On the final analysis, despite the careful description of Weininger’s experimentation and inventiveness during his Canadian years, Botar seems to accept that it was a failure.⁶ Weininger’s carnivalesque attitude juxtaposed with the creative geniuses of mid-century artists, who relished wealth and fame, perhaps foretells our current interest in contemporary art and its defaming of high art.

Often surmounting the difficult assessment of an eclectic oeuvre, *A Bauhausler in Canada: Andor Weininger in the 50s* is a story of a Bauhausler trying to keep the Bauhaus commitments going in a rapidly changing world, a topic that previously had been addressed by scholars without the intense investigation Botar was committed to do.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of Albers and Moholy-Nagy’s art in North America see Achim Borchardt-Hume ed., *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: from the Bauhaus to the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

² Botar, *A Bauhausler in Canada*, p. 106.

³ Botar, *A Bauhausler in Canada*, p. 185

⁴ Botar, *A Bauhausler in Canada*, p. 142.

⁵ For Oliver Botar's relevant writings on biocentrism see "Biocentrism and the Bauhaus," *The Structurist*, no. 43-44 (2003-2004): 54-61; "The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism," in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007), 315-344; *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered* (New York: Graduate Center, The City University of New York, 2006); and Oliver Botar and Isabel Wünsche eds., *Biocentrism and Modernism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

⁶ Botar, *A Bauhausler in Canada*, p. 186.