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KALEIDOSCOPE VISION: MODERN PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORK OF PEGINICOL MACLEOD

Maria E. Szabo

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**KALEIDOSCOPE VISION:
MODERN PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORK OF PEGI NICOL MACLEOD**

(Spine title: Kaleidoscope Vision)

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by

Maria E. Szabo

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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*A*bstract

Positioning the work of Canadian artist Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904-1949) as a dynamic negotiation of modernism, this thesis examines the significance of everyday life and embodied existence to her artistic practice. By representationally revising domesticity, tactically modifying her home environment, and progressively engaging a broader community, Nicol MacLeod cultivated a modern integration of art and life. Rejecting transcendental purifications of modernism, she instead advocated the potency of perceptual and conceptual embodiment. Exploring the flux and immediacy of human interaction, Nicol MacLeod's paintings function performatively as modern evocations of art as experience.

Key Words: Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian art, modernism, gender, painting, domesticity, everyday life, embodiment, female nude, performance, Pragmatism, Existentialism, film

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Introduction

Kaleidoscope Vision

*I have furled back over my paces in a vast retreat to the week,
so dizzily in reverse*

*I have come to the place where I must paint my daughter or
bust. To have it around all day removes perspective and I have
Kaleidoscope vision but I must face it at last!*

— Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, 1944 ¹

Taking Pegi Nicol MacLeod's own characterization of her creative mode of perception as a point of departure, what follows is a critical examination and a descriptive evocation of the complexities and contingencies of a selection of her works — a responsive look at the dynamically modern perspectives which her *kaleidoscope vision* negotiates. From the mid 1920s until her death from cancer in 1949, at the age of forty-five, Nicol MacLeod pursued a multi-faceted, highly mobile artistic practice. She worked across Canada — in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto and Fredericton — and, despite primarily residing in New York from 1937-1949, was widely recognized as a key player in Canadian art over the course of her career. Nicol MacLeod's central position was reiterated through her participation in definitive Canadian exhibitions of the period, in both national and international contexts. Likewise, Nicol MacLeod was involved with

¹ File: Correspondence with Artists, 1935-1971, Kathleen Fenwick fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

formative artists' organizations of the 1930s and 1940s, including The Canadian Group of Painters, The Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour, and The Federation of Canadian Artists.

Yet, as early as 1964, Montreal critic Robert Ayre could observe a rapid decline in both the visibility and the status of her work, noting:

It is just 15 years since Pegi Nicol's untimely death. We had the memorial exhibition organized by the National Gallery in February, 1950, and Mrs. Millman's show in the West End Gallery in October of the following year, but there have been no others — unless it be a small one I vaguely remember in Gallery XII which I can't place in time. Meanwhile, a new generation has grown up that has had little opportunity to know a painter it is so much fun to know.²

Indeed, not until Joan Murray's 1984 publication of *Daffodils in Winter: The Life and Letters of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904-1949*, with an accompanying, touring retrospective exhibition organized by the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, was there a nationally accessible critical re-engagement with Nicol MacLeod's practice. By making the majority of Nicol MacLeod's surviving letters publicly available, this work offered a rich opportunity to become acquainted with the artist.³ Prior to Murray's monograph, Charles C. Hill's 1975 exhibition and catalog for *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, which includes a number of works by Nicol MacLeod, signaled a renewed interest in a period that had received little art historical attention in canonical accounts written since the 1950s — obscurely positioned, as the diverse paintings of the depression decade seemed to be, between the Group of Seven's northern landscapes and the polemical abstractions of Les Automatistes. Moreover, Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj's 1975 exhibition and

² Robert Ayre, "Pegi Nicol — As Refreshing as a Child," *Montreal Star*, March 7, 1964.

³ Throughout this thesis, for the reader's convenience of reference, I cite Nicol MacLeod's letters from the published transcriptions in *Daffodils in Winter*, instances where I have found discrepancies between the original letter and the transcription are indicated. Where the given letter has not been published, I cite an archival source.

publication, *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada*, and more comprehensively, Luckyj's 1983 show and catalog, *Visions and Victories: 10 Canadian Women Artists 1914 – 1945*, productively contextualized Nicol MacLeod in relation to her women artist peers. This vein of feminist revisionary scholarship significantly contributes to an art historical repositioning of Nicol MacLeod's work, particularly in light of the relatively high number of women who maintained prominent roles in the Canadian art scene of the 1930s and 1940s, notably as active members of the Canadian Group of Painters.⁴ Still, Murray's edited volume of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's letters, which includes as its introduction a thorough biographical essay, remained the only published study to substantively address this artist and her oeuvre for more than twenty years.

Highlighting Nicol MacLeod's historical importance to Canadian art and her connections with numerous key figures and organizations, Murray moreover correlates aspects of the stylistic evolution of Nicol MacLeod's painting with the developing aesthetic of abstract-expressionism that overtook Canadian and American art in the late 1940s.⁵ Consequently, Murray contends that Nicol MacLeod's “. . . living images of her

4 As critic Graham McInnes observes in a 1935 review of Nicol MacLeod's work: “Women occupy a strangely prominent position in the realm of the fine arts in Canada. Aesthetic creation in painting and in sculpture has usually been a field dominated by men; neither in Great Britain nor in France will you find as large a proportion of the well-known artists of the nation to be women.” McInnes, “Vivacious Artist.” *Saturday Night*, Toronto, Ontario, February 9, 1935. Lilia Torrance Newton, Anne Savage, Sarah Robertson, Mabel May, Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Paraskeva Clark and Isabel McLaughlin were all among the women members of the Canadian Group of Painters. Joan Murray has noted: “If we ask what the Canadian Group of Painters accomplished the answer must lie in what it did for women. The Group of Seven was totally male. To open its membership to women was a fairly radical decision in 1933.” Murray, *Pilgrims in the Wilderness: The Struggle of the Canadian Group of Painters (1933-1969)* (Oshawa, Ontario: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1993), 10. The first Vice-president of the Canadian Group of Painters was Prudence Heward, she shared this position with A. Y. Jackson. For a discussion of the involvement of the women painters affiliated with Beaver Hall in the early history of the Canadian Group of Painters, see: Barbara Meadowcroft, *Painting Friends: The Beaver Hall Women Painters* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1999), 129-135.

5 Joan Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils in Winter: The Life and Letters of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904-1949* (Moonbeam, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 1984), 55.

world form part of the first wave of Canadian modernism.”⁶ Laura Brandon's 1992 M.A. Thesis, “Exploring 'the Undertheme': The Self-Portraits of Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904 – 1949),” which grew out of biographical research on the artist that Brandon began in the early 1980s, is also concerned with the relationship between Nicol MacLeod's painting and the modernist framework of early twentieth-century Canadian art. Differentiating her position from Murray's, Brandon writes of Nicol MacLeod: “while she was not anti-modernist or reactionary, her style and subject-matter fitted uneasily into the new art burgeoning around her in both Toronto and New York.”⁷ Brandon contests the relevance of formalist analysis when applied to Nicol MacLeod's self-portraiture, interpreting this work as intimately autobiographical in subject and intent.

Brandon's 2005 touring retrospective exhibition, *Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Life in Art*, and her concurrently published biography, *Pegi By Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian Artist*, follow from the premises formulated in her M.A. thesis.⁸ Addressing Nicol MacLeod's historical marginalization in conventional narratives of Canadian art, Brandon cites Nicol MacLeod's gender, her situation in New York (both economic and geographical) for the last twelve years of her life, and her early death, as contributing factors, while further contending that: “the failure of MacLeod's work to remain at the forefront has until recently had more to do with its inability to fit neatly into the twentieth-century modernist trajectory.”⁹ Anna Hudson makes a similar assertion in

6 Murray, “Preface,” *Daffodils*, 14.

7 Laura Brandon, “Exploring 'the Undertheme': The Self-Portraits of Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904 – 1949)” (MA thesis, Art History, Queen's University, 1992), 4.

8 In a collective surge of attention which has considerably raised Nicol MacLeod's profile in recent years, the release of Michael Ostroff's National Film Board of Canada documentary, *Pegi Nicol: Something Dancing About Her*, also coincided with Brandon's biography and exhibition.

9 Laura Brandon, *Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Life in Art* [Exhibition pamphlet] (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2005).

her 1997 PhD Dissertation, “Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950.” However, Hudson offers a very different argument, considering Nicol MacLeod in the context of a broader analysis of the Toronto-based community of painters during the 1930s and 1940s. Hudson describes the development of a humanist aesthetic during this period as a blend of formal and social interests, primarily evidenced through the communal engagement in representations of civilized landscapes. Thus, Hudson charts what she refers to as “a socially-conscious modernist movement of painting [that] has been overlooked in histories of Canadian art,” locating Nicol MacLeod's practice within this movement.¹⁰ My own analysis develops in dialogue with these previous studies addressing Nicol MacLeod's position in early twentieth-century Canadian art history, while also engaging more broadly with contemporary scholarship that re-complicates our understanding of the boundaries of modernism.

Through an examination of the means whereby Nicol MacLeod's individualized artistic practice disrupts sweeping art historical trajectories and subverts inflexible modernist paradigms, I address what it meant to create modern art during the period of global instability and transition which characterized the decades of the Great Depression and Second World War. *Kaleidoscope vision* is a productive metaphor for picturing the motile dimensions of Nicol MacLeod's modernist art practice, in relation to the overdetermined influences of gender, as well as other factors including economic status, political affiliation, theoretical/philosophical framework and geographical situation. My analysis engages aspects of Nicol MacLeod's work which fall in line with recent critical redefinitions of the field of modernism — often instigated by scholars endeavoring to

10 Anna Victoria Hudson, “Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters 1933-1950” (PhD diss., History of Art, University of Toronto, 1997), ii.

understand the complex positions of early twentieth-century women artists.¹¹ By directing my attention towards the particularities of Nicol MacLeod's practice, I pursue an avenue of feminist inquiry that Norma Broude and Mary Garrard characterize as a process of elucidating “. . . the agency of specific women in history, uncovering the subversive power they actually wielded, as measured by visible cultural efforts to suppress or neutralize them.”¹² However, the present study is far from an exhaustive account of the contentiously modern perspectives discernible in Nicol MacLeod's oeuvre.¹³ In two independent yet organically inter-related parts, I focus my investigation on the significance of everyday *life* and of lived *embodiment* to Nicol MacLeod's conceptualization and realization of modernism.

-
- 11 As Katy Deepwell explains: “When the attention shifts to female subjects, the defining topos requires redefinition and new layers of complexity are added to the arguments. The field itself becomes redefined.” Deepwell, “Introduction,” in *Women Artists and Modernism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1998), 3. In this regard, my understanding of Nicol MacLeod's art practice has also been appreciably informed by Bridget Elliott and Jo-Anne Wallace's study: *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings* (Routledge: London and New York, 1994).
- 12 Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Reclaiming Female Agency,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 3.
- 13 Notably, a consideration of the implications of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's body of paintings documenting the activities of the Women's Services of the Canadian Armed Forces, which she was commissioned to produce by the National Gallery of Canada in 1944 and 1945, is beyond the scope of my investigation. For texts which do address these works, see: Laura Brandon, *Paragraphs in Paint: The Second World War Art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod* (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1998); and Teresa McIntosh, “Other Images of War: Canadian Women War Artists of the First and Second World Wars” (MA thesis, Canadian Studies, Carleton University, 1990).

Part 1

Life Models

I hope this is not a peculiar question but have you thought of designing a flag for this curious country? I feel you could do one and it would be just right. I see no reason why it could not be a gorgeous banner like a Schiaparelli scarf, silk screened on pure wool.

— Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Marian Scott, 1945¹⁴

Questioning aesthetic categories and looking beyond the limits of social conventions, Pegi Nicol MacLeod perceived modern life as a vital creative project. Taking as a medium for her artistic practice the objects, signs, activities and spaces of immediate experience, Nicol MacLeod worked to redefine the subject of daily life and readjust the focus of modern living. Part one is an exploration of varied and interrelated facets of Nicol MacLeod's artistic engagement with contemporary life, and pays particular attention to the role of the domestic sphere in her representations and negotiations of modernity. The cultivation of a domestic perspective in Nicol MacLeod's paintings is closely aligned with the tactical revisions of 'home' that she engendered in her daily life. Investigating recurrent representations of her window view, I show how this motif connotes a modern integration of art with everyday life, and a liminal transition between domestic and social spaces. This representational blurring of boundaries is

¹⁴ Postmarked September 16, 1945, *Daffodils*, 240.

carried through in Nicol MacLeod's enacted revisions of domesticity, through transgressive maneuvers that accommodate and extend her creative interests. Further to her domestic reconfigurations, Nicol MacLeod's design work, pedagogical pursuits, and related endeavors to socially engage her practice were the threads in her open, mutable pattern for a progressive cultural fabric. Nicol MacLeod actively promoted the production and reception of art as indispensable components of living — fluid sites of agency in the flux of modernity.

Picture/window

Locating the impulse behind a 'new horizon in Canadian art,' critic Graham McInnes cites the quotidian outlook adopted by a number of young Montreal artists at the onset of the 1930s as a key development: "While the majority of painters were religiously hiking north, they looked out of their back windows and saw two things: an immediate, interesting activity of people, and significant formal relationships. These they fused into creative ideas which they externalized on canvas."¹⁵ McInnes' account of a shift in modern Canadian painting, away from the unpeopled northern landscape and towards the sort of direct vision of contemporary life available from an urban window-frame, resonates decidedly with the direction of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's painting during these years. From the early 1930s onward, Nicol MacLeod's fascination with the ever-changing view from her nearest window — whether in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto or New York — is repeatedly manifest in paint. A discernible leitmotif of her compositions, Nicol MacLeod's window view generates a modern perspective in her work — a

15 Graham McInnes, "New Horizons in Canadian Art," *New Frontier* (June 1937): 20.

perpetual integration of art and life. Moreover, her recurring window-image connotes a liminal transition between inside and outside, as well as domestic and social spaces, highlighting the significant role that the domestic sphere plays in Nicol MacLeod's conception of a modern, socially-engaged art practice.

At the same time that she was painting landscapes directly indebted to the national idiom of the Group of Seven — as with her Willingdon Prize winning work, *The Log Run* (c.1930) (Fig. 1), a rhythmically stylized depiction of the Gatineau River from its tree-lined shore — Nicol MacLeod was also revising the parameters of the Canadian scene by setting her sights much closer to home. Among figure studies, street-corners, cityscapes and school gardens, her compositions of the late 1920s to mid 1930s show increasing evidence of domestic interests. As if in affirmation of her subject, Nicol MacLeod paints a study of a *Houseplant* (c.1930) (Fig. 2) with the raw directness of a Tom Thompson wilderness sketch. In swift, heavy strokes of fresh, vital colour, the flowers and foliage of this domestic plant are imbued with untamed urgency. More telling of a purposeful move indoors is the compositional structure of *Narcissus* (c.1931) (Fig. 3). The strong diagonal of the windowsill, an emblematic divider of inside from outside, is broken by the vertical placement of the plant. The viewer's focus in the upper-portion of the composition is oriented distally, towards the clustered blossoms that fuse with the outside space beyond the windowpane. Following the plant's curving stems we are guided downwards into the room, to where the narcissus originates in a decorative vase that has been propped up by a stack of books, subtly hinting at the primacy of domestic life as a point of departure.

“Our art has become both subtle and intimate,” Nicol MacLeod observes in her

review of the second exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters — the artists' organization that formed in 1933 as a successor to the Group of Seven. "To my mind there are few faults in the final development. The empty patterns like gaskets have relaxed and the clichés for spruce, barn, drift shapes, have given place to shapes actually experienced."¹⁶ These sentiments fit well with the intimate setting of *Narcissus*, and are strongly echoed in *From My Studio Window* (1937) (Fig. 4), painted in the same year she became a member of the Canadian Group. Here a progression from the iconic Canadian north to daily life is expressed in a fluid transition from outside to inside, as distance is collapsed by merging plant forms. The stark branches of a dead spruce converge with a blooming geranium on the windowsill; the potted-plant, in turn, grows into the rich floral pattern of the curtains in the artist's home-studio. In a sense, Nicol MacLeod portrays her concern with immediate experience as a natural outgrowth of the Group of Seven's influence. Art historian Anna Hudson makes a case for this very relationship. Relating "images of wilderness landscape to the rise of socialism in Canadian politics during the 1920s," Hudson argues that "The Group of Seven encouraged artists to appreciate their potential influence on society and to take responsibility for the values their art inevitably conveyed."¹⁷ Underscoring the Group's British Arts and Crafts sensibility and theosophic spiritual underpinnings, Hudson proposes a "re-examination of the Group of Seven's legacy as leaders of the modern movement of painting who, in counterpoint to the prevailing view of the 1920s as a nationalistic decade in Canada, encouraged community-minded and socially-conscious artistic production."¹⁸

Hudson's argument helps to explain why Nicol MacLeod — while critical of a

16 Pegi Nicol, "The Passionate Snow of Yesteryear," *The Canadian Forum* 16, no. 183 (April 1936): 21.

17 Hudson, "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950," 27.

18 *Ibid.*, 25.

formulaic perpetuation of landscape painting — would perceive of the Group's work as an expansive precedent for modern expression in Canadian art, not a closed or exclusively nationalistic mandate. In a letter to artist Charles Comfort, written in 1932 in regards to a storming controversy brought on by academic painters' charges that the National Gallery had unduly favoured the Group of Seven,¹⁹ Nicol MacLeod asserts: "I love the gallery so much and especially the modern room that I feel I am in the midst of life there, more than in any other place."²⁰ Her characterization of the aesthetic experience of modern art, as tantamount to an immersion in life itself, finds agreement in Group of Seven member and progressive art educator Arthur Lismer's writing of the period. In his essay on art appreciation published in the 1928-1929 *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* — at the end of a decade marked by the Group of Seven's critical assent — Lismer contends:

The artist's business in any age and in any country is to recall, not the facts and formulae, but the beauty of experience — to give us pictures of our own inarticulate selves, to widen the horizons of our unexpressed thoughts and hopes — to make us home-conscious, to put us in touch with our physical boundaries and to push aside veils from our unseeing eyes.²¹

Cold Window (c.1937) (Fig 5) compellingly evokes these inclusive aims. With curtains blown wide-open, Nicol MacLeod incorporates the physical boundary of her window-frame in a view of the urban landscape. The open window offers a vantage point from which to both articulate oneself and to gain access to expansive horizons; thus demonstrating a *consciousness of home* in its most immediate implications.

19 These charges came in the form of a petition threatening to boycott exhibitions at the National Gallery and calling for an investigation by government officials. Regarding the events surrounding this petition, the circulation of a counter-petition supporting Eric Brown as Director of the Gallery, and the residual impact of this controversy on the formation of The Canadian Group of Painters, see: Charles C. Hill, "Formation of the Canadian Group of Painters," In *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 20-37.

20 Letter to Charles Comfort [photocopy of original], postmarked Dec 16, 1932, File: Letters from P.N.M., 1932, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

21 Arthur Lismer, "Art Appreciation," in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928-1929*, ed. Bertram Brooker (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1929), 59-69.

“I am making watercolours out of my window everyday,” she writes, following her move to New York in 1937.²² For Nicol MacLeod, becoming home-conscious necessitated a socially-conscious art practice. Looking out the window of her tenement apartment, she pursues the complexity and incongruity of modern life in New York's *Tenements* (1945) (Fig. 6) — one of hundreds of paintings and sketches on this theme. Nicol MacLeod consistently employs her window view to situate her position as an artist immersed in contemporary life, connecting the social space of the street with the domestic space of the home. From a visit to New York during the 1940s, artist André Biéler recalls Nicol MacLeod's avid engagement with the life of her street. “She was on a street that was really pretty shabby,” Biéler remarks, “. . .and she organized the street into a festival. She was so good at getting people to do things that she organized. They had streamers and dancing in the street and all the rest. . . [it] was a great success.”²³ As an extension of her community-directed efforts, Nicol MacLeod's painted representations of window-images are interfaces for actualizing and evaluating social change. Lismer advocates art as just such a social mechanism, quoting John Dewey's inference that “all art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live and involves a phase of protest and of compensatory response.”²⁴ With *Tenements*, the prominent figures in the windows overlooking the crowded street dismiss the notion of a 'detached observer' or a distance between art and life. The viewer identifies with the vantage-point of these figures, becoming an inextricable part of the scene itself. In *Jane Reading*

22 Letter to Marian Scott, September 1937, *Daffodils*, 134.

23 André Biéler, Interview with Joan Murray, November 11, 1982, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery. See also: Ruth Comfort Jackson, “Sunday, Oct 19/75,” File: P.N.M. Journal, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

24 John Dewey, *Experience, Nature and Art* as quoted by Lismer, “Art Appreciation,” in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928-1929*, 60.

(c.1948) (Fig. 7) a window ledge crossing the bottom of the composition representationally anchors the viewer's implied location within the space of the apartment. This is a domestic scene in which the artist's young daughter is seated by her window, immersed in the constructive task of interpreting the lessons found in books and making them meaningful for her contemporary life. Jane's mundane activity of reading at home is attributed social import and a symbolic magnitude by its connection — through the window — with the labour of the construction workers who build the modern city.

In the textual commentary that Nicol MacLeod wrote to accompany *Manhattan Cycle*, the exhibition of her New York paintings which toured numerous Canadian venues from 1947 to early 1949, she calls attention to New York's windows as conspicuous markers of life in the city:

Probably the most typical habit-sight in all New York is the contemplative face at the tenement window. For all the divergency of character, the people are brought into commune, visually, by this habit. It probably saves them from snapping with the tensions tautened by the peculiarities of transportation and other modern irritations. What goes on in the street below is a ballet of everlasting interest.²⁵

Inhabitants of the tenements cope with the hurried pace and relentless pressure of modern life by adopting a perspective on their situation that reinforces their place within a social community. They look out from their windows at the evolving dance of the city, from which their individual lives are distinct yet inseparable. *Young Girl at the Window* (undated) (Fig. 8) shows the artist's daughter intently leaning over her window ledge, in commune with the dynamic figures across the street whose own window frames are filled

25 Pegi Nicol MacLeod, "Commentary" ["Manhattan Cycle"], File: Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. I am quoting from the unedited version of this text, as written by Pegi Nicol MacLeod and sent to the National Gallery on November 6, 1947, and subsequently transcribed as a copy for the Gallery's files, dated Nov. 13, 1947. An edited version of Nicol MacLeod's "Manhattan Cycle" commentary is also located in this National Gallery of Canada archival file, and is included as Appendix I in *Daffodils*, 313-316.

by their varied, expressive gestures. This is a portrayal of an emphatically outward-looking and socially aware sense of home-life. To a similar effect, sketching *Manhattan Neighbours (sketchbook)* (1942) (Figs. 9 and 10), Nicol MacLeod fixates upon transitional movement. A swirling group of children ascends the tenement steps in an unbroken advance from the street to their private dwellings. A thoughtful figure at the window animately shifts across the page in nuanced repositionings that mark action over time. Stressing the mobility of her figures, Nicol MacLeod demonstrates the interrelation of domestic and social spaces, in which the window is a liminal site of active exchange.

While Nicol MacLeod's windows illustrate the fluidity of domestic life, these permeable boundaries also bring the crisis of global conflict home. Nicol MacLeod describes *The Peace Bird* (undated) (Fig. 11) as "an after VJ day painting," adding: "The bird cannot decide whether to descend into our street or not."²⁶ Victory over Japan day, on August 15, 1945, marked Japan's surrender to the allied forces, thereby ending the Second World War. This victory also signifies the United States of America's incursion into nuclear warfare, with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *The Peace Bird's* wary ambivalence is a testament to the uncertainty and fragility of peace, post-nuclear armament, when the life of an entire city can be devastated with a single detonation. In this painting, Nicol MacLeod has vastly enlarged the engaged figures at their windows. The windows burst open to accommodate these massive, looming sentinels. Among them are women, children and, again, the artist's daughter, who shares the viewer's raking perspective on the restless street below. The domestic sphere is not only integrated with the social space of the city, but given a monumental importance

26 Ibid.

within the schema of city life. Thus, Nicol MacLeod both references the effect of world-altering events in awakening a powerful awareness of home, and suggests we should appreciate the profound influence that our everyday actions (or complacencies) have in defining the state of the world. By painting *The Peace Bird* as a scene viewed from her own window, Nicol MacLeod presents herself as a socially-engaged artist, working from home. She shows us that her painting is a part of her broader experience, a non-compartmentalized response to modern life. In the words of a commentator from her day, “Pegi Nicol's dynamic art went hand in hand with the intense life of a woman, wife, mother, community-conscious citizen.”²⁷

Consequently, Nicol MacLeod's work issues a modern challenge to conventional categorizations — in art and in life. Describing genre painting as “the portrayal of scenes from ordinary life,” Graham McInnes identifies Nicol MacLeod among Canadian artists revisiting such subject matter after a long period of its decline.²⁸ Yet McInnes also recognizes that “[t]he extreme individuality of Pegi Nicol's style, with its turbulent waywardness and the violent frenzy of its movement, make one hesitate to include her work in a survey of genre.”²⁹ In effect, Nicol MacLeod has revised the notion of 'genre painting' by reconceptualizing ordinary life. Fundamental to this reconceptualization is Nicol MacLeod's engagement with the domestic sphere. Questioning the framework of a modernist discourse which marginalizes domesticity “outside the flux and change of an authentically modern life,” Rita Felski argues for a theoretical reassessment of “the everyday significance of home.”³⁰ In keeping, Felski stresses that “the boundaries

27 Carl Weiselberger, “Art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod at National Gallery,” *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, June 13, 1949.

28 Graham McInnes, “The Decline of Genre,” *Canadian Art* 9, no. 1 (October 1951): 11.

29 *Ibid.*, 14.

30 Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York and London: New York

between home and non-home are leaky” and, thus, home is both “an active practicing of place” and a space “powerfully shaped by broader social currents, attitudes, and desires.”³¹ Nicol MacLeod's work mirrors these concerns, moreover confirming Felski's premise that “home is not always linked to tradition and opposed to autonomy and self-definition: on the contrary, it has been central to many women's experience of modernity.”³² Measuring the significance of home as a setting for self-determination in Nicol MacLeod's negotiation of modernity requires contextualizing her painting in relation to her daily reconfigurations of domestic life.

This kind of contextualization involves identifying how Nicol MacLeod's art practice *challenges* the pre-given limitations of domesticity during this period. In contrast to my interpretation, Laura Brandon reads Nicol MacLeod's artistic interests as inevitably conflicting with her domestic tasks. “She found it very difficult to do more than one thing at a time and claimed always that her role as wife and mother came first, although her addiction to painting and her desire for professional recognition affected her competence in both roles,” Brandon suggests.³³ Such an unproblematized dichotomy obscures the ways in which Nicol MacLeod blurred the division of these roles. Elsewhere in the biography, however, Brandon critically exposes the gendered implications of an art-historical marginalization of Nicol MacLeod; notably, Brandon's study of Nicol MacLeod's self-portraiture as an autobiographical exploration of her sexuality informs the assessment of such works that I develop in the second part of this thesis. Notwithstanding, Brandon's reading of Nicol MacLeod's domestic difficulties is

University Press, 2000), 89, 87.

31 Ibid., 87.

32 Ibid., 89.

33 Brandon, *Pegi by Herself*, 157. Under the rubric of this paradigm, Brandon positions Nicol MacLeod as painting “at the expense of her household.” Ibid., 158.

structured around a blindspot that renders her tactics of transgression invisible.³⁴ In the following section, I investigate Nicol MacLeod's domestic reconfigurations. Crossing over from the window into her living space, I uncover the extent to which Nicol MacLeod's artistic creativity insubordinately issued forth from a daily struggle to connect what many considered the mutually exclusive categories of artwork and housework.

Hitting Home

In a letter of 1936 — before giving a jovially incredulous account of her recent wedding — Nicol MacLeod discloses her intent that Marian Scott's son, along with three children of other artist-friends, be entitled to a number of her paintings as an inheritance:

As Pegi Nicol I intended to make a will and aside from what heirs I might get by marriage I want Elizabeth and Peter and the two Comf's to have a certain number of my paintings. One reason being that I know they are going to grow up knowing that pictures have some importance, also because I choose them as heirs so that is my maiden will.³⁵

This wish stems from her identity as *Pegi Nicol*, the name she gave herself in her early twenties when resolving to pursue a career in art. “She just signed her work that way and that's what she *was* – very 'modern,’” a painter friend explains.³⁶ Pegi Nicol here again

34 Kirk Niergarth identifies this blindspot in his review of Brandon's monograph: “Although Brandon nicely connects Nicol MacLeod's unconventional sexual behaviour with her feminism and career ambitions, it is surprising that she is not more sympathetic to what she calls Nicol MacLeod's 'constant complaints' about domestic responsibilities after her marriage and move to New York in the late 1930s. Brandon is very understanding of Norman MacLeod's professional difficulties and seems impressed at his tolerance for his wife's 'lamentable housekeeping.’” Kirk Niergarth, review of *Pegi by Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian Artist* by Laura Brandon. *The Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (March, 2006): 123.

35 Letter to Marian Scott, December 1936, *Daffodils*, 130.

36 Marjorie Oberne, Letter to Laura Brandon, June 2, 1985, File: Oberne, Marjorie Borden, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Emphasis in original. Oberne likewise notes that Nicol MacLeod's parents were uncomfortable with the implications of her name change: “That they thought was very unusual and it distressed them because that was kind of getting into their territory, you know, the family name that they had given her.” Marjorie Oberne, Interview with Joan Murray, June 6, 1985, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Pegi Nicol's given name had been Margaret Kathleen Nichol.

departs from traditional patrilineal models of descent, by choosing heirs who affirm her sense of social/artistic community.³⁷ Contemplating the future ownership of her life's work, she finds that shared ideas concerning the cultural value of art are strong ties, and recognizes that, while the production of her paintings is limited to her own lifetime, their meaningfulness can extend to future generations. This reorganization of 'family' to make room for ideational kinship and artistic propagation, is allied to her relentless renovation of 'home.' Framing Nicol MacLeod as a artist who “. . . loathed cooking and housekeeping and was a rebel with a cause,”³⁸ in order to place her as an unconventional woman and to promote current public interest in her paintings, offers very little in the way of disrupting a gendered hierarchy of social roles and artistic practices. When, in evidence, this hierarchy was a key target of her rebellion, and undoubtedly factored in the art historical obscurity of her work during the three decades that followed her death. Moreover, such a faulty characterization is inimical to Nicol MacLeod's interest in lived creativity, and at odds with the spontaneous creative potential inherent in the tasks of setting-up house and making oneself at home — tasks which formed the basis of her art practice as a way of life.

37 Analogously, Nicol MacLeod expresses her perception that Maude Brown and Eric Brown, first Director of the National Gallery of Canada, were “more nearly parents as any” through their encouragement and support of Nicol MacLeod's work in a close personal relationship. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Maud Brown, c. 1939, File: Letters of Sympathy, death of Eric Brown, 1939, Eric and Maud Brown fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. This also speaks of the clash between Nicol MacLeod and her familial parents over her artistic interests, and her mother's overt opposition and resentment. Nicol MacLeod writes in a letter to Charles Comfort: “I never could have painted in Ottawa at all if it hadn't been for Eric, because my parents hate it and all art classes I have attended and all the artists I know here have behaved in a discouraging manner.” Letter to Charles Comfort [photocopy of original], postmarked Dec 16, 1932, File: Letters from P.N.M., 1932, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Regarding Nicol MacLeod's relationship with her parents, see also: Brandon, *Pegi By Herself*, 30-33; and Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 18-20.

38 Paul Gessell, “She Painted Herself in the Nude, Loathed Cooking and Housekeeping and Was a Rebel with a Cause,” *CanWest News*, February 8, 2005, Don Mills, Ont. Article also available as: “All the Right Strokes: The Remarkable Life of a Bohemian Ottawa Artist,” *Ottawa Citizen* (The Citizen's Weekly), Sunday February 6, 2005.

This is not to suggest that Nicol MacLeod was unphased by domestic pressures. Her letters often betray frustration over the confining chores of a wife and mother. She laments the regimentation of “three meals per day to cook, laundry, scrubbing etc.,”³⁹ wryly makes reference to “a full winter 75% in front of sink,”⁴⁰ and, at times, becomes darkly “depressed at slum conditions,”⁴¹ or succumbs to the nervous exhaustion brought on by “the crush on two buses and back again before 9 am,”⁴² taking her daughter to school. Patently, Nicol MacLeod was affected by the isolation and oppressive monotony that characterized 'women's work,' particularly for a woman with a young child and scant financial resources. Indeed, constraining circumstances and regimented gender roles motivated her drive to re-invent domesticity. Facing the demands of domestic life, many of her women artist peers found little time left for art — a situation that Nicol MacLeod fiercely and ingeniously resisted.⁴³ Without the means to systematically reject social conventions, or the option of architecturally restructuring her living/working environment, Nicol MacLeod relied upon her ability to recognize and implement the creative opportunities that she encountered in her daily life.

Michel de Certeau's notion of tactical subversion in everyday life — opportune maneuvers performed by the dispossessed in order to resist the power structures that dominate — applies well to Nicol MacLeod's domestic transgressions. Unlike a strategy,

39 Letter to Madge Smith, September 10, 1947, *Daffodils*, 266.

40 Letter to Harry McCurry, July 9, 1945, *Daffodils*, 233.

41 Letter to Harry McCurry, November, 27, 1944, *Daffodils*, 226.

42 Letter to Madge Smith, 1945, *Daffodils*, 229.

43 Ruth Comfort Jackson notes that “Marian [Scott was] the kind of painter who needs lots of time and space for painting – always amazed that Pegi could carry on motherhood, wifery, painting and teaching all at the same time in spite of frustrations.” Ruth Comfort Jackson, Notes from Interview with Marian Scott, March 15, 1976, File: P.N.M. – Montreal Interviews, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Joan Murray similarly observes that: “Unlike her colleague, Paraskeva Clark, who found herself bogged down with a constant routine of 'shopping at Loblaw's, Dominion,' as she recently said, MacLeod only rarely faltered as a producer.” Murray, “Preface,” *Daffodils*, 15.

or overarching plan of attack, which requires a power base and designated resources for its implementation, a tactic is temporal and contingent; it operates by vigilantly and unexpectedly poaching “the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.”⁴⁴

As de Certeau identifies:

Dwelling, moving about, speaking, reading, shopping, and cooking are activities that seem to correspond to the characteristics of tactical ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,' an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic and warlike discoveries.⁴⁵

These everyday activities of tactical opposition rely upon transforming the circumstances at hand in one's favour. Tactics are temporary rather than permanent, like “the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of a space” enacted by an agent lacking “the power to provide oneself with one's own place.”⁴⁶

Nicol MacLeod's expressed need to tactically reorganize the space that she inhabits — in order to sustain herself as an artist — runs like a pressing current through her correspondence. A letter of 1932 reads: “I am making the attic into a place where I can pretend I am in the stable, with a blue door, orange covers, flowers, etc. . . . It is terribly lonely here — there are only about three people I want to see. I don't think the attic will be lonely when I get finished or at least it will be a pregnant kind of loneliness.”⁴⁷ Coping with her return to the unwelcoming house of her parents in Ottawa, after the Montreal stable that she had converted into a live-in studio is destroyed in a fire, Nicol MacLeod recovers her ambition by remaking her living environment. Five years

44 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

45 *Ibid.*, 40.

46 *Ibid.*, 38, 36.

47 Letter to Marian Scott, 1932, *Daffodils*, 99.

later, from Toronto, Nicol MacLeod writes:

Yesterday Norman and I bought a piano, our home is complete. . . We also have a sculpture from the Picture Loan's Society and I am making a big mural of Phoebus going to town in a big chariot plus some aeroplanes and Diana coming home from the hunt. . . Our bowl you gave us has appeared as every form of container from salad to dough mixer and once in a painting."⁴⁸

The walls that delimit the rented space of an apartment are transformed into expansive surfaces for experimentation in a modern revision of classical mythology. A bowl moves seamlessly from manifold container in the kitchen, to object of aesthetic contemplation on the canvas. Nicol MacLeod tactically repositions her household tasks in order to infuse domesticity with her artistic interests. The last excerpt that I will cite here — although her letters are replete with like references — is written from New York and accompanied by an ink illustration (Fig. 12). Upon receiving a sketchbook as a gift, Nicol MacLeod rearranges accordingly: “I have it propped in my window on a new kind [of] easel and there as I fleet by, even sweeping or just watering the horticulture, I may add to the story of 88th Street by one little sketch.”⁴⁹ Nicol MacLeod's written words and dynamic drawing — of her own swift movement from sketching at the easel to sweeping the floor — suggest a fluid continuity between pursuing fine art and cultivating a creative home life. With jubilant, poetic and warlike domestic discoveries, Nicol MacLeod contests the limiting conventions of housework.

Visitors to 509 East 88th Street were privy to a highly developed, ever evolving, tactical installation of *art-into-life*. From 1941-1948 Nicol MacLeod spent nomadic summers teaching in Fredericton with her daughter, passing the rest of the year with her

48 Letter to Marian Scott, 1937, *Daffodils*, 131.

49 Letter to Marian Scott, 1944, *Daffodils*, 211.

family (herself, husband and child) in their New York flat. The flat was on the top floor of a five-storey walk-up building; that was part of a development of cold water tenements in an area of low-rent housing. It was structured like a corridor — a 'railway car' floor-plan — where each narrow room opened into the next, up to the last, large-windowed room that served as a combination kitchen/living-room (the room from which Nicol MacLeod painted her window view throughout the 1940s). Within this restrictive space, she created a hybridized domestic environment of vastly diverse, surrealistically re-contextualized elements. There was a small Gothic oak door, that conjured-up a medieval European church, alongside an ornate feather duster, of the sort that belonged in a Vanderbilt mansion. The rooms held a dazzling array of such (dis)similar, wondrous items — with the cumulative effect of a seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities, but for an apparent interspersed of superlatively modern inventions like radios. Nicol MacLeod's interior scheme included hanging light-switches in the form of elegant wooden hands, from re-painted antique glove-stretchers; a grandfather clock — whose workings had been removed — remodeled into a well-stocked spice cabinet; fantastic, colourful marionettes, strung-up theatrically in the window-like openings between rooms; eclectic textiles of mixed textures, weaves and tones, made-up as curtains, bed covers and floor mats; an impressive collection of artifacts, pottery, rugs, woven baskets, and carefully chosen dishes and utensils; an overgrown windowsill garden; and walls painted in inspired shades of blue and green, covered by paintings and drawings, often of Nicol MacLeod's own compositions — with views from her window and depictions of her daughter that had the heightening effect of representationally extending life in the

apartment itself.⁵⁰ “As we talked in her New York apartment, surrounded with what seemed stacks and stacks of eager paintings, you almost felt the room crowded with people,” an interviewer remarked.⁵¹ Christopher Reed's account of English modernists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's Bloomsbury interior at Charleston also sheds light on Nicol MacLeod's New York apartment. The living space, in Reed's words, blurs the “boundaries between art and decoration, image and reality, in a cycle where domestic existence and aesthetic creativity reinforce one another in a complex but coherent whole.”⁵² Pairing the traditionally feminized and socially marginalized realm of housework with artistic experimentation, Nicol MacLeod converted the space of her apartment into an aesthetic environment with inspirational objects. Guests who came to call were left with an indelible impression; “always growing. . . like her painting,” Nicol MacLeod's orchestration of the interior was “almost like a jungle.”⁵³

Likewise, by experimenting with domestic cooking as a facet of her artistic creativity, Nicol MacLeod tactically challenged women's subordinate social status and

50 Regarding Nicol MacLeod's East 88th Street apartment, see: Alison Ignatieff, Interviews with Ruth Comfort Jackson, October, 1975, audio recordings, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives; Maud Brown, Interview with Ruth Comfort Jackson, March 25, 1975, audio recording, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives; Marian Scott, Interview with Laura Brandon, October 28, 1985, audio recordings, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives; Erica Deichmann Gregg, Interview with Joan Murray, March 5, 1981, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery; Marion Scott, Interview with Joan Murray, August 27, 1980, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery; Alison Ignatieff, Interview with Joan Murray, January 26, 1981, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery; Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letters to Erica Deichmann dating to 1940s, *Daffodils*, 152-4, 193-4, 265-6; Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letters to Madge Smith dating to 1940s, *Daffodils*, 151, 154-9, 166-71, 175, 183-4, 197, 212-13, 244-5, 247-49, 256-8, 261, 266, 299, 305; Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letters to Marian Scott dating to 1940s, *Daffodils*, 211, 258-9; and Joan Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 45-46.

51 Barbara E. Scott Fisher, “Summer Art Centre Uncorks Talents at the University of New Brunswick: For, Says Pegi Nicol MacLeod, You Can Successfully Teach Anything Through Art,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 29, 1946.

52 Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 184.

53 Alison Ignatieff, Interviews with Ruth Comfort Jackson, October, 1975, audio recordings, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

devalued labour, much as Luce Giard relates the enjoyment afforded by the act of writing — “the pleasures of the text” — to “the sophisticated ritualization of basic gestures” involved in women's domestic culinary practices, which have been socially situated “at the most necessary and unrespected level.”⁵⁴ A concern with making visible the cultural significance of women's work comes through very early in Nicol MacLeod's artistic career. From the two trips that she made in 1927 and 1928 to Western Canada in order to paint the lives of indigenous peoples, Charles Hill observes that Nicol MacLeod's choice of subject matter in a painting like *Women Cleaning Fish* (c. 1928) (Fig. 13) is atypical in intent. “Unlike the work of her colleagues who concentrated on the landscape and poles and drew and painted portraits of native peoples, the subject of this work is women's labour,” Hill notes.⁵⁵ With reference to her own domestic labour, Nicol MacLeod writes to Martin Baldwin, Curator of the Art Gallery of Toronto, to inquire after “Any good recipes [for] getting pictures over [the] border, minimum expense, red tape?”⁵⁶ Reappropriating the vernacular of housewives exchanging meal ideas, she intentionally subverts the gender and economic divisions separating professional from domestic work by conflating her exhibiting difficulties with the creative demands of home life. Moreover, by doing so, Nicol MacLeod makes room for a holistically experiential understanding of art, which moves beyond visual frameworks or accepted modes of display. The sensory experience of food preparation, through the exploration of taste in

54 Luce Giard. “Doing Cooking.” In *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (New York: Routledge, 2002), 321.

55 Charles Hill, “For the Collection of Later Canadian Art” [acquisition rationale for Nicol MacLeod's work: *Women Cleaning Fish*, c. 1928], June 11, 1993, Curatorial files, National Gallery of Canada. Regarding Nicol MacLeod's western trips see: Brandon, *Pegi By Herself*, 37-42; and Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 24-25.

56 Note from Pegi Nicol MacLeod to Martin Baldwin [photocopy of original], undated, File: Letters From P.N.M., undated, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

an almost alchemical transformation of raw ingredients into stimulating flavours, smells, colours and textures, is consonant with Nicol MacLeod's embodied investment in art-making — a topic that I investigate further in part two. Like Giard, Nicol MacLeod explored the materiality of 'doing cooking' as “a way of being-in-the-world and making it one's home.”⁵⁷

Friends marveled at the glorious fare that she prepared from seemingly nothing, in a freely inventive approach to cooking that was, during her lifetime, remarkably unorthodox.⁵⁸ Ruth Comfort Jackson's childhood memories of Nicol MacLeod include the lasting impression of wonderful food: “She once made a salad that I have tried to duplicate for years but have never succeeded — concocted with carrot, cucumber and tomato chunks, with light and dark green leaves, tossed with a dressing somehow making the whole thing ambrosia.”⁵⁹ From the many visits that Nicol MacLeod and her daughter made to the Deichmanns — well-known potters living in New Brunswick on the Kingston Peninsula — Erica Deichmann Gregg recalls:

She was an original cook and together we invented splendid recipes. At that period there were minor restrictions both as an aftermath of the recent depression and through food rationing due to the war, but this did not stop us from making splendid coarse breads, cookies with wild berries, seeds and nuts, splendid stews with many kinds of locally grown vegetables and herbs, applesauce to which we added rosehip puree (made by ourselves) and honey.⁶⁰

With avid attentiveness to the ingredients within her reach, Nicol MacLeod occasions a

57 Giard, 121.

58 Alison Ignatieff, Interviews with Ruth Comfort Jackson, October 1975, audio recordings, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

59 “Pegi Nicol MacLeod Journal,” Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Comfort Jackson also notes: “Marian [Scott] agrees wholeheartedly that Pegi was a fantastic cook — another means of expressing her creativity.” Ruth Comfort Jackson, “Interview with Marian Scott, March 15, 1976,” File: P.N.M. — Montreal Interviews, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

60 Erica Deichmann Gregg, “Pegi Nicol MacLeod,” Appendix II, *Daffodils*, 321.

Bloomsbury-esque “escape from conventional imperatives of canny consumption in favor of intuitive, spontaneous pleasures enjoyed as ends in themselves.”⁶¹ She seizes upon the necessary domestic work of home cooking as an opportunity to engage sensuously with an organically aesthetic medium.

Nicol MacLeod's culinary experimentation, as with her creatively modified home environment, undermined repressive gender norms — which were a source of considerable conflict in her own marriage.⁶² On a practical level, she thus engaged with contemporary debates concerning women's secondary social status. In a 1937 *New Frontier* article addressing the restrictions to personal and professional development perpetuated in constructed ideals of what it meant to be a wife and mother — definitively closing off opportunities for social and economic equality by allowing for only a very narrow sphere of activities and interests — Marjorie King asserted the efficacy of an immediate (what might be called tactical) response:

There is another way for the woman who rebels against a life like this. She can illuminate it with a healthy realism and get rid of a lot of the lumber which a bourgeois tradition has imposed upon her. She can sort out the real from the false in her relationships with other people and in her material life, and get rid of the claptrap of stereotyped, meaningless social obligations and conventions in house-furnishing and table-setting and food. It is only when she has done this that she is free to work toward the real goal of economic freedom for women.⁶³

Through the domestic interventions that Nicol MacLeod practiced in her daily life, she likewise promoted a progressive revision of 'family values' and the comforts of home.

61 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 191.

62 In notes from an interview with Marian Scott, Comfort Jackson writes of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's marital difficulties: “. . . all her affairs had been easy-going arrangements but after marriage N. expected P. to become the 'little woman,' wash his socks, have a good hot meal on the table every night at 6, etc. P not prepared to play that role — she wanted to be a great artist.” Ruth Comfort Jackson, “Marian Scott, April 20/76,” File: P.N.M. Journal, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

63 Marjorie King, “Women Are Mugs,” *New Frontier* 1, no. 10 (February, 1937): 24.

Nicol MacLeod's counter-domesticity confronted the expectations of many of her peers, eliciting the sort of critical self-reflection that engenders change. Louise Parkin elucidates:

We shared in June one summer a cottage lent us by friends and overlapped for a night. I had a child of about five and arrived tired late in the day. I was a rather stiff conventional creature in those days, not used to the casual way Pegi lived, and I remember being rather irritated by the state of confusion in the living-room and wondering when on earth we could have a meal and could put the child to bed. Pegi came back from a swim, said something about making a crust for a pie and disappeared into the kitchen while I unpacked. When I came down we had a leisurely drink and she then produced a superb meal to which she had obviously given great attention. It made me realize how she always concentrated on what was important — the untidy room didn't really matter — and that she had this many-sidedness — her painting, her cooking, her love for children. It has always seemed to me that she had an extraordinary wisdom about life which underlay her gaiety and her intense vitality.⁶⁴

For Nicol MacLeod, setting her house in order involved an ongoing re-prioritization of everyday life.

“Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time,” writes de Certeau, “to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation.”⁶⁵ In the effort to make time for her artistic pursuits, Nicol MacLeod frequently recast household tasks as innovative opportunities. In the realm of her basic daily duties, she spontaneously maneuvered creative situations. And while she could often ill afford to purchase painting supplies, her domestic interventions allowed for the timely adaptation of versatile materials. Many of the extraordinary items that Nicol MacLeod incorporated into her chimerical apartment were discovered in local thrift shops, or reclaimed from the garbage put out on New

64 Louise Parkin, Letter to Laura Brandon, April 30, 1984, File: Parkin, Louise, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

65 De Certeau, 38.

York's streets. From found objects and second hand goods, Nicol MacLeod re-created home décor, furniture, toys, batiks, and accessories — she reshaped the stuff of domestic life by subversively assigning new uses (and modern meanings) to old cultural products.⁶⁶ “My big rug is finished,” she announces in a letter to Madge Smith. “It has twenty dresses, two suits, 6 sweaters in it.”⁶⁷ The gender roles and social positions implicit in conventional apparel are taken apart and imagined quite differently in Nicol MacLeod's creative endeavour to arrange and furnish a space in which she can feel at home. Cultivating a living environment that sustained her aims as an artist was intrinsic to Nicol MacLeod's investment in art-making as a site of resistance and social engagement. “The ability to imagine new forms of domestic life is fundamental to any project to re-imagine social values,” Reed reminds us.⁶⁸ During the Depression and Second World War, the integration of art into daily life was seen by many artists as a social imperative, in Canada as elsewhere. Nicol MacLeod's at-home reconfigurations of domesticity informed and accommodated broad-ranging professional endeavors which contest the hierarchical differentiation of high art from design, and decoration from craft, in an interdisciplinary exploration of art as an open-ended means of navigating and shaping modern life.

A Liveable Modernity

When in Toronto from 1934-1937, Pegi Nicol MacLeod worked on special projects for prominent French designer René Cera, who had headed Paul Poiret's *Martine*

66 Here, I am aligning Nicol MacLeod's domestic reconfigurations with Reed's account of Bloomsbury's “subcultural negotiation of existing conventions in order to create an alternate space within the culture it inherited.” “A Room of One's Own” in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 149.

67 Letter to Madge Smith, 1941, *Daffodils*, 174.

68 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 198.

collection in France before coming to Toronto's new Eaton's College Street store — a premier Art Deco triumph.⁶⁹ At Eaton's, she was involved with interior murals as well as the painted settings and backdrops for window displays, which often presented elaborate, pastiche-like recombinations of art historical references.⁷⁰ In addition, having past experience in theatre as a performer with The Ottawa Drama League, as well as through independent experimentation in play-writing and set-design, Nicol MacLeod designed and prepared fantastic stage sets and costumes for the Hart House production of *The Pied Piper*, which opened in December of 1934. “I'm a worker now in the social sense and of use,” she writes of these endeavours in a letter to Marian Scott, adding: “my artistic knowledge has spread out to something I could never have had before.”⁷¹ While finding paid employment was a financial necessity for Nicol MacLeod, she was also drawn to design by a sense of social responsibility as an artist. Her concern with broadening her artistic knowledge to include widely accessible public formats demonstrates a rejection of art as an isolated or esoteric pursuit. Just as she tactically transformed her own domestic life, Nicol MacLeod believed that socially integrated artwork could communicate progressive values, by encouraging an audience of active participants in the evolution of modern ideas.

This notion was supported and elaborated in the pages of *The Canadian Forum* — a politically leftist magazine, closely associated with the League for Social

69 René Cera, Letter to Laura Brandon, March 3, 1984, File: Cera, René, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

70 Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 31. See also: Caven Atkins, Interview with Joan Murray, Nov. 9, 1982, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery; Letter from Caven Atkins to Joan Murray, June 3, 1983, Robert McLaughlin Gallery (this letter includes a photograph documenting the cafeteria mural that Pegi Nicol MacLeod and Caven Atkins worked on together at Eaton's in the mid 1930s); and Brandon, *Pegi by Herself*, 77-79.

71 Letter to Marian Scott, December 1934, *Daffodils*, 111.

Reconstruction — for which Nicol MacLeod became Art Editor in 1935.⁷² Decrying “[t]he passive, non-resistance type of education in vogue today,” in a 1936 *Canadian Forum* article regarding the benefits of child education through art, Lismer advocates:

. . . the emotional and creative forms of expression in music, drama, the plastic arts and handicrafts, that release personality and intensify the business of living. We have stressed the business of making a living at the expense of showing people how to live. For society does not know what to do with its creative individuals and educational responsibility has no regard for the development of personalities that cannot fit into the present social order.⁷³

Education through diverse forms of creative expression, for adults as well as children, offered a tangible means of countering the perpetuation of a social order widely perceived as deeply lacking in the face of a disastrous economic depression and advancing fascism. With this same goal in mind, promoting informed art-appreciation amongst the general public was prioritized by socially-conscious Canadian artists during this period, and bringing art into full integration with daily life was considered essential to the purpose of affecting social change.

“At a time when art is so woefully divorced from the public, the launching of such

72 *The Canadian Forum* “. . . is edited by people who believe that free expression, in the Canadian idiom, of reactions to Canadian life in all its aspects is needed in this country, and who are devoting themselves unselfishly to producing such a medium,” the end-page of the May 1936 issue reads (Vol. 16, no. 184). Earlier issues that feature Nicol MacLeod as art editor moreover assert that: “The magazine is published to give Canadians and all who wish a reliable statement of facts, fearless criticism and generally a liberal and progressive policy with regard to Canadian conditions; together with that which is new and interesting in politics, literature and art” (*The Canadian Forum*, March and April, 1936, Vol. 16, no. 182 and no. 183, end-pages). Brandon outlines the time-frame of Nicol MacLeod's editorial involvement as follows: “She was art editor of *Canadian Forum* from December 1935 until May 1936. The July 1935 issue mentioned her as being a contributing editor; the issue of February 1937 gave the last such reference.” *Pegi By Herself*, 200, note 13.

73 Arthur Lismer, “Children and Art,” *The Canadian Forum* (January 1936): 12. Lismer further contends: “The claims of art as a guiding star in education are as valid and important as the moral, physical, scientific and economic aspects in the development of a new society. People without art are fit for 'strategems and spoils', and go goose-stepping to every blare of dictator music, joining the mob of other servile ones in the spurious march to a possessive theme of fear and hatred. The new ideas in education find faith in creative impulses, which develop capacities of control of environment and individual thinking.” *Ibid.*, 14.

a venture should do much to promote a new understanding between the artist and the people," McInnes observes, of the opening of The Picture Loan Society at 3 Charles Street in Toronto.⁷⁴ This venture was the first art rental co-operative in Canada, and it soon became synonymous with its director, Douglas Duncan, who set up the gallery with the aid of Pegi Nicol MacLeod and several other founders in November of 1936.⁷⁵ A non-profit organization — existing "because it believes it can be of service to both artists and public" — the gallery featured contemporary painting and sculpture available for rental at 2 per cent/month of the total value; members paid a two dollar annual subscription and could opt to purchase a work at the end of their rental period with the rental outlay deducted from the final cost.⁷⁶ "The Picture Loan is bursting into bloom," Nicol MacLeod writes, rhapsodizing its early success.⁷⁷ In the first year of operation, the Picture Loan Society held fourteen exhibitions and rented three hundred works, a real help to many artists in dire financial circumstances.⁷⁸ Moreover, and of particular relevance to Nicol MacLeod's conceptualization of domestic life, the Picture Loan Society addressed the average home as a site for the circulation of contemporary art.

Critic Pearl McCarthy noted:

The system offers an advantage in that the persons have a chance to try out a picture, to see whether they enjoy living with it, before they take the final step; and those who can not afford to buy at all may live with some interesting art for two per cent. per month of the value of the painting. It seems likely that the society will be a very lively force in widening the

74 G. Campbell McInnes, "The World of Art," *Saturday Night*, Nov. 7, 1936.

75 Rick (H. Garnard) Kettle, Erma Lennox, Norah McCullough, Gordon MacNamara and Gordon Webber were also involved in founding The Picture Loan Society which had been modeled after Picture Hire Limited in England. See: Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, 17.

76 Works could alternately be purchased directly or by installments of 10 per cent/month. H. Garnard Kettle, Letter to the Editor, *Canadian Forum* 16, no. 191 (December 1936), 39.

77 Letter to Marian Scott, 1936, *Daffodils*, 129.

78 Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, 17. Hill notes that The Picture Loan Society was "[o]ne of the few successful cooperative ventures at this time." Ibid.

circle of interest in contemporary art.⁷⁹

Rather than luxury commodities tucked away in the collections of the wealthy elite, or rarefied objects in a remote museum, original paintings were meant to be taken home, lived with and exchanged. “Pictures should not always be considered as sacred, lifetime investments. . .” Robert Ayre asserts, in support of the establishment of a corresponding picture loan gallery in Montreal. “Why not let them come in and out, making their contributions to our changing lives like books and music, alive rather than static?”⁸⁰

In the same spirit of questioning and contradicting the narrow framework through which visual art is commonly encountered, Nicol MacLeod initiated the Fiddlehead Observatory Art Centre at the University of New Brunswick. During the first of her subsequently annual summers in Fredericton — initially planned as a single trip, in 1940, brought on by financial uncertainties as well as the desire that her daughter spend time with her husband's family — Nicol MacLeod, along with Margaret MacKenzie and artist Lucy Jarvis, converted an early nineteenth-century astrological observatory (at the time an unused, neglected campus building) into what quickly became a thriving cultural centre.⁸¹ As Hudson elucidates, Nicol MacLeod's summer art classes at the Observatory “operated on the idea that a democratic ideal of art as experience stimulated collective engagement of art and life, wherever teaching and exhibition opportunities were

79 P. McC. “Picture Loaning New Force in Art.” *Toronto Mail & Empire*, Nov. 16, 1936.

80 Robert Ayre, “Picture-Loan Society: Means of Acquiring Paintings You Admire.” *Montreal Standard*, December 24, 1938.

81 Margaret Mackenzie was married to Norman Mackenzie, President of the University of New Brunswick and a friend that Nicol MacLeod had met in Toronto. Regarding Nicol MacLeod's work at the Observatory Art Centre, see: Brandon, *Pegi by Herself*, 116-119, 125-136; Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 42-45; Russell J. Harper, “Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Maritime Artist,” *The Dalhousie Review* 43, no. 1 (1963): 40-50; and Hudson, 216-217 (note: Hudson mis-dates the first session of Nicol MacLeod's summer classes at the Observatory as beginning in July of 1942, when in fact this occurred the previous summer, see: Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Harry McCurry, August 24, 1941, *Daffodils*, 165).

established.”⁸² To maintain this stimulation, Nicol MacLeod augmented her studio classes with extensive materials lent by the National Gallery, including lectures, art magazines, reproductions and slides — addressing Canadian, American and European art, the work of 'Old Masters', and a range of technical issues pertaining to painting, sculpture, craft and design.⁸³ She also displayed contemporary and historical art across the campus, in the form of National Gallery silk-screen reproductions and original paintings personally lent from prominent Canadian artists.

Writing to Harry McCurry, Director of the National Gallery, to request a loan of artwork for University buildings, she explains: “We have 5 Muhlstocks and 2 Comforts, some Brittains and Humphreys but they hang in the Observatory where only those deeply interested come. Through the professors hanging stuff, we want to drag the people towards us.”⁸⁴ Attending the landmark Conference of Canadian Artists in June of 1941 at Queen's University in Kingston — the first nation-wide meeting of artists, historians, critics and museum officials, organized for the purpose of discussing the artist's role in society — had reaffirmed Nicol MacLeod's social commitment to broadening the scope of contemporary art and proactively expanding its audience. That Nicol MacLeod believed artists' direct and unmediated efforts to connect with the public were indispensable to this goal is evident in her suggestion, during the Kingston Conference

82 Hudson, 217.

83 The National Gallery was a key resource for virtually all art education initiatives in Canada during this period. As Graham McInnes notes: “the National Gallery of Canada . . . not only possesses one of the finest permanent collections in the Dominion, but . . . by means of loan exhibitions, correspondence, the dissemination of lectures, slides, reproductions and the like throughout Canada, is doing much to make the public conscious of the place of the fine arts, and has stirred up a great deal of enthusiasm, especially in the west. It also acts as a unifying influence, offsetting, to a large extent, the enormous pull exerted by the United States.” “Art of Canada,” *The Studio* CXIV, no. 533 (August 1937): 70.

84 Letter to Harry McCurry, August 1, 1941, *Daffodils*, 162. Likewise, Nicol MacLeod writes in a later letter to the Gallery: “The pictures you sent me are magnificent. I have inaugurated tea every day at the studio and find the summer school fondest of contemporaries!” Letter to Harry McCurry, July 25, 1944, *Daffodils*, 219. Nicol MacLeod perpetually changed and added to the works on display.

proceedings, that: “Instead of having academic treatment of the subject of the appreciation of art within our schools, could it not be brought about by the artists lending their pictures to the various schools?”⁸⁵ Her own completion of a mural later that year at the Fisher Vocational School in Woodstock, New Brunswick, is a clear manifestation of this commitment,⁸⁶ as are the continuous efforts she made, in connection with Madge Smith,⁸⁷ to promote the art and crafts of the area and to raise awareness in the Maritimes of the work of Canadian artists in other parts of the country, while knitting the Observatory Art Centre into the ongoing activities of the university and broader community.

When teaching at the Observatory, Nicol MacLeod concentrated her studio instruction on technical experimentation in a range of media. Her intent was to provide students with a working knowledge of the physical properties of diverse materials, which could then be adapted and extended in the pursuit individual interests.⁸⁸ Although she continuously integrated historical and contemporary art into her lessons, Nicol MacLeod

85 Pegi Nicol, *The Kingston Conference Proceedings* (reprint) (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, 1991), 114.

86 Nicol MacLeod's interest in mural work moreover suggests the influence of the American Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, which implemented thousands of mural projects in public buildings across the United States during the Depression as part of Roosevelt's New Deal reforms — Edward B. Rowan, assistant to the director of the WPA Fine Arts Projects, and Thomas Hart Benton, avid proponent of American Scene regionalism, were keynote speakers at the Kingston Conference. Regarding the effects of the Kingston Conference on Canadian artists more broadly, see: Michael Bell, “The Welfare of Art in Canada,” Introduction to *The Kingston Conference Proceedings* (reprint) (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, 1991), iii-xxxiv.

87 “Madge' (Edith Marjorie) Smith, 1898-1974, was a photographer and art dealer and a friend of many Canadian artists. The three roles were so intertwined that it is difficult to discuss these activities separately.” Lynne Struthers Swanick, “Madge Smith,” *Canadian Women's Studies* 2, no. 3 (1980): 34.

88 The Kingston Conference similarly included a demonstration component which addressed technical concerns in painting. Expressing her interest in the conference initiative, Nicol MacLeod writes to its organizer, André Biéler, in support of this component: “I have always been interested in pigments and have been preparing canvas for years and believe that is the stuff to teach people instead of dogmatic art ideas.” Letter to André Biéler [photocopy of original], c. 1941, File: Letters from P.N.M., 1941, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. (In this passage, the word 'dogmatic' has unfortunately been mis-transcribed as 'domestic' in *Daffodils*, 157).

excluded the direct copying of artwork. Her primary objective was to motivate openness to diversity in art-making. University of New Brunswick English Professor, Desmond Pacey, observes of her pedagogical model: “There was no condescension or pedantry in her approach: each individual was of supreme worth, and she considered it her task to foster that individuality rather than force it into preconceived patterns.”⁸⁹ In this vein, Nicol MacLeod eschewed copying in favour of working immersively from life — an approach that differed markedly from contemporary academic training in fine arts.⁹⁰ The indeterminate, expansive potential of modern art was unequivocally politicized by Nicol MacLeod, as she asserts in a letter to Jack Humprey:

The academy represents — reaction — fascism — free painters will always allow other painters to paint in their own way. Art should be freedom; its essence is freedom; Rules, laws, controls, standards — these works smell of the academy (power, lust to dictate). The very word 'taste' is bandied about by people as if it were the exclusive possession of the elect.⁹¹

89 Desmond Pacey, “Pegi Nicol's Memorial Display” (A Tribute), *The Daily Gleaner*, Fredericton, Tuesday, November 8, 1949. Likewise, fellow painter Will Ogilvie asserts: “In any writing about the art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, mention must be made of her extraordinary gift of communication. She was outstanding as a teacher and lecturer who was articulate in conveying her own sensitive awareness as to what goes into the making of a work of art. Many of her students and others, bear witness to the excitement they experienced in finding that their eyes had been opened by Pegi to 'see' and to search for and find, beauty in the world of Nature and of Humanity. The art of 'seeing', is, of course, a very different matter from 'looking' however intently.” Will Ogilvie, Insert with Letter to Laura Brandon, Feb. 16, 1984, File: Ogilvie, Will, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

90 Nicol MacLeod's development of this pedagogical model dates from when she first began giving art lessons while living in Ottawa during the mid 1920s and teaching for a time at Elmwood private school. Marjorie Oberne notes: “I met Pegi when she came to teach art at Elmwood. She was a rare and inspiring teacher, broke through the academic rules and got us all thinking in terms of creation rather than copying. She was directly responsible for my lifetime career as an artist.” Marjorie Oberne, Letter to Laura Brandon, Jan 3, 1985, File: Oberne, Marjorie Borden, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. In keeping, Lucy Jarvis describes Nicol MacLeod's inaugural lecture at the Observatory as “. . . a most wonderful talk about painting pictures, in which she emphasized the dividing of space, the qualities of line and things like that, and then she handed [out art materials] — they hadn't expected this! Most of the people up until then had been copying pictures, The Fredericton Art Club, that they bought at the art dealers and they were so surprised, they were all handed papers and crayons, and were told to get to work. They were thrilled!” Transcript of Lucy Jarvis interview with Janet Toole, 1975, The University of New Brunswick Harriet Irving Library, File: Jarvis, Lucy, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

91 Letter to Jack and Jean Humprey, November 1947, *Daffodils*, 270.

In consequence, her teaching mandate was profoundly democratic.⁹² Nicol MacLeod's courses involved music, films, dancing models in costume, and sketching trips to local destinations, ranging from the Fredericton outdoor farmers' market to the Boardman Collection of taxidermied birds in the University's Arts building. She stressed experiential contact throughout, encouraging her students to approach their work less as a final product than as "a release for creative expression."⁹³ This she hoped would have particular significance for the young teachers in her classes, as she explained: "You can teach anything through art."⁹⁴

By cultivating individual creativity with her own teaching, and directing her students to work from life, Nicol MacLeod advanced artistic imagination as a tool for social action — at times through a clear rejection of proprieties. "Pegi would encourage one to do somewhat 'unconventional' things such as leaving laundry to dry on the campus lawns," a former Fredericton student recalls.⁹⁵ Following the same principle of advocating art-making as an inclusive means of expanding one's ability to respond to life's circumstances and to affect and interpret external events, Nicol MacLeod carried on with her teaching less formally when back in New York. For several months in 1943 she worked towards establishing an art centre in a make-shift studio space on 88th street in

92 Correspondingly, Niergarth asserts that: "Brandon does MacLeod disservice with her observation that 'if Pegi readily supported the left-wing line in political matters, she did not think deeply about such things, being essentially a follower rather than an initiator.'" He goes on to elaborate: "Nicol MacLeod became an integral part of a developing New Brunswick art scene in which she shared an enthusiasm for art education, child art, handicrafts, and murals, which were all perceived to be part of an emerging democratic cultural life. Nicol MacLeod's co-worker at the centre, Lucy Jarvis, reflected, 'We really thought we were doing "war work" in that old Observatory' (118), suggesting a shared belief that fascism needed to be fought not only militarily in Europe but culturally at home." Niergarth, review of *Pegi by Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian Artist* by Laura Brandon (123, 123-124).

93 Pegi Nicol MacLeod as quoted by Barbara E. Scott Fisher, "Summer Art Centre Uncorks Talents at the University of New Brunswick: For, Says Pegi Nicol MacLeod, You Can Successfully Teach Anything Through Art," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 29, 1946.

94 Ibid.

95 "Reminiscences of Pegi," *Pegi Nicol Month in the UNB Art Centre, November 1981*, File: Exhibition, Madge Smith Memorial, 1974, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

Manhattan, but more often she taught from home. “I have a class of four people who are going into paint to help understanding. My kitchen makes an excellent studio,” she writes to Harry McCurry.⁹⁶ The stimulating interior of her New York apartment was also a generative site for the development of diverse work in textiles and clothing — additional aspects of her effort to dismantle the conceptual and material obstacles separating art from the operative interchange of daily life.

Frequenting New York galleries and museums whenever possible, Nicol MacLeod was keenly aware of design exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art,⁹⁷ and was particularly mindful of the role of textiles in both modern shows and historical exhibits — perceptively remarking upon inventive wall-hangings adapted from Joan Miró’s surrealist imagery, as well as Medieval French tapestries on loan from the Louvre.⁹⁸ She also admired Elsa Schiaparelli’s boundary-breaking fashions, and was familiar with the productions of the Ballets Russes, both cases where avant-garde modern art took the form of clothing and costume.⁹⁹ Underscoring her interest in designing for ballet and children’s theatre in a 1940 interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*,¹⁰⁰ Nicol MacLeod maintained an involvement in costume design after her move to New York, by sending animated sketches (Figs. 14 and 15) and elaborate materials to Madge Smith for

96 Letter to Harry McCurry, February 2, 1942, *Daffodils*, 178.

97 Nicol MacLeod writes: “I was at the Modern Museum Opening of *Organic Design* – new furniture. My rugs should have been in the show . . .” Letter to Madge Smith, September 28, 1941, *Daffodils*, 168.

And in another letter: “I found a grey green squash the colour of my big bowl and I just can’t keep my eyes off. Speaking of delicate fleurs not sufficiently decorative – the Museum of Modern art uses huge green rose-like cabbages – Kale – chicory with its modern furniture – oh so, gorgeous!” Letter to Madge Smith, November 10, 1941, *Daffodils*, 170. For an outline of the prominent role of design exhibitions in promoting modern art to the public at the MOMA in New York during the 1930s and 1940s, see: Elissa Auther, “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 343-345.

98 See: Letter to Madge Smith, Fall 1941, *Daffodils*, 168; Letter to Marius Barbeau, December 1941, *Daffodils*, 173; Letter to Madge Smith, January 21, 1948, *Daffodils*, 280.

99 Nicol MacLeod mentions the Ballets Russes in a letter to Madge Smith, October 19, 1942, *Daffodils*, 186.

100 “Murals Offer Opportunity To Record Canada at War.” *The Citizen*, Ottawa, Ontario, August 12, 1940.

use in Fredericton performances.¹⁰¹ However, most of the garments that Nicol MacLeod designed and assembled served an immediate, intimate function in her own day-to-day activities.

“So many people used to say to me, doesn't Pegi dress oddly? And I'd say oh no, she dresses magnificently, beautifully.”¹⁰² As Erica Deichmann Gregg's response suggests, Nicol MacLeod's manner of dress — much like her interior decoration — presented a fabulous challenge to convention. During a period when clothing was widely perceived as a strictly defined indicator of gender, social status and occupation, Nicol MacLeod created her own patterns and sewed and re-crafted her wardrobe from disparate garments and varied fabrics. “My new old Chelsea sweater is almost up to my shoulder augmented by a violet, a chartreuse stripe which turns ex-soktic to exotic,” she describes her current project in a letter to Kathleen Fenwick.¹⁰³ In spontaneous, subversive ensembles, Nicol MacLeod combined Victorian skirts with army jackets, turned a nursing cape into a party skirt, filled-in the moth holes of her swimsuit with daisies, wore trousers as the piano accompanist for dance classes at an all-girl's private school, and accessorized with a priest's black biretta.¹⁰⁴ She also made custom apparel for close friends.

101 “Next week I send more beads: some costumes: good wishes: perhaps even a *small* picture,” Nicol MacLeod writes to Madge Smith in the winter of 1943, and in the following letter: “There is a priceless thing for *Silvery Waves*. Keep it for me after use. I may have to do a cabaret act myself some day.” Letters to Madge Smith, 1943, *Daffodils*, 203. Italics in original.

102 Erica Deichmann Gregg, Interview with Joan Murray, March 5, 1981, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

103 Kathleen Fenwick was a close friend of Nicol MacLeod's and the Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Canada. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter Kathleen Fenwick, undated – c. march 1945, File: Correspondence with artists: 1935-1971, Kathleen Fenwick fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

104 See: Alison Ignatieff, Interview with Joan Murray, January 26, 1981, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery; Margot Johnston, Letter to Laura Brandon, June 25, 1984, File: Johnston, Mrs. A. M. [Margot], Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives; Marjorie Oberne, Letters to Laura Brandon, January 3, 1985 and February 3, 1985, File: Oberne, Marjorie Borden, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives; and Maud Brown, Interview with Ruth Comfort Jackson, March 25, 1975, audio recording, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

Otherwise unsentimental about clothing, Marian Scott became deeply attached to a striped silk dress created for her by Nicol MacLeod, mending it and wearing it until it was beyond repair.¹⁰⁵

Personal and purposeful, the clothing that Nicol MacLeod produced was in tactical response to her available resources and the oppressive uniformity of mainstream fashions. “When she made something to wear in the evening out of an old double damask tablecloth, and dyed,” Bill Graham recounts, “it wasn't just a great idea or a great piece, it was better than anything that could be bought at Creed's or anywhere else, and you had better agree.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Margot Johnston recalls that “. . . Pegi was upset because her parents had given her a fur coat which she did not want. She felt that her more conventional family did not understand her needs.”¹⁰⁷ Nicol MacLeod felt much the same in regards to the clothing that she created for her daughter, deliberately opting not to dress Jane in the conventional items provided for her by grandparents.¹⁰⁸ In a sense comparable to Sonja Delaunay's *Simultaneous* dresses, Fortunato Depero's *Futurist* vests,

105 “It was the only dress that I have ever had any sort of emotional feeling for and I still kept on wearing it even though it was in little shreds,” explains Marian Scott. Marion Scott, Interview with Joan Murray, August 27, 1980, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery. This dress is also discussed by Marian Scott in a later interview, see: Marian Scott, Interview with Laura Brandon, October 28, 1985, audio recordings, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

106 W.H. (Bill) Graham, Interview with Joan Murray, March 8, 1983, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Here my reading of Graham's account differs from Brandon's. Brandon cites Graham's above words in the context of her suggestion that: “Pegi always had difficulties with practical matters. She did not really know how to dress appropriately, for example, and friends often provided a suitable garment or advice.” *Pegi by Herself*, 92. The question that Brandon's reading raises is: appropriately for what purpose? In the same interview, Graham later affirms that Nicol MacLeod “really had that extraordinary visual gift of making herself something to look at. That is, she could pull together bits and pieces and there she was, something that you loved looking at.” W.H. (Bill) Graham, Interview with Joan Murray, March 8, 1983, transcript. Brandon herself later suggests that “Pegi's often-bohemian appearance may well have rattled some of Fredericton's teacups,” and notes: “Many of her friends remembered her clothes and her passion for bits of contrasting material.” *Pegi by Herself*, 115, 116.

107 Margot Johnston, Letter to Laura Brandon, June 25, 1984, File: Johnston, Mrs. A. M. [Margot], Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

108 See: Marjorie Mersereau, Letter to Laura Brandon, January 4, 1985, File: Mersereau, Marjorie, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

or Vavara Stepanova's Constructivist patterns, Nicol MacLeod's clothing design can be understood — in Whitney Chadwick's terms — as a “signifier for revolutionary modernism.”¹⁰⁹ Nicol MacLeod participated in the modern impulse to “. . . break down earlier notions about clothing as a cover for the body, replacing them with an image of the body as a fluid screen, capable of reflecting back a present constantly undergoing redefinition and transformation.”¹¹⁰ An engagement in clothing (re)design fostered the vanguard aims of many early twentieth-century modernists: to harness the revolutionary impetus of art for the redefinition of cultural and social conditions.

These goals are also reflected in Nicol MacLeod's involvement in designing and producing hooked rugs and mats during the 1940s. New Brunswick flora and fauna were the main sources for her design imagery, denoting an environmental awareness and concern for the attunement of art to *life* from an ecological as well as a social standpoint (Figs. 16, 17, 18).¹¹¹ She fostered ecological sensitivity among her students as well, at times holding her Observatory classes “. . . in a field where grows every fern, every tree and flower of all the county.”¹¹² The community-directed focus of this textile work is further apparent from Nicol MacLeod's and Madge Smith's collaboration with New Brunswick craftswomen to have the designs made-up as rugs for sale in Smith's Fredericton shop.¹¹³ Moreover, in 1943, Nicol MacLeod entered her rug work and won

109 Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 262.

110 *Ibid.*, 274. This is an aspect of Nicol MacLeod's negotiation of modernism that I revisit in part two of the present study.

111 Erica Deichmann Gregg writes: “We were all lovers of Nature – I remember long walks in the woods when we gathered ferns, mosses and flowers which Pegi would paint when we returned. . . . I think Pegi's longing to grasp the secret of the explosive mystery of Nature is evident in nearly all her work with a constant vigorous undertone of search.” Appendix II, “Pegi Nicol MacLeod,” *Daffodils*, 321.

112 Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, July 1944, *Daffodils*, 218. (The word 'county' has been mis-transcribed as 'country' in this passage in *Daffodils*. See original letter: Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

113 Hudson likewise discusses Nicol MacLeod's rug work as indicative of a fusion of art with life, see: Hudson, 217.

third place in the Arts in Therapy Competition at the Museum of Modern Art. This was a national contest for handicraft design of prospective value in the therapeutic rehabilitation of disabled or convalescent war veterans.¹¹⁴ The announcement of Nicol MacLeod's award in *Maritime Art* relays the social implications of adapting art for therapeutic aims: "This use of the arts is one of the most significant developments of today and of the utmost importance for the great part it can play in the restoration of the mind and body to normal living and in the immense programme of rehabilitation which lies ahead."¹¹⁵ Recognizing the value of her work, the National Film Board of Canada, under the aegis of the National Gallery, documented Nicol MacLeod's rug designs in colour photographs, and in 1946 these designs were considered for distribution by the Maritime Division of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association.¹¹⁶

Envisioning the extension of her art practice into all facets of contemporary production, Nicol MacLeod attests to her readiness: "I am alive to create design (any shape or form) and I am interested in rugs, clothes, furniture, textiles, motor cars — houses, trees and people!"¹¹⁷ Destabilizing restrictive conventions of classification and inviting variant angles of reception, her artistic endeavours are exploratory and expansive. In addition to the diverse work discussed above — and finally I must resort to a list — Nicol MacLeod illustrated for posters, Christmas cards, prospective children's books, ethnologist Marius Barbeau's transcriptions of Québécois folk stories, and for

114 "The Arts in Therapy," New York: The Museum of Modern Art, February 2 – March 7, 1943.

115 Kathleen Fenwick, "Coast to Coast in Art: Ottawa," *Maritime Art* 3, no. 4 (April-May, 1943): 114.

116 Regarding the Canadian Manufacturers' Association's interest in Nicol MacLeod's designs, see: Letters to Madge Smith, 1946, *Daffodils*, 249, 252-253; Letters to Harry McCurry, 1946, *Daffodils*, 250-251; correspondence between W.S.A. Daley (Secretary, Maritime Division, Canadian Manufacturers' Association) and McCurry, as well as letters from McCurry to Pegi Nicol MacLeod, all dating to 1946, Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

117 Letter to Madge Smith, January 28, 1946, *Daffodils*, 249.

publications including *The Canadian Forum* and *The Canadian Nation*; was a captivating dancer, well remembered for the verve of her impromptu dances at parties, played the piano with notable talent, and often sang among friends in social settings; as well as being an avid writer of poetry, fiction, art reviews, articles, and numerous, irrepressible letters. Nicol MacLeod's account of her final summer session of teaching at the Observatory Art Centre in Fredericton goes a long way towards demonstrating the scope and depth of her conception of art as a malleable forum for invention and communication. She writes:

I am more and more attached to my teaching. This summer I took the aesthetics department of the Philosophy class, five high school principals, through an ad lib programme on painting, sculpture, music . . . It was strictly participation; so that they used paint and clay. I traced the structure of music with my piano, sang the Nut Brown Maiden to them and played them more on the college record machine. Then I got the classics prof to trace the beginning of the Greek theatre and then he and I did the new version of *Medea*.¹¹⁸

Spontaneous, sensuous, participatory, experiential and broadly interdisciplinary — Nicol MacLeod taught art as she lived it.

118 Letter to Marian Scott, postmarked September 29, 1948, *Daffodils*, 297. Nicol MacLeod wrote this letter from a New York hospital, where she was recuperating from a major operation to combat the intestinal cancer that resulted in her death less than eight months later. She writes with remarkable resilience: "The pain in my stomach was just right for *Medea*. We left out the dance but I am sure that by next year with all my new plumbing that little matter will be remedied."

Part 2

A Body of Work

No one, today, is supposed to be concerned with digging form out of nature. According to Madame Rebay, curator of the Museum of Non-objective Art, we are supposed rather to be seeking to leave this world and its foolish forms. It seems to me that the public on the contrary have other ideas . . .

— Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Canadian Art*, 1947 ¹¹⁹

Unwilling to abandon the present moment, or to cast aside the elusive shapes and mutable surfaces of life, Pegi Nicol MacLeod's work presents a divergent perspective in modernist painting. In part two, I investigate Nicol MacLeod's multi-faceted approach to painterly representation, drawing on the primacy of experiential embodiment to her artistic practice. The notion of embodied creativity, palpable to those who knew her, played a significant role in the representational strategies that Nicol MacLeod developed in her work. Considering the implications of embodiment for a gendered negotiation of artistic identity, I assess Nicol MacLeod's studies of the female nude as transgressively modern confluences of *artist/female/body* — achieved through pointed revisions of a sexually-encoded stock device of Western painting. Such revisions were dependent upon an epistemological reconsideration of bodily experience, in rejection of dualistic

¹¹⁹ Pegi Nicol MacLeod, review of *Rouault*, by Edward Alden Jewell, *Canadian Art* 4, no. 2 (March, 1947): 83.

denigrations of material existence which favour detached spiritual or conceptual realms. Nicol MacLeod's open pursuit of *art as experience* unfolds in performative paintings of active and dynamic figures. Her work highlights the sensuous, gestural enactment of art-making and the meaningful role of painting's audience. Moreover, Nicol MacLeod emphasizes temporal and spatial flux in her experiential portrayals of multiple figures and contemporary crowds, entering into a direct dialogue with the philosophical and technological transformations of modern life.

***Repositioning the nude***

Through self-reflexive figurations of the female body, Nicol MacLeod's painting confronts a long history of Western art where representations of the female nude have played a central part in asserting artistic prowess as a sexualized male prerogative. Whitney Chadwick outlines how the female body has persistently been presented discursively "as a site of male viewing pleasure, a commodified image of exchange, and a fetishized defense against the [masculine] fear of castration."¹²⁰ Chadwick further contends that "an erotically based assault on the female form" is a key characteristic of those works of art identified as canonically modern and formally or stylistically innovative, citing:

Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes, Gauguin's 'primitives,' Matisse's nudes, Surrealism's objects. Modern artists from Renoir ('I paint with my prick') to Picasso ('Painting, that is actual lovemaking') have collaborated in fusing the sexual and the artistic by equating artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated.¹²¹

120 Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 280-281.

121 *Ibid.*, 279.

Male artists appropriating the female nude have thus staked a historically validated claim to the title of 'modern master' — where artistic identity is cultivated through mastery of the female body, an overdetermined signifier of the natural world.¹²² In this context, the (oppressive, heterosexist) sexual power dynamic between the male artist and the female model represents “a fundamental metaphor for creativity,” Rosemary Betterton explains, a metaphor that by the onset of the twentieth century had become “firmly entrenched as a central image by which to define artistic identity in both popular myth and painterly imagination.”¹²³ Such a referent for creativity, by definition, excludes the female artist intent upon imaging her own praxis, and mediates her identification as an artist with her own body. Both in spite of and because of this, the female nude has a pivotal presence in the work of many early modernist women, including Pegi Nicol MacLeod, whose paintings disrupt this phallogentric logic along multiple fault lines — contentiously engaging with “discourses of representation, morality and female sexuality” through the repositioning of women's bodies.¹²⁴

Nicol MacLeod's far reaching interest in historical and modern art, alongside her mutually supportive relationships with women in the Canadian artistic milieu and her positive self-perception as an artist, strongly motivated her to visualize the actively creative female body. Her status as friend and model to other women whose bodies she painted places her work in opposition to enactments of sexual and economic mastery.¹²⁵

122 Rosemary Betterton, “Mother Figures: The Maternal Nude in the work of Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 162.

123 Ibid.

124 Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 280.

125 Nicol MacLeod writes, “Mrs. E. [Mrs. Elliot, on a visit to Ottawa with her husband the poet and artist Wm. Yandell Elliot] and I painted each other continually during the ten days or so that they were here. The attic turned into a nudism hive! . . . I am recruiting the figures of all my friends. I lure them up the Gatineau in the Ford, then strip them and paint them.” Letter to Frank and Marion Scott, 1932, *Daffodils*, 100-101. Likewise, Alison Ignatieff (Alison Ignatieff, Interviews with Ruth Comfort

The painting *Two Nudes* (1931) (Fig. 19) demonstrates Nicol MacLeod's early revision of the conventional nude. In *Two Nudes*, the figures appear as the reflection in a mirror surrounded by fabric, yet the composition also references Nicol MacLeod's recurrent image of a window framed by open curtains. As observers, we are situated ambiguously. We stand in as the central nudes, looking down at our own reflected image, but also as unspecified viewers, looking up at a standing female nude who, in a direct and confident pose, pushes back the drapes that would obstruct our vision, as her body shelters and obscures a second figure. While this painting does not deny the viewer a voyeuristic gaze, it does complicate our position by also suggesting an alternate field of vision. Christine Battersby — in the pursuit of a feminist aesthetics cognizant of women's contributions as historical producers of culture — argues that since “women have been presented with contradictory evaluative norms against which to measure their attainments” they “are not always fated (via the culturally determined unconscious) to have a uniform vision of themselves as lacking,” rather, they “adopt a double perspective on themselves.”¹²⁶ *Two Nudes* can be understood as representing this sort of instability. The viewer's gaze is aligned with both that of a voyeur and that of the self-reflexive subject. A sense of doubling is reiterated by the doubled figures, one presented as an image of lack — a nude, but not a sexed body — the other, unabashedly, the body of a woman. *Two Nudes* evocatively illustrates Battersby's assertion that while women must “manipulate our society's presentation of themselves as Other. . . they are not

Jackson, October 1975, audio recordings, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives), Marjorie Oberne (Marjorie Oberne, Interview with Joan Murray, June 6, 1983, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery) Kathleen Daly Pepper (Brandon, *Pegi By Herself*, 61), Marian Scott (Ibid.), and Letitia Echlin (Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 30) were all fellow painters who reciprocally modeled nude with Pegi Nicol MacLeod over the course of their various friendships.
 126 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 10.

continuously trapped by that perspective into seeing themselves as Other.”¹²⁷ Herein lies the potential for adopting a perspective of identification rather than objectification, of reflecting upon oneself as a producer of images: foregrounded, active, and gendered as female.

There is no hint of submission in the upright, advancing figures of Nicol MacLeod's sizable watercolour of 1934, *Untitled (Nude Study)* (Fig. 20). The weighty, powerful bodies — three representations of the artist herself — loom over the viewer; pushing forward in the composition, they cannot be contained by the edges of the paper. Read as three stages in the sequential movement of one woman, this is a body in motion. She encroaches upon the viewer's space physically with a sudden, sure, and even confrontational stride, that challenges the viewer's detached position of privilege. A scopophilic response of erotic entitlement is further inhibited by the uninviting colour-tones of the flesh that is neither warm nor pliant. As an artist's self-portrayal, this work articulates an identity grounded in a purposeful, dynamic female body.

Still, Nicol MacLeod remained sensitive to the problematics of self-identification with the female nude. As evidenced by both paintings cited above, the women's bodies that Nicol MacLeod represents are often cropped at the neck, leaving a torso or trunk that fills the frame. This cropping is comparable to the effect that Betterton identifies in the work of Käthe Kollwitz as a “violent splitting of head from body.”¹²⁸ Betterton recounts that: “The normative pairing of male artist and female model reproduces that fundamental gendered division between the 'intelligible and sensible', mind and body, in western thought. In this division of roles, the artist may look at, but not inhabit, the body of the

127 Ibid.

128 Betterton, “Mother Figures,” 164.

woman.”¹²⁹ For Betterton, a literal split between mind and body as represented spatially in Kollwitz's work testifies to the impossibility of resolving this division “within the terms of contemporary discussion of women and art.”¹³⁰ Although Nicol MacLeod's adoption of a similar schema suggests a corresponding difficulty, her intentional framing of *woman-as-body* also implies a deliberately mocking response to the contemporaneous terms of representation delimiting the female nude in art. Through her work she *redefines* such terms for her own ends. By willfully emphasizing 'the sensible' with reference to her own body, Nicol MacLeod aligns her creativity with her physicality and sensuality, in rejection of an epistemic/moralistic denigration of embodiment. Drawing on her social non-conformity with restrictive notions of female sexuality, she endeavours to picture the female body outside the strictures of a dominating masculine gaze.

“Physical relations were very important to her,” close confidante Marian Scott recalled, stressing that Nicol MacLeod was highly open and mobile sexually — such that several male members of the radically progressive League for Social Reconstruction, in which she was also peripherally involved, were too inhibited for her interests.¹³¹ Notably, Nicol MacLeod postponed marriage to selectively cohabit with the men who were her lovers at a time when this was far from socially permissible, and exercised a right to reproductive control and bodily autonomy at a time when this was illegal. Contextualizing her work biographically, both Murray and Brandon have made compelling links between Nicol MacLeod's sexuality and the subject matter referenced directly and obliquely in her paintings — relating *Torso and Plants* (1935) (Fig. 21) to a

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.

131 Marian Scott, Interview with Laura Brandon, October 28, 1985, audio recordings, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

terminated pregnancy.¹³² Brandon further argues that *Torso and Plants* and *Descent of Lilies* (1935) (Fig. 22), both self-portraits, demonstrate a personal exploration of sexuality that is closely tied-up with a coded rejection of “the prevailing prudishness within the Toronto art establishment.”¹³³ By nodding to the reigning standard of acceptability in locating her nudes amidst eternal, natural settings, Brandon contends that Nicol MacLeod could produce work which “flouts conventional mores” while receiving wide public exposure.¹³⁴ Extending Brandon's argument, I would like to suggest that Nicol MacLeod was not only using her work as a platform for the surreptitious expression of her sexuality, but also — and in parallel — fleshing-out a transgressively modern conception of the female body as a generative, gendered source of artistic creativity.

Torso and Plants and *Descent of Lilies*, when viewed as self-portraits of Nicol MacLeod as an artist, present a multileveled subversive sophistication. In these works, Nicol MacLeod takes up and takes on the pervasive, loaded rhetoric of what Chadwick identifies as “early Modernism's exultation of the 'natural' female body always subject to

132 Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 37; Brandon, “Exploring 'the Undertheme,’” 45-51, and *Pegi by Herself*, 86-87. Unlike Brandon's and Murray's readings of this work, Hudson's does not consider the personal implications of *Torso and Plants*. Although Hudson notes that the work is a self-portrayal and that “*Torso and Plants* asserts human physiognomy as a determining factor in aesthetic experience,” instead of elaborating on the specificity of this physiognomy, Hudson contends: “. . . MacLeod's work refers back to the academic tradition of the fine arts. It is this tradition, embracing the essential humanism of aesthetic experience, that is carried forth in contemporary painting.” Hudson, 100.

133 Brandon, “Exploring 'the Undertheme,’” 42-52. Here Brandon reads *Torso and Plants* and *Descent of Lilies* — works dealing with abortion and sexual experience — as camouflaged critical responses to the censorship of female nudes in art at the Art Gallery of Toronto during the early-mid 1930s.

Specifically, Brandon shows a connection between Nicol MacLeod's visual critique in *Descent of Lilies* and Donald Buchanan's article in the April 1935 issue of *Canadian Forum*, “Naked Ladies,” in which Buchanan recounts what he describes as “the perverse logic that pervades the miasma of censoring minds” (Buchanan, 273) following incidents involving censorship in Canadian art exhibitions.

Buchanan discusses the 1934 Canadian Group of Painter's Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in which a painting by Liliias Torrence Newton, *Nude in a Studio* (c. 1934), featuring a female nude was refused hanging on moral grounds; the nude is standing indoors and wearing fashionable footwear which situated the figure too directly as a contemporary woman (naked, erotic, taboo) rather than a timeless and universalized artist's model located in a natural setting (nude, symbolic, fine art) —

Buchanan vehemently rejects such distinctions. See also: Brandon, *Pegi by Herself*, 82-87.

134 Brandon, “Exploring 'the Undertheme,’” 51.

the literal and metaphoric control of man.”¹³⁵ The affinity that Nicol MacLeod traces between her own body and animate, teeming plant-life carries a challenge that did not escape her contemporaries. Walter Abell, in a 1937 article which included a full page reproduction of *Descent of Lilies*, writes of Nicol MacLeod's work:

Nudes with flowers are a favorite subject, sometimes realistically, sometimes imaginatively interwoven. A recurrence of heroic and barbaric elements, color now strangely metallic, now softly gracious, characterize these works. They are sometimes forbidding. They awe one and impose themselves by their strength.¹³⁶

Heroic, barbaric, forbidding and imposing; these 'nudes with flowers' must be reckoned with. Abell's response suggests that more is operative here than a prima facie acquiescence to acceptability as a mask for unsettling personal content. Graham McInnes' review of *Descent of Lilies*, written the same year and likewise illustrated, is also revealing. Emphasizing the premise that an artist must *create*, McInnes begins the article:

To analyse one of Pegi Nicol's paintings is to go a long way to understanding a point of view which was obscured by the academic naturalists and the misuse of the camera. It is that artists do not represent or portray; they interpret and create. . . The artist's task, taking his subject matter as the initial inspiration perhaps, is to abstract, to synthesise, to emphasise and understate, to re-form and fuse in the fire of his creative imagination, under the stress of powerful feeling, the original impact of the external world.¹³⁷

McInnes does not identify *Descent of Lilies* as a self-portrait, neither does he speak of its representational content. Rather, he addresses this painting as an exemplary manifestation of how an artist works, giving primacy to the artist as the determining agent in the creative act. This guides the reader's focus foremost towards Nicol MacLeod

¹³⁵ Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 286.

¹³⁶ Walter Abell, "Some Canadian Moderns," *Magazine of Art* 30, no. 7 (July 1937): 427.

¹³⁷ Graham Campbell McInnes, "Contemporary Canadian Artists: No. 8—Pegi Nicol," *The Canadian Forum* 17 (September 1937), 202. Spelling and grammar in original.

as an artist, and in doing so offers valuable insight into her self-presentation.¹³⁸

In *Descent of Lilies*, Nicol MacLeod directly references her own body at three different spatial depths in the composition: the fully realized central figure; a receding, partial repetition of this figure; and the immense hand — almost four times larger than life — that reaches into the bottom edge of the composition, grasping the stem of a lush blossom as a hand would hold a paintbrush. Like McInnes, Nicol MacLeod stresses her creativity. The artist's hand, compositionally foregrounded, is a suggestive metonym — divulging a physical, tactile engagement with her work, which is reinforced here by her undraped upper body. For Nicol MacLeod, painting was a sensual act and a phenomenological affirmation. She writes: “I sometimes think nothing matters but the communication from a certain kind of person thro his hand and his brush. Expression by planes alone *is* not. Only by his tenderness and infinite pleasure stroke by stroke, he *is*.”¹³⁹ Painting, as gesture, motion and touch, occasions self-communion and vital exchange. In *Descent of Lilies*, the central figure of the artist looks back at herself while pursuing herself, suggesting the compounded reflexivity of self-portraiture *in the act*. Aligning her body with flourishing natural forms in an amorphous state of organic transformation, she conceptualizes her creativity as a proliferating aspect of her person. At the same time, Nicol MacLeod asserts herself as a modern woman. The artist's hand wears bold red nail polish. She shows herself sporting a bobbed haircut, standing in stocking feet, with a silky, fitted gown slid down to her waist. This central self-

138 McInnes goes as far as to contend that “this painting does not depend for its effect on our perceiving that it is an arrangement of hands, lilies, horses and figures.” *Ibid.* As such, Brandon interprets this review differently than I have done here, arguing that McInnes' article presents a “full page formal interpretation” in which he “neglected the work's meaning.” *Pegi by Herself*, 86. See also: “Exploring ‘the Undertheme,’” 5, 72-73.

139 Letter to Madge Smith, March 10, 1941, *Daffodils*, 157. Italics and spelling in original.

representation strikingly contrasts with the marginal, faceless figure riding sidesaddle in bourgeois Victorian costume at the bottom left of the composition. *Descent of Lilies* exposes the prevailing notion of a fixed, subordinate 'women's nature' as a ridiculous euphemism for oppressive, culturally constructed socio-sexual roles, and refutes the purportedly universal/allegorical status of the female nude as an unchanging, objectified referent for the natural world. Instead, Nicol MacLeod celebrates the modernity and sensuality of her own embodied artistic experience.

With *Torso and Plants*, a bursting surge of rhubarb, daffodils, and hyacinths unfurls before a naked female frame. The vibrant colours of the plant-life are also those of the woman's body; a warm red gently outlines, touching down to linger on an arm, a nipple, fingertips, stems. Thick and richly individuated strokes of green, white, yellow and blue meet to define the curves and folds of body and plant. The artist's pleasure in painting takes form in the female torso as an incarnation of natural growth and fecundity. Yet this is neither an image of timeless, instinctual womanhood, nor a projection of primitive otherness — the reference is specific, the body is the artist's own. The specificity of this gendered body is carried through from Nicol MacLeod's immediate personal circumstances, and references an abortion in 1935.¹⁴⁰ Even so, there remains a euphoric fervency to this work that is quite difficult to reconcile with the symbolic narration of an unwanted, aborted pregnancy — a dissonance connoting multiple levels of meaning. For Nicol MacLeod, the female body is simultaneously a lived reality, an

140 Brandon identifies rhubarb as a traditional purgative, inferring that Nicol MacLeod's "use of rhubarb in *Torso and Plants* referred to a very specific kind of cleansing; in fact, her reference to the abortion in *Torso and Plants* was recently confirmed by [Marian] Scott in an interview." "Exploring 'the Undertheme,'" 48. Brandon also cites indirect references to abortion in two of Nicol MacLeod's letters c. 1935 to Marian Scott, noting that "[t]here is no suggestion that she considered continuing the pregnancy." *Pegi By Herself*, 86-87.

artist's body, and a potent referent for her creativity. *Torso and Plants* underscores this subjective complexity; in this work, she represents a fecund female nude that is at once actual and metaphorical. With *Torso and Plants*, Nicol MacLeod revises and extends the terms of female creation. She pictures her body as a sensually generative artist's body, active as an abundant, female cultural producer, at a time when she opted not to pursue biological procreation.¹⁴¹

Nicol MacLeod likewise employs birthing and maternal references metaphorically when writing of her working process. She recounts “sitting up nights nursing some designs” in an article on her mural project at the Woodstock Vocational School, describing design itself as “creative agony.”¹⁴² Concurrently, she perceives of her maternal actuality — upon pregnancy and the birth of her daughter, Jane, in 1937 — as a source of artistic creativity. “You won't be surprised when I say I wrote almost a whole novel in the hospital. . . . It was a fascinating ten days. . . .” she pens in a letter to Marian Scott, “I painted a great big watercolour the night Jane was born.”¹⁴³ In her next letter, Nicol MacLeod affirms that “the thrill of having a baby” had incited her to paint.¹⁴⁴ In effect, Nicol MacLeod *inhabits* her privileged metaphor. What Battersby finds so powerful in the work of Frida Kahlo is also present in Nicol MacLeod's work; there is a calling of attention to “the double aspect of flesh as both immanent . . . and also as that through which life flows and her own creativity comes,” in the “attempt to bind the processes of artistic creativity with a birth-giving that is fleshy, material and premised on

141 Here my analysis is indebted to Betterton's reading of Paula Modersohn-Becker's *Self Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day* (1906). Betterton, “Mother Figures,” 166.

142 Pegi Nichol (sic) MacLeod, “Adventure in Murals.” *The Carleton Sentinel*, 1942, Woodstock, N.B.

143 Letter to Marion Scott, January 1938, *Daffodils*, 137.

144 Letter to Marion Scott, April 1938, *Daffodils*, 138.

the *female* body as a site of *cultural* creativity and rebirth.”¹⁴⁵ *Self-portrait with Jane* (c.1939) (Fig. 23) is just such an endeavor.¹⁴⁶

The artist's body supports a young girl, only past infancy, who smiles in recognition at the sprouting shoot of a plant at her feet. Foreground and background merge; mother and daughter — artist and child — are immersed in the populous, distinctive social space of tenement housing on East 88th Street, New York City. The figures are compositionally paramount; the mother-daughter relationship maintains a powerful presence within the myriad of interconnections that comprise modern life. By representing her maternal subjectivity via the female nude of the modern city, Nicol MacLeod re-signifies the creative metaphor as her own contemporary artistic embodiment. Intrinsic to this re-signification is a refutation of, in Betterton's words, “the western cultural tradition of spiritual and dematerialized motherhood symbolized by the immaculate conception and virgin birth.”¹⁴⁷ Nicol MacLeod counters the “sealed vessel”¹⁴⁸ of the 'Virgin Mother,' a symbolic repudiation of female sexuality, with her

145 Christine Battersby, “Flesh Questions: Representational Strategies and the Cultures of Birth,” *Women* 17, no.3 (Winter 2006/2007): 301, 302. Italics in original. Battersby is interested in the philosophical implications that this entails, contending that: “Even those philosophers – like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault – who do subvert the dominant traditions of western philosophy and emphasize embodiment have been unconcerned with the ways that philosophy would change when what is privileged is the birthing human body. To demand that philosophy theorize a self that is female in its capacity for birthing is not, however, to suppose that all human females can or do – let alone *should* – give birth. It is not to make an empirical generalization about all (or even some) women. Philosophy's task is conceptual analysis and, as such, it needs to take seriously the implications of conceiving and imagining a self that is embodied as ‘female’. What makes feminist philosophy such a productive means of moving forward is the sudden switch in perspective that comes from focusing on the problem of sexual difference as a *philosophical* problem.” *Ibid.*, 296. Italics in original.

146 From my knowledge of Nicol MacLeod's oeuvre, I would instead date this work to c. 1941. The tenement housing speaks of the apartment on East 88th Street that Nicol MacLeod and her family moved into in 1940, with tenement developments constructed facing the view from her window in 1941; Nicol MacLeod depicts these tenement buildings consistently in her work throughout the 1940s.

147 Betterton, “Mother Figures,” 159-160. Brandon also finds that Nicol MacLeod's pairing of mother and child references Christian iconography of the Virgin Mother, but does not read this reference as a subversion. *Pegi by Herself*, 109.

148 Betterton, “Mother Figures,” 167.

own sensuously creative female body as artist/mother. Her maternal subjectivity, though *of her body*, is not a condition of primal stasis, but is *enacted* within an ecologically integrated environment, a substrative socio-historical framework and a specific domestic situation. Through nude studies, Nicol MacLeod intently *re-presents* the female body in order to gain representational access to her own embodied artistic identity. In a similar way, Nicol MacLeod's investment in artistic embodiment is carried through in her representations of modern life, insistently evoking the corporeal act of art-making and the performative encounter of the *work of art*.

***Performing Art***

*She lived her art in her motion and speech
As her painting spoke and moved.
She entered a room like a self-portrait
And her language cut quickly.
Everything that was ordinary became extraordinary
Through her vision and touch,
And what she approached grew bright colours.
She started songs and joys and bells. . .¹⁴⁹*

Lived enactment, experientially performative, these lines from Frank R. Scott's vivid poem, *For Pegi Nicol*, adeptly relay the reciprocal performance that is her art — a characterization that applies to her interdisciplinary cultivation of art-into-life, her self-portraits as an artist, and her broader painting practice. Most directly, Nicol MacLeod's engagement with performance is evident in her extensive involvement with theatre, through writing, acting and design. Tracing a theatrical thread, Russell Harper posits a

149 Frank R. Scott. "For Pegi Nicol," *Daffodils*, 8. Scott wrote this poem following Nicol MacLeod's death in 1949, ending with the expressive assurance: "Only part of her died. / Her alive is still alive."

relationship between Nicol MacLeod's work in stage design and what he describes as her humanist approach to representing figures en masse. "Her Toronto theatre sets were designed as backgrounds which were meaningless unless peopled by actors," Harper writes, identifying this work as a contributing factor in the culminating development of her crowded New York paintings: ". . .when, surrounded by mass humanity on every side, she built up compositions purely of moving figures."¹⁵⁰ From a different angle, with an emphasis on painterly gesture, Murray also ties Nicol MacLeod's painting to the actions of a performer, relating: "she painted as though fixing on canvas the rhythms of dance."¹⁵¹ Murray further asserts that Nicol MacLeod's gestural work positions her as an action painter and, in this regard, "[o]nly a hairsbreadth finally separated her from abstract art."¹⁵² With Frank Scott's resonant poetics in mind, I will develop a connection between Murray's and Harper's observations concerning the performative qualities of Nicol MacLeod's paintings, demonstrating how her compositions palpably communicate the physicality of the movements through which they were produced, while her depictions of grouped figures engender a vitally humanist evocation of the bodily immersion of experience. With the rhythmical perspicacity of poetry, Nicol MacLeod reiterates the performative affect of her gestural paint-handling in representations of fluid and dynamic crowds — both enunciating and eliciting experiential embodiment.

Nicol MacLeod's review of a loan exhibition of European paintings at the Art Gallery of Toronto, in December of 1935, helps to elucidate her critical conception of

150 J. Russell Harper, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Maritime Artist," *The Dalhousie Review* 43, no. 1 (1963): 49.

151 Murray, "Introduction," *Daffodils*, 15.

152 Ibid. Murray adds: "One of her *Flower Market* paintings (National Gallery of Canada) shows how close she was to total abstraction; the swirling dark subject recalls an early Kandinsky. On the other hand she might have remained, as she did much of her life, on the verge of abstraction, like Picasso, never quite taking the ultimate plunge." Ibid., 55.

paint as a powerfully sensuous medium. She observes:

The importance of Segonzac is his behaviour with paint. He treats it as a painter likes it best to be treated. Unlike Seurat, who paints upward from the surface of the canvas, giving the vibration and glitter of porcelain, he must get right underneath and work in the very material stuff of colour itself. In *Point de Joinville* he unearths colours so fragile that they might be compared to odours which dissipate into thin, fragrant essence.¹⁵³

In this encounter, painting is not confined to the visual. Nicol MacLeod describes painterly exploration as multi-sensorial, a process whereby colour is excavated and released, as sight becomes touch and smell. This appreciation for exploratory, sensuous play is materially manifest in Nicol MacLeod's own work — in the lush, laden brush strokes of *Descent of Lilies* and *Torso and Plants*, and, dramatically, through the tangible dynamism of crowd scenes like *Christmas Tree and Skaters, Rockefeller Plaza* (1946) (Fig. 24). Its mixed-media surface conveys a vibrantly enacted experimentation (Detail, Fig. 25). Opaque touches and streaky smears of yellow, white and brown evoke the riotous pleasures of fingers in paint. The hazy softness of pale pink and baby-blue washes, the scratchy strokes of grey from a rough, dry brush, and the wet volatility of a vividly inky indigo — with the varied dispositions of as many different characters — elicit a rush of diverse sensations. And even yet, this rich performance in paint is overlapped and underlaid with the impassioned score of abundant line — twisting, circling, spiking, and flowing across the paper in heavy marks and delicate traces.

“There was one aesthetic conviction in particular which always guided her work,”

153 Pegi Nicol, “Loan Exhibition of Paintings,” *The Canadian Forum* 15, no. 176 (December, 1935): 390. Likewise, in her review of the second exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters, Nicol MacLeod expresses her appreciation for Anne Savage's painterly sensibility. Valuing the sensuous exploration of painting as *paint*, Nicol MacLeod writes: “Ann[e] Savage, of all Montreal women painters, advances through a metamorphosis from belief in picturesque Quebec to a belief in the sensuousness of paint itself. Paint is between cheese and butter for texture and thickness, revered in its use for creating entities called paintings. A painting is not a design, a painting is not an idea, but that has not been realized by everyone yet.” Pegi Nicol, “The Passionate Snow of Yesteryear,” *The Canadian Forum* 16, no. 183 (April, 1936): 21.

Donald Buchanan writes in his catalogue essay for the National Gallery of Canada's 1949 Memorial Exhibition of Nicol MacLeod's painting. "It was, as she stated, that once a line was put down it possessed an expressive reality in itself, and should never be changed. . . This was part and parcel of the quality of spontaneity which was most typical of her, both as a human being and as a painter."¹⁵⁴ Buchanan's description might well be taken as an account of the surrealist-inspired spontaneity of Les Automatistes, or the unconscious impetus of abstract expressionism. Indeed, in a review of this exhibition for the *Ottawa Citizen*, Carl Weiselberger interprets her stylistic development along these very lines, suggesting that: "A new, different experience was New York. Pegi Nicol's painting became more 'expressionist,' sometimes on the verge of abstract surrealism."¹⁵⁵ In an unhindered transmission of creative energy onto canvas, abstract surrealist and expressionist painting privileges the impulsive discoveries of open performance. Analogously, Marjorie Oberne recalls that Nicol MacLeod "would wake up in the night with a vision, and leap out of bed to paint frantically until she was exhausted."¹⁵⁶ Through expressively performed corporeal/material experimentations, Nicol MacLeod's painting edges very close to these abstract classifications. Her work stresses painting as a verb, reveling in *process as discovery*. Yet, though she painted as if "possessed by a sort of feverish daemon," in the words of René Cera, the effect was not unbounded abstraction, but a fervent transposition of "the ordinary events of surrounding life."¹⁵⁷

In his 1936 text, *Representation and Form: A Study of Aesthetic Values in*

154 Donald W. Buchanan, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod," in *Memorial Exhibition: Pegi Nicol MacLeod 1904-1949* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1949), 7.

155 Weiselberger, "Art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod at National Gallery," *Ottawa Eve Citizen*, June 13, 1949

156 Marjorie Oberne, Letter to Laura Brandon, January 3, 1985, File: Oberne, Marjorie Borden, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

157 René Cera, Letter to Laura Brandon, March 3, 1984, File: Cera, René, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

Representational Art, Walter Abell argues for the artistic merits of a middle position between abstraction and literally descriptive depiction, defined by the aesthetic qualities of 'representational form.' "There is no such thing as form without content (the charge of the novice and historian against abstract art) or content without form (the charge of the abstractionist against an interest in subject-matter)," he contends.¹⁵⁸ As such, Abell finds that, just as the formal elements of line, colour and compositional arrangement are indispensable to aesthetic appreciation, the rich associative qualities of identifiable subject-matter enhance the aesthetic value of a work of art. Analyzing the socially progressive slant of the community of painters in Toronto during the 1930s, Hudson stresses the significance of Abell's text in providing "a solid critical basis for identification of the humanist aesthetic in Canadian painting."¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, Hudson argues that Toronto painters were "modernists in their assertion of the primacy of representational form," and that Abell's concept propitiously "redefined formalism and

158 Walter Abell, *Representation and Form: A Study of Aesthetic Values in Representational Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 92.

159 Hudson, 79. Hudson identifies the Toronto community of painters as: Bertram Brooker, Charles Comfort, Carl Schaefer, Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Paraskeva Clark and, by the end of the 1930s, also Fred Hagan, Jack Bush, Aba Bayefsky, and Jack Nichols. Hudson includes Pegi Nicol MacLeod among this community since she lived in the city during the mid 1930s, and maintained her Toronto contacts in later years via an extensive involvement in Canadian exhibitions and membership in both the Canadian Group of Painters and the Canadian Society for Painters in Water Colour. However, Hudson's reading of Nicol MacLeod's work as subscribing to a "collective language of art" (Ibid., 220), specific to Toronto painters, downplays the significance of Nicol MacLeod's close professional and personal relationships with artists — notably Marian Scott, a founding member of the Contemporary Arts Society — in Montreal, where Nicol MacLeod attended L'École des Beaux-Arts from 1923-24, lived for a period from 1931-1932, and visited often, as well as her wide-ranging exposure to modern art in New York. Moreover, Hudson's assertion of a shared regional symbolism clashes with Nicol MacLeod's sentiments, as expressed in a letter to Jack Humphrey, that "... the utmost value a group can have is to give individual painters opportunities to exhibit together," (November or December, 1947, *Daffodils*, 272) and the wide appreciation for the individuality of her work among her contemporaries — in the words of Graham McInnes: "To have a Pegi Nicol in one's room is like smelling daffodils in mid-winter. Artistically, there is no experience in Canadian painting quite like it." Graham McInnes, "Artist of the Wayward Brush," *The Ottawa Citizen*, February 14, 1949. Nonetheless, Hudson's positioning of Nicol MacLeod as part of a socially-conscious movement of painting in Canada sheds considerable light on her artistic practice.

opened the humanist aesthetic to a play of references between art and contemporary life.”¹⁶⁰ In his article entitled “Some Canadian Moderns,” Abell writes accordingly of Nicol MacLeod's crowd scenes:

There emerges in my response to many of these pictures a sense of human vicissitude, of inscrutable destiny. I am lost yet steadied, as when I recognize the enigma of life. Subject matter gives the motif for this effect, but the pictorial success of the work lies in the reinforcement of subject matter by juxtapositions of strident with winsome color, and by bewildering complexity of design.¹⁶¹

Without using the term *performative*, Abell nonetheless experientially responds to the sense of *flux*, of *becoming*, and of *life enacted* that he perceives in Nicol MacLeod's work, evoked through the reciprocal juxtaposition of complexity and contrast in structure and subject. This effect of enigmatic unfolding was intrinsic to her painting process — with representational content concomitant to gestural delivery. “It was always as though the brush was part of her hand and part of her head . . .” Alison Ignatieff explains.¹⁶² Similarly, Erica Deichmann Gregg recounts that the creative performance of Nicol MacLeod's painting was integral to the subject of her work: “Pegi worked spontaneously and very very quickly. . . . If she wanted to change her concept she altered the pattern and even the main structure while she was working — transforming a head into a bowl of flowers. It was wonderful to watch her work.”¹⁶³

In keeping, drawing on John Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience, Abell

160 Hudson, 10, 300. Hudson explains: “Abell's *Representation and Form* revised the prevailing theory of a separation of abstract form and representational subject matter in painting described by British formalists Clive Bell and Roger Fry. The union of form and content for the creation of compelling works of art derived from a democratic ideal of art as experience. This ideal emerged most forcefully in the United States with John Dewey's 1934 publication *Art as Experience*, a book that demonstrated a general refinement of humanist and naturalist currents in post-war American thought from the rationalist and empiricist philosophical traditions inherited from Britain.” *Ibid.*, 80.

161 Abell, “Some Canadian Moderns,” 427.

162 Alison Ignatieff, Interviews with Ruth Comfort Jackson, October, 1975, audio recordings, Ruth Comfort Jackson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

163 Deichmann Gregg, “Pegi Nicol MacLeod,” Appendix II, *Daffodils*, 321-322.

regards the experiential expressiveness of art as part of the production of the work itself. Moreover, in *Representation and Form*, Abell asserts that representational subject-matter is a profound conduit of experiential communication:

The artist's experience of life was as full as our own. The images he embodied in his art emerged from, and were moulded by, that fullness. And so, by the meeting of his treatment of subject-matter and our own funded experience of life, our experience of representational art becomes potentially charged with 'human values' which could exist neither if the work were abstract nor if our past were abstract; values which are the expressiveness of life embodied in images of life and its world.¹⁶⁴

Considering *Christmas Tree and Skaters* in these terms, one can recognize that the 'expressiveness of life' which comes through in Nicol MacLeod's vitally performed mark-making is further *embodied* in the scene represented — a profusely inhabited image of 'life and its world.' The varied motions of the artist, recorded in diverse paint-handling and lyrical line-work, materialize the fluid and joyous movement of the urban crowd (Detail, Fig. 26). We see a blurred rush of racing skaters, peaked hoods of carefree children, and the exquisite lightness of a pirouette on ice. Buchanan finds in Nicol MacLeod's *Christmas Tree and Skaters* “. . . all she wanted to express of humanity in its variety, rising vigorous and triumphant over the mechanisms of the metropolis.”¹⁶⁵ With a multitude of movements, this work presents a poignantly performative humanist acclamation of embodiment. *Christmas Tree and Skaters* thus illustrates Abell's conception of representational form as a fusion of aesthetic interests and social content for the embodied conveyance of human values.

Nicol MacLeod's reading of *Representation and Form*, in her review of the book as Art Editor for *The Canadian Forum*, shows considered reservations about and

¹⁶⁴ Abell, *Representation and Form*, 66.

¹⁶⁵ Buchanan, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod," in *Memorial Exhibition: Pegi Nicol MacLeod 1904-1949*, 6.

approval of Abell's theoretical text, both of which affect the way she tackles such issues in her own practice. Nicol MacLeod writes:

As the critic usually spends his life trying to find the words to describe the mysteries of art, he is apt to become too obscure for him who deals with paint. And for the layman quite unintelligible. In discussions of aesthetics the artist asks: Is that me? Did I do that? Does the artist know what aesthetics are? Has he recipes? Does he taste as he goes? Does he mean 'feel' as the author means 'read'?¹⁶⁶

This questioning of the translation of aesthetic experience into textual rationalization foreshadows Nicol MacLeod's approach to teaching with the University of New Brunswick's philosophy department at the Observatory Art Centre. For Nicol MacLeod, open-ended and participatory material exploration was foundational to the apprehension of art, which could not be adequately understood in theoretical terms alone.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, her account of the artist's inter-sensory investment in art-making — tasting and feeling his way along — is an assertion of phenomenological continuity that counters Abell's maintenance of an essential opposition between visual and aural perception.¹⁶⁸

These initial hesitations notwithstanding, Nicol MacLeod's review is highly receptive to Abell's ideas. She affirms:

Professor Abell raises out of limbo the long dismissed dispute, the value of subject matter in painting. I feel happier to enjoy the Old Masters without

166 Pegi Nicol, review of *Representation and Form*, by Walter Abell. *The Canadian Forum* 16, no. 190 (November, 1936) 30.

167 Nicol MacLeod also raises this issue in her review of critic Edward Alden Jewell's text on Rouault, noting of Jewell: “. . . I have wondered, observing his sincere struggles to define the activities of present day artists, why his friends have not put a brush in his hand so that he could resolve the puzzle by experience.” Nicol MacLeod, review of *Rouault*, 83.

168 Abell writes: “Visually at least, the mind appears to be a representational instrument. However much, at certain moments, it may delight in abstract form, it cannot long subsist on the rarefied atmosphere of abstraction. In this respect, it will be noted that the stimuli received through sight and hearing are opposite in character. Whereas the former cannot easily be kept abstract, the latter cannot easily be made representational. Sounds are never conceived by us as *parts* of real objects. They are thought of, at best, as produced *by* such objects. Songs are sung *by* birds; they do not seem to us parts of the birds themselves, as do the colors of their plumage or the shape of their bodies.” *Representation and Form*, 39. Italics in original.

doing so surreptitiously, and even the most convinced believer in the purity of abstraction will have a hard time standing against this attack. Mr. Abell has put reality into abstractions and limitations and in discovering the abstract qualities in all representation he sets it free from limitations.¹⁶⁹

Nicol MacLeod favours Abell's theoretical positioning of abstract art as necessarily representational, through his references to both pre-modern works and contemporary art. This is a significantly different understanding of abstraction than that presented in Alfred H. Barr's (subsequently) canonical diagram of "The Development of Abstract Art," also published in 1936 — in the catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art's *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition — which seamlessly charts the inevitability of abstraction through a teleologically mapped, modern stylistic progression. With an alternate frame of reference, Abell's more inclusive aesthetic theory goes against the reification of an oppositional understanding of abstraction *versus* representation, form *versus* subject-matter. Nicol MacLeod's performative painting operates through a similar rejection of such epistemological dualisms.

Outlining a Platonic tenet in the development of modern abstract art — "that a purer, or higher, or deeper, or more universal form of reality is revealed through the paring away of the incidental and 'inessential' aspects of things" — Charles Harrison notes that the majority of artists and critics who advocated early twentieth-century abstraction did so by positioning the purification of form, colour and line as a conceptual or spiritual program, a move beyond the surface distractions of material existence in pursuit of transcendence.¹⁷⁰ Recognizing the distance between her own painting and pure

169 Nicol, review of *Representation and Form*, 30.

170 Charles Harrison, "Abstraction," in *Modern Art: Practices and Debates; Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 198.

abstraction, Nicol MacLeod asserts: "Life interests me too much."¹⁷¹ Because of this, Nicol MacLeod opted instead for the tangible textures of unfiltered experience. Eschewing the essentialising or autonomous aims of 'pure' modernism, she engaged painting from a different but equally modern perspective on the ontological significance of conceptual/perceptual embodiment. Nicol MacLeod's point-of-view is persuasively relayed in painterly exaltations of live musical performances.

Children's Orchestra in Concert (1946) (Fig. 27) is an animate fusion of figures, instruments, and overwhelming colour. In a sumptuous atmosphere of purples and reds, this painting connects the experience of music to the embodied play of the children's material movements, upon which the soaring notes and flowing rhythms of the melody are contingent. *Fugue* (c.1945) (Fig. 28) takes its title from a compositional technique, where an initial theme is introduced by a single instrument (or part) and subsequently repeated, in delayed succession, by each remaining part, culminating in an intricately interwoven evolution of the theme. Rather than approximating this musical form with a purely abstract visualization of self-contained sound, Nicol MacLeod shows us the intensity and complexity of the interactions among performers, as figured by their idiosyncratic yet eloquently interrelated corporeal expressions. A reviewer's account of the humanizing vitality of her crowded paintings befits these musical subjects; the orchestral players "...escape being symbols and present themselves as living characters, though simplified to the nth degree."¹⁷² Both *Fugue* and *Children's Orchestra* contradict

171 Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, February 12, 1948, Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. This line is misquoted as "Life interrupts me too much," in *Pegi by Herself*, 177; and is omitted with a longer segment of the same letter from *Daffodils*, 284.

172 Richard Hersey, "Pegi Nicol McLeod (sic), Ernst Neumann Widely Contrasting," *Montreal Standard*, March 4, 1950.

an analogy between 'purity' in visual art and the representational transcendence of music, by portraying music as intimately related to the enactment of musicians — as much a part of this transitory, untidy world as the bodies, instruments, spaces, ideas and emotions of its performance.

Nicol MacLeod intended her paintings to be interpreted responsively by a diverse public, without recourse to a specialized theoretical apparatus or predetermined, static symbolism — in the pressing, subjective way that one might understand a heated discussion, or an embrace. She explains in a letter to Kathleen Fenwick:

I came to a conclusion once that if I wanted to say what I do, I'd better find as simple a means as possible. I also felt that, forgive me, it isn't only art lovers I want to get to. I found when I let myself go (thick paint and wild abandon) 'those' people couldn't get it.¹⁷³

Closer in affect to the interactive improvisation of everyday life than what might have been expected in a white-walled art gallery, Nicol MacLeod's work demands a sensually engaged audience, not a remote viewer. Her paintings performatively communicate lived encounters, submerged in the shifting strata of felt experience. The corporeality of kinetic figures on densely covered, sensitive surfaces, awakens an embodied response. “[O]bviously it's a city scene painted by someone who knows the feel of cements in August through their soles,” Richard Hersey notes of one of Nicol MacLeod's New York paintings.¹⁷⁴ “It is exactly the feeling of looking back at an event, not quite able to sort out faces but retaining a strong impression of the over-lying atmosphere,” another writer responds to her *Manhattan Cycle* exhibition.¹⁷⁵ Through the phenomenal conveyance of

173 Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Letter to Kathleen Fenwick c. 1948, File: Correspondence with Artists, 1935-1971, Kathleen Fenwick fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

174 Richard Hersey, “Pegi Nicol McLeod (sic), Ernst Neumann Widely Contrasting,” *Montreal Standard*, March 4, 1950.

175 “Pegi Nicol MacLeod Paintings Depict Confusion of Metropolis,” *Ottawa Journal*, February 17, 1948.

bodies in motion, Nicol MacLeod's work activates painting *as* performance, knowledge *as* being, and art *as* experience.

Modern Movements

Facing life, in all its incidental and uncertain immediacy, characterizes Nicol MacLeod's perspective on modern painting. As an artist working across Canada and in New York during the 1930s and 1940s, non-objective abstraction did not assert itself to her as the singularly most modern or most innovative approach to painting. Instead, it was merely one among many diverse early twentieth-century art practices.¹⁷⁶ By exploring a wealth of embodied experiences, Nicol MacLeod discovered an alternative to the transcendentalizing or rationalizing purifications of modernism — which, in either case, entailed a renunciation of the sensuous and the particular for purportedly universal ends. “I am grateful to you for making me think of the positiveness of life, not of the sterile formality of semi-classical modern art,” René Cera writes to Nicol MacLeod following the opening of her *Manhattan Cycle* exhibition in Toronto, continuing:

Your stuff is made for our clean animality, not aimed at our fastidious understanding. Modern art is dying because it must at all cost be bearing a certain intellectual mark which separates it from the straight ordinary business of being alive. Modern art is irreligiously metaphysical, it is too too intelligent as if these artists were really ashamed of being themselves composed of something as abominably low and vulgar as matter.¹⁷⁷

176 Nicol MacLeod writes from New York to Harry McCurry regarding an exhibition of the Contemporary Arts Society in Montreal, whose membership included Paul-Émile Borduas and Jean Paul Riopelle:

“From all the talk I've heard, I thought they were a very important group. The abstracts were certainly impressive and you must hand it to Lismar for having the courage to put it on. As I see quantities of such every day, the work could hardly be called nerve but it is thought provoking and Canada deserves to see the tail end of a movement.” November 27, 1944, *Daffodils*, 226.

177 René Cera, “Letter from René Cera, 14 April 1947,” Appendix I, *Daffodils*, 317. Nicol MacLeod included Cera's letter with a copy of her *Manhattan Cycle* commentary and press clippings which she sent to the National Gallery of Canada in advance of her exhibition opening in Ottawa. She writes of Cera's letter: “It is so precious to me that I hope you will send it back . . . I think some of it might be

As Cera's deep felt response indicates, Nicol MacLeod's painting — like her varied work in design — calls to task the championing of ideals over lived experience in the dominant strands of modernism. Such a value system is evident in the self-referential stance of an autonomous formalism and the starkly mechanized efficiency of a uniform international style. While not canonized in modernist art history, Nicol MacLeod's interests are no less modern.

During Nicol MacLeod's day, an appreciation of the sensory knowledge of experience and the efficacy of phenomenal existence, was espoused in the developing philosophies of Pragmatism and Existentialism. In his widely influential 1934 work, *Art As Experience*, Dewey explains:

Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication. Since sense-organs with their connected motor apparatus are the means of this participation, any and every derogation of them, whether practical or theoretical, is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and dulled life-experience. Oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life may — bring forth.¹⁷⁸

Nicol MacLeod's uninhibited commitment to creativity is premised on the notion that sensuous responses are indivisible from ideas — that feeling is thinking — in an unbroken exchange between self and environment. Her knowledge of Dewey's Pragmatist aesthetics was, at least in part, gleaned from Abell's and Lismer's publications advancing a Deweyan formulation of art. Likewise, Nicol MacLeod attended the Kingston Conference of Canadian Artists, where Thomas Hart Benton delivered a lecture

quoted." Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, February 12, 1948, *Daffodils*, 284.
178 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, Penguin Group, 2005), 22-23.

grounded on the perception that “. . .the kind of experiences you have in *the life you live* will determine the kind of formal expression you make.”¹⁷⁹ But, of course, beyond any evidence of her familiarity with Pragmatism, Nicol MacLeod's practice itself is a salient presentation of *art as experience*.

Nicol MacLeod determinedly promoted the public's participatory role in the meaning of art. In *School Performance* (c.1946) (Fig. 29) this role is portrayed directly. By depicting the interactive experience of a live show with a sea of figures, this painting reiterates the significance of art's reception. For Dewey, art was inseparable from an engaged audience. He asserts:

A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced. No one doubts this fact in the rendering of a musical score; no one supposes that the lines and dots on the paper are more than the recorded means of evoking the work of art.¹⁸⁰

School Performance makes an analogous proposition for defining a work of art as a reciprocal encounter rather than an autonomous object. The reaching, curved arms and yearning, expressive features of the spirited performers set the stage as a powerful focal point of the composition. The viewer of the painting thus experientially attends the performance represented, aware of other audience members as a loose, open patchwork in which one takes part, while intently responding to the scene on stage. Strong, heady

179 Thomas Hart Benton, *The Kingston Conference Proceedings*, 47. Italics in original. Benton adds: “I think that if you are going to have any kind of living art of genuine cultural expression yourself, that you cannot buy it and you cannot borrow it. I think you have to make it yourself, and that the only way you can make it is out of your own experiences, and that the only place you can have experiences which are really our own and which you can express, are within those environments or locales or regions which are familiar and currently on the go. That is, in life.” Ibid., 48. Murray identifies that Benton's lecture corresponded with Nicol MacLeod's “. . . idea that making art from the direct experience of life was a necessity.” Murray, “Introduction,” *Daffodils*, 48.

180 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 113.

colours in a mottled, transient pattern lend a visual flux to the surface, approximating physical movement and heightening one's sensory involvement in the work. By soliciting the response of an audience member at a live event, *School Performance* reinforces an awareness of how we likewise play a consummate role as active participants in the function of the painting. This work aims for the sort of organic universality that Dewey perceives, when he suggests that a work of art is “. . . universal because it can continuously inspire new personal realizations in experience.”¹⁸¹ In Nicol MacLeod's paintings, a Pragmatic understanding of art is manifest in renditions of embodied experience and constant exchange.

These aspects of Nicol MacLeod's painting also connect her work to an Existentialist interpretation of *Being*. “For the Existentialist thinker,” Paul MacDonald recounts, “a human being is not the subject of his or her circumstances, nor an instance of a timeless essence, but a unique manner of *existence*.”¹⁸² This manner of existence is future oriented and determined by individual choice; existence is freedom through an ongoing process of becoming. Against metaphysical dualism, Existentialism prioritizes the *lived-body* — or embodied existence — postulating that: “Through my comportment or corporeal intentionality towards things and persons and values, all these items encountered become parts of me, not real object-like parts but vital moments of my own life.”¹⁸³ In Sartre's words: “The world is me in the dimension of the Not-me.”¹⁸⁴ The

181 Ibid.

182 Paul S. MacDonald, “Introduction: Background and Themes,” in *The Existentialist Reader: An Anthology of Key Texts*, ed. Paul S. MacDonald (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

183 Ibid., 37.

184 Jean-Paul Sartre, “A New, Authentic Way of Being Oneself” (1948) in *The Existentialist Reader: An Anthology of Key Texts*, ed. Paul S. MacDonald (New York: Routledge, 2001), 325. In an earlier article, Sartre writes: “. . . everything is finally outside, everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others. It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves; it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.” Sartre, “Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology,” 1939, as quoted by MacDonald, 2.

sense of spatial instability and ceaseless interaction in *Christmas Tree and Skaters* helps us to visualize this concept — the human beings are not defined by an opposition between inside and outside, but through an absolute, relational freedom of movement.

References to works by Sartre appear in Nicol MacLeod's correspondence.¹⁸⁵

Likewise, Marjorie Oberne recalls:

Pegi took me to the very first Jean-Paul Sartre play, *No Exit*, at Cherry Lane Theatre. . . she was always ahead. She told me about existentialism. She told me about all these things that nobody in my world were even aware of.¹⁸⁶

An interest in Existentialism might also be read in Nicol MacLeod's watercolour, *War Parade, New York* (1944) (Fig. 30). As with *Christmas Tree and Skaters*, and many of her later paintings, *War Parade* overflows with the movement of figures. Interconnected yet individualized, but never entirely realized — these are mobile bodies, not essential identities. Writing of Nicol MacLeod's manifold crowd scenes, Abell affirms “. . . I am impressed by the reading of life. Faces combine in strange blends the qualities of caricature, of primitive masks, and of psychological reality.”¹⁸⁷ This effect is masterfully realized in *War Parade* (Detail, Fig. 31). We see the consequential complexity of existence in the disquieting, undone faces of indeterminate selves. There is a strong temporal dimension to the painting; in an Existentialist current of becoming, the fluid figures seep into their surroundings and surge beyond the definition of the past.¹⁸⁸

185 Nicol MacLeod writes: “K. ask Bob, if found, one Sartre?” See: Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, January 12, 1948, *Daffodils*, 276. Likewise there is reference to an unspecified 'Sartre novel' in a letter sent to Pegi Nicol MacLeod from Kathleen Fenwick (January 20, 1948, Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives) and in Nicol MacLeod's reply (Letter to Kathleen Fenwick, 1948, *Daffodils*, 281). Also, in a 1947 letter to Desmond Pacey Nicol MacLeod writes: “Saw 'No Exit' Last week.” File: Letters from P.N.M., 1947, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives).

186 Marjorie Oberne, Interview with Joan Murray, June 6, 1983, transcript, Robert McLaughlin Gallery
187 Abell, “Some Canadian Moderns,” *Magazine of Art* 30, no. 7 (July 1937): 427.

188 MacDonald emphasizes the importance of temporality in Existentialist thought: “Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre insist that each human being has the capacity to become an individual that does

As much as this conveyance of movement-through-time in Nicol MacLeod's paintings is an intimation of contemporary philosophical interests, it also demonstrates her engagement with the modern experience of the cinema. Figures shift across her canvases just as the frames flicker past in a film; we saw this effect in *Nude Study* (Fig. 20) and one of her *Manhattan Neighbours* sketches (Fig. 10), and it is discernible also in *Flower Market I* (undated) (Fig. 32) — where a vendor moves from left to right in flowing montage sequence, turning around to face us with ready bouquets.¹⁸⁹ There is a similar sense of filmic editing *between* Nicol MacLeod's sketches, as with the series of four *Orchestra Sketches* (c.1948) (Figs. 33-6) now in the in National Gallery of Canada's collection. Following these works, the scene is cut as it would be in a film, connecting a range of perspectives and depths of field in the manner that a cinematic sequence is created by splicing together diverse film footage. In addition, each individual *Orchestra Sketch* collapses and re-combines time, approximating the zooms, dissolves and unexpected camera angles of the modern motion picture. Elaborate and multitudinous representations of New York in works like *The Peace Bird* (Fig. 11) incorporate all these filmic effects — linking multiple, disparate points-of-view in non-linear spatial and temporal vignettes, playing through like an epic film.

not yet fully exist, and this doctrine underlines the significance of time for human being. Only through the passage of time, experienced as the horizon of one's projects, can possible options become one's own actualities." MacDonald, 34.

189 Stuart Allen Smith identifies this cinematic effect in Nicol MacLeod's paintings, writing of her later work: "The technique used . . . is dynamic rather than the static imagery of the Group of Seven. Instead of a single image, we are given a layered image. In a movie we are convinced of action by hundreds of still pictures flashed in front of us, one vanishing to be replaced by another. But a painter leaves permanent images and to devise a technique descriptive enough to define objects, yet fluid enough to convey movement, and above all, capture the spontaneous ambiance of a special moment is an enormous challenge. Pegi Nicol gave herself over to that task." Smith, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod Retrospective," (Fredericton: Gallery 78, 1981). Likewise, Brandon discusses this filmic quality, noting: "The multiple views of the same scene and the sense of movement in a watercolour of hers such as *New York Street Scene* (1945) show her indebtedness to film and photographic techniques." *Pegi By Herself*, 103.

“The street is a movie in Technicolor,” Nicol MacLeod writes in her *Manhattan Cycle* commentary.¹⁹⁰ This conflation of the city with the cinema shows keen insight into the role of film in articulating early twentieth-century urbanism, by altering contemporary perceptions of time and notions of audience.¹⁹¹ The captivating crowds and mutable movement of Nicol MacLeod's paintings reflect a cinematic representation of the city. Moreover, her incongruous perspectives and combined temporalities displace a rationalizing model of urban modernity with an individuated, experiential negotiation. Rather than functionally reversible maps or concrete, singular locations, she gives us fleeting, human moments. Nicol MacLeod's cinematic scenes corroborate de Certeau's account of the tactical, temporal networks created by ordinary inhabitants as they walk (through) the city — “unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others.”¹⁹² Toronto critic Augustus Bridle underlined this effect in his 1947 review of Nicol MacLeod's *Manhattan Cycle*:

Pegi Nicol has been living long enough in New York to have a vivid conception of its humanity-dwarfing walls. Her pictures, brilliant, entirely color-toned, collectively dramatic, are not architectural. She scrambles the world's most stupendous area of big-top edifices to depict obviously sprawling millions of people who inhabit both skyscrapers and tenements.¹⁹³

190 Nicol MacLeod, “Commentary” [“Manhattan Cycle”], Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Likewise, one of the watercolours Nicol MacLeod included in this exhibition is entitled *The Street is a Movie*, see list of works, Ibid.

191 As Juan Suárez notes: “The cinema . . . had been married to the city from birth. Before the industry relocated to Hollywood, it thrived in large northern cities, where the anonymous crowds were the cinema's main audience. Furthermore, the metropolis was an important purveyor of cinematographic spectacle, as witnessed by the popularity of an early genre: the ‘urban panoramas.’” Suárez, “City Space, Technology, Popular Culture: The Modernism of Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's Manhatta,” *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2002), 88. For a developed discussion of the interrelationship between the cinema and the city, see also: David Clarke, “Introduction: Previewing the Cinematic City,” in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-18.

192 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

193 Augustus Bridle, “Pegi Nicol's Scenes Collectively Weird,” *The Toronto Star*, April 16, 1947. He adds: “Most of her pictures intensify collective humanity. Faces, forms, clothes, moving mobs on streets are impressionized — all but the eyes which glow with melancholic lustre. Skies, clouds, happy revels, radiant home scenes are usually merged into a multitudinous rabble.” Yet, Bridle is also disconcerted

Adopting filmic devices, Nicol MacLeod re-draws New York as a series of dynamic encounters. These painted-movies portray, in De Certeau's terms, "an 'anthropological,' poetic and mythic experience of space," within a "*migrational*, or metaphorical, city."¹⁹⁴ Exploring the drama and intrigue of daily life as it is lived by the diverse practitioners of the metropolis, she freely sketches the fantastic reality of costumed *Figures* (undated) (Fig. 37), and grasps the (extra)ordinary magic of a street carousel in *The Two-cent Ride* (undated) (Fig. 38). Nicol MacLeod's Manhattan is not the "stream-lined wonder city" of the tourist's postcard, but a cinematic montage of "unaware festivals": anecdotal, familiar, and marvelous everyday occasions.¹⁹⁵

Taking this analysis further, Nicol MacLeod's painting can be described as exhibiting the features of a Pragmatic aesthetic in modernist film. Ray Carney develops a comparison between what he classifies as *idealist* and *pragmatic* cinema, describing idealist filmmaking as visionary in approach — the staple of Hollywood productions — where 'seeing' equates with 'knowing' through disembodied looks; internal mental states maintain priority over sensory experience, practical actions and external events; characters are portrayed as fixed and generalizable types; truth, thought, and emotion are singular and pure, unencumbered by socio-historical circumstances or the specificities of language; and the mode of viewership is passive, a driven quest towards a finite resolution.¹⁹⁶ In contradistinction, Carney suggests that pragmatic film — in keeping with

by Nicol MacLeod's intensification of human experience, finding her paintings: "As color-ensembles, often wonderful. As pictures of humanity, more often pessimistically weird." Ibid.

194 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

195 Nicol MacLeod, "Commentary" ["Manhattan Cycle"], Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Referencing titles of her *Manhattan Cycle* paintings, she explains: ". . . the Faces in the Window, the Children coming back and forth for Lunch, the March of the Bus Catchers, the Handball, the Skip-rope. These are the festivals that fascinate me." Ibid.

196 Ray Carney, "Two Forms of Cinematic Modernism: Notes Toward a Pragmatic Aesthetic," in *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States*, ed. Townsend Ludington, assistant eds.

the Pragmatism advanced by Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, F. C. S. Schiller, William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes — is multiple-minded, portraying particularized, process-oriented, sensory and bodily experiences.¹⁹⁷ In pragmatic cinema, Carney relays:

. . . there is no inside, no underneath, no beyond to get to, and no secret to uncover. There is no hidden basement of the psyche to work our way down into, but only delightful, dismaying, distracting surfaces to negotiate — sometimes figured as a maze of passages, hallways, or streets angling off in every direction, at other times figures as a maze of social interactions to be negotiated.¹⁹⁸

Characters “*enact* their being” through surface expressions, physical gestures, and situation specific responses; close-ups give way to medium and long shots which allow the viewer a wider interpretation of the given scene, while bringing individual characters “into fullest existence in their interactions with others.”¹⁹⁹

Reviewing the second exhibition of The Canadian Group of Painters for the premier issue of the unapologetically socialist *New Frontier*, Sophie Livesay recognizes in Nicol MacLeod's paintings a progressive emphasis on communal interaction. “Here is someone who has freed herself from old standards: she has a definite plan, her forms flowing into one another, her colours alive, and over all a sense of balance and restraint,”

Thomas Fahy and Sarah P. Reuning (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 357-382. Carney explains: “Because idealist works prefer mental and imaginative relationships over physical interactions with experience, experience becomes something you *have* rather than *do*. It is about seeing, feeling, and thinking a certain way, adjusting your angle of vision — not about actually interacting with (and therefore creating the meaning of) persons, places, and things. Knowledge is a mental phenomenon, not a course of practical actions and events. Truth becomes something outside yourself that can be known, rather than a relationship between you and the world. You do not interact with the world in ways that potentially change it and you; you realize, understand, appreciate, feel what it already and unalterably is. You do not *make* realities in this world (children, families, personal relationships, works of art) you *discover* truths that would have been there even if you had never come along.” Ibid., 382. Italics in original.

197 Ibid., 383-411.

198 Ibid., 401.

199 Ibid., 384, 388. Italics in original.

Livesay writes of Nicol MacLeod.²⁰⁰ Finding the majority of artists represented “still more interested in interpreting the individual,” Livesay further asserts that, in contrast, “Pegi Nicol has possibilities of development. She is interested in people and is not inhibited from expressing group feeling. There is already a feeling of mass, a blending of the human and artistic experience.”²⁰¹ Here Livesay describes the same creatively interconnected representation of humanity that Carney identifies as key to pragmatic modernism. Nicol MacLeod herself narrates a pragmatic/cinematic perspective on group representation in her *Maritime Art* article concerning the work of figurative painter Miller Brittain. She writes:

For years one wished our vigorous Canadian painters might focus a little on man. There were portraits in the yearly shows, but portraits are reflections of individuals. Man in his environment and doing, has been considerably neglected as a subject. . . . Man moving and acting; persons by shape and form, by personality and feeling, juxtaposed against each other. . . . Not archaic man, but present-day man; complicated and modern. Just like all of us.²⁰²

Her paintings similarly articulate interdependent yet heterogeneous impressions of humanity, in moving-images of living modernity.

Streets of New York (c. 1945) (Fig. 39) more than meets Carney's criteria for a pragmatic film. A combination of at least three 'scenes' — a maze “of superficial, multivalent, hazy expression”²⁰³ — this painting shows an unexpected encounter on the street, as a man drops his brief-case in startled recognition of the woman pushing a pram, who turns back in surprise; two male figures facing off on a staircase, their postures

200 Sophie Livesay, “Art,” *The New Frontier* 1, no. 1 (April, 1936), 26.

201 Ibid.

202 Pegi Nicol, “Miller Brittain,” *Maritime Art* 1, no. 4 (April, 1941), 14.

203 Carney, 407.

uncertain yet confrontational; and a jubilant, lithe dancer, dressed in rose, who moves with abandon through three positions. *Streets of New York* is a composite of fractured meanings, uneven temporalities, and multiple truths, without finalizing preconceptions. Like the pragmatic filmmaker, Nicol MacLeod does not attempt to resolve or gloss over the incongruity of modernity. Neither uniform nor mechanical, and far from idealist, her paintings instead explore what she calls “the undertheme of the life of the linear city.”²⁰⁴ Nicol MacLeod's penchant for combined perspectives; her full, fluctuating crowds; her all-over compositions; her indefinite, transitional figures; her sensuous, swarming surfaces; and her labyrinth-like layers, are all pragmatic attributes in cinematic representations of the modern city. And, as Carney notes of the films he discusses: “The pragmatic display of energy in motion tests both a viewer's powers to keep up with it and a critic's powers to describe it.”²⁰⁵

Indeed, reviewers have often been left confounded by Nicol MacLeod's 'unfinished' and 'overcrowded' paintings. Some critics have insisted that they would prefer greater clarity, finding it a “matter for regret that a literal brainstorm should evolve so much confusion in the detail of the subjects,”²⁰⁶ where “impulses came too fast to permit thoughtful and considered development of any of them.”²⁰⁷ Dominion Gallery owner, Max Stern, assessed her paintings as “not clear enough to be appreciated by our

204 Nicol MacLeod, “Commentary” [“Manhattan Cycle”], Correspondence with/re Artists, MacLeod, Pegi Nicol, NGC fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

205 Carney, 407. Carney elaborates: “Living as we do in the shadow of Plato's vision of knowledge as being a form of contemplative detachment, pragmatic knowledge does not look like knowledge at all. It looks like randomness or sprawl. It is precisely the brilliance of pragmatic works' nonabstracted, nonintellectualized presentation of experience, their replacement of states of thought with acts of perception, their devotion to 'broken' and 'incomplete' forms of knowledge, their acceptance of worldly, expressive compromise, contingency, and imperfection that most viewers and reviewers mistake for sloppiness or disorganization. Where the experiences will not fit into old forms of meaning, there may seem to be no meaning at all.” Ibid., 410-11.

206 F. H. Norbury, “Museum Displays Memorial Exhibit,” *The Edmonton Journal*, December 6, 1950.

207 Mildred Valley Thornton, *The Vancouver Sun*, October 23, 1950.

clients . . . unsalable here.”²⁰⁸ However, others embraced this generative confusion, recognizing that Nicol MacLeod's “highly individual experiments have the tempo of now in their hysterical chaos,”²⁰⁹ and responding perceptively to her works' performative immersion: “we feel rather than actually see the tumultuous and disparate life in a crowded street on New York's East Side.”²¹⁰ Moreover, many of Nicol MacLeod's contemporaries found in the erratic energy of her paintings a profoundly humanizing pulse, an assurance “that human beings are still human in a metropolis where so much is mechanized and where the setting is a geometry of upstairs and downstairs.”²¹¹ Her paintings confound us with the brimming, tousled, interminable potential of modern life, and the potency of existence, by reminding us of our phenomenal agency. Remaining in-the-world and with all the antennae of her senses, emotions, thoughts, philosophical insights, formal interests, and social values attuned, Nicol MacLeod's kaleidoscope vision is an embodied, experiential, modern vision.

208 Letter from Max Stern (Dominion Gallery) to Pegi Nicol MacLeod, November 18, 1948, MacK-MacV, Correspondence Series, 1948-1967, Dominion Gallery fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

209 Richard Hersey, “Pegi Nicol McLeod (sic), Ernst Neumann Widely Contrasting,” *Montreal Standard*, March 4, 1950

210 Palette, “Interesting Exhibition at UBC Art Gallery,” *The Vancouver Daily Province*, October 21, 1950.

211 Pearl McCarthy, “Art and Artists: Honor for Mestrovic Pleases Friends Here,” unidentified press clipping, 1947, Pegi Nicol MacLeod Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Archives. The exhibition opened on April 15, 1947 at The Eaton Fine Art Galleries, Eaton's College Street in Toronto.

Conclusion

Shifting Focus

Invariably her approach to subject is from an unusual angle both intellectually and technically. Her ability to foreshorten and to create unusual perspective is worth study.

— *The Calgary Herald*, Alberta, July 23, 1948 ²¹²

Pegi Nicol MacLeod's unexpected, subversive perspectives engender a process of defamiliarization with far-reaching ramifications for a re-consideration of both the modernisms of her era, and the critical and conceptual lenses of contemporary scholarship. In the 2006 anthology, *The Social and The Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, in an essay entitled "Canadian Political art in the 1930s: 'A form of Distancing,'" Marilyn McKay contends that, as with the majority of Canadian artists active during the 1930s, Nicol MacLeod ". . . did not focus on making political art."²¹³ Furthermore, in developing this assessment, McKay selects Nicol MacLeod as a specific example of an artist with leftist political commitments that only very rarely came

212 Unattributed review of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's Manhattan Cycle exhibition, "Expressionistic Works Feature Art Display," *The Calgary Herald*, Alberta, July 23, 1948.

213 Marilyn McKay, "Canadian Political art in the 1930s: 'A form of Distancing,'" in *The Social and The Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 82. McKay does, however, suggest that there is "a covert response to the troubles of the decade" discernible in English Canadian landscape painting of the 1930s. *Ibid.*, 87.

to the fore in her work. McKay writes:

Pegi Nicol, of Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal . . . was a close friend of Norman Bethune and active in the League for Social Reconstruction and the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. In 1935-1936 she was art editor for the leftist *Canadian Forum*. In the December 1936 issue she published an antifascist Christmas card featuring people in gas masks pressed together to form the shape of a Christmas tree surmounted by a swastika 'star.' The rest of Nicol's work, however, consists of happy family portraits, exuberant floral still lifes, cheerful street scenes, and domestic interiors.²¹⁴

In a 1943 letter to Marian Scott, Nicol MacLeod anticipates and responds to the sort of criticism of her work that McKay has posed here. Shifting the focus beyond what is conventionally defined as political art, Nicol MacLeod affirms:

I'm sure it's a struggle for every painter to paint 'Canada at War.' I have turned myself inside out. After all I've made a few pretty scenes, you know, children in gardens, falls. I'm just not equipped but still I think all our pictures were Canada not at War, and we needn't apologize. In fact all our best ones, scenes, children — are still new frontiers.²¹⁵

As an artist-activist, Nicol MacLeod understood that the parameters of political protest extend from the street to the home and back again, and that promoting progressive change is not only a matter of confronting the hazards and injustices of the current system, but also a process of identifying alternatives and enabling participation.

The anti-fascist graphic, *Merry Christmas* (1936) (Fig. 40) — a bold critique of political corruption, military force, and the detached complacency of a Canadian public — might stand as Nicol MacLeod's most 'overtly' political work. Yet, her socially-integrated domestic scenes and dynamically peopled urban streets, like her eloquent sketches of women's hands knitting and sewing, dating from the early 1940s, are perhaps even more radical in conception. In a work like *Pair of Hands Knitting with Red Wool*

214 Ibid.

215 Letter to Marian Scott, postmarked October 25, 1943, *Daffodils*, 205.

(1942) (Fig. 41), Nicol MacLeod concentrates our attention on the otherwise unremarkable act of knitting. As such, this work relays a powerful political agenda, directing us to acknowledge the efficacy expressed in the minor gestures of marginalized figures. A study of Pegi Nicol MacLeod's multi-faceted modern art practice reveals the limitations of standardized art-historical models and dualistic rationalizations of the past, thereby offering invaluable insight into the possibilities for the present.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

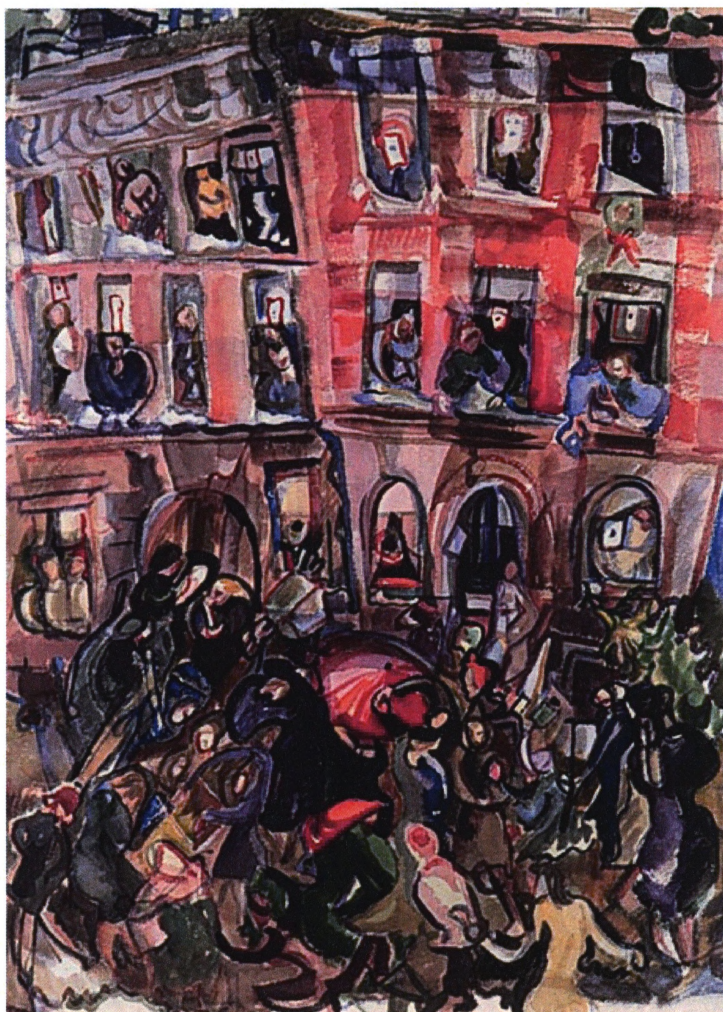


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10




Fig. 11



Fig. 12

at once a window. I have it
 is worth two birds. I have it
 propped in my window on a new
 kind easel and there as I
 fleet by, even sweeping or just
 watering the horticulture, I may
 add to the story of 88th Street.

It has a picture



by one little sketch.

So please thank Eric E.

Fig. 13





Fig. 14

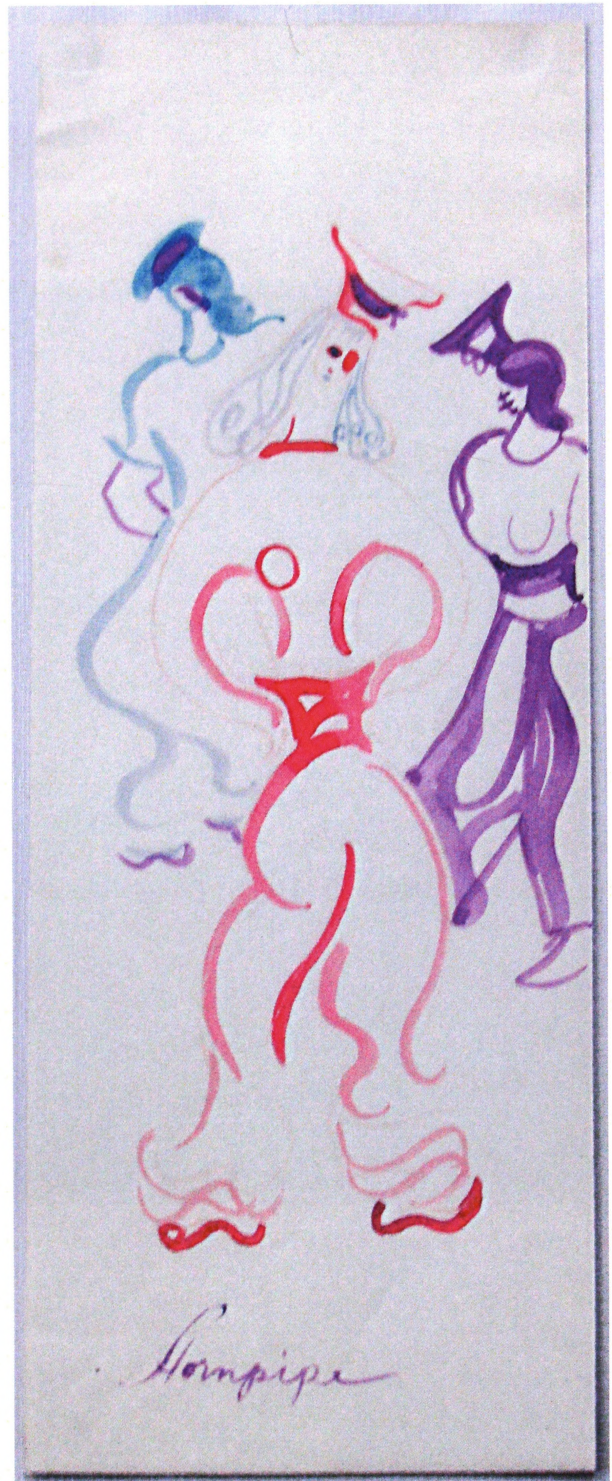


Fig. 15

Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

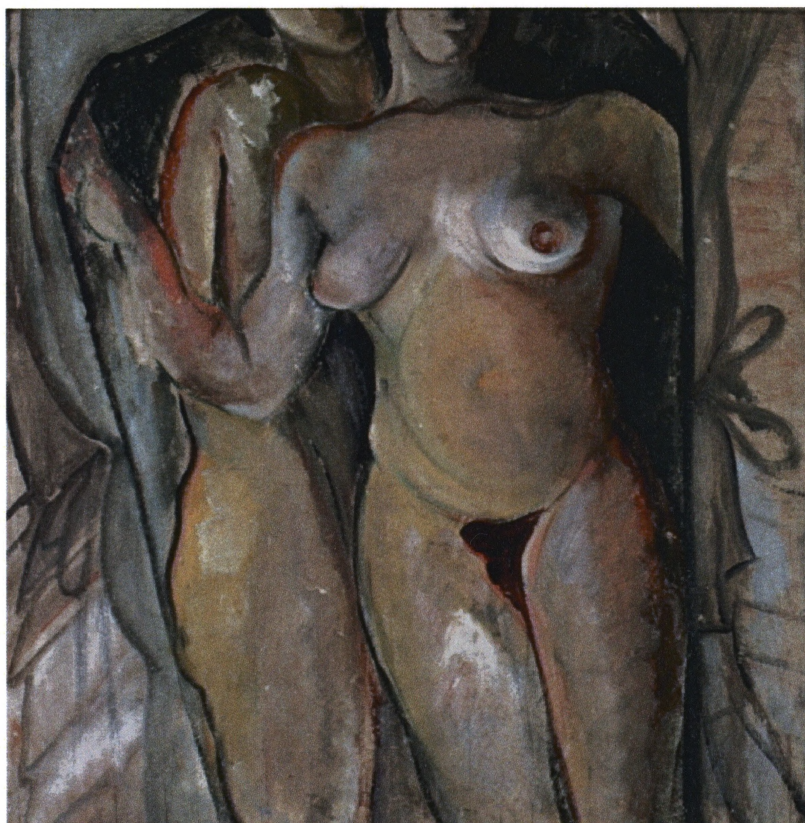


Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

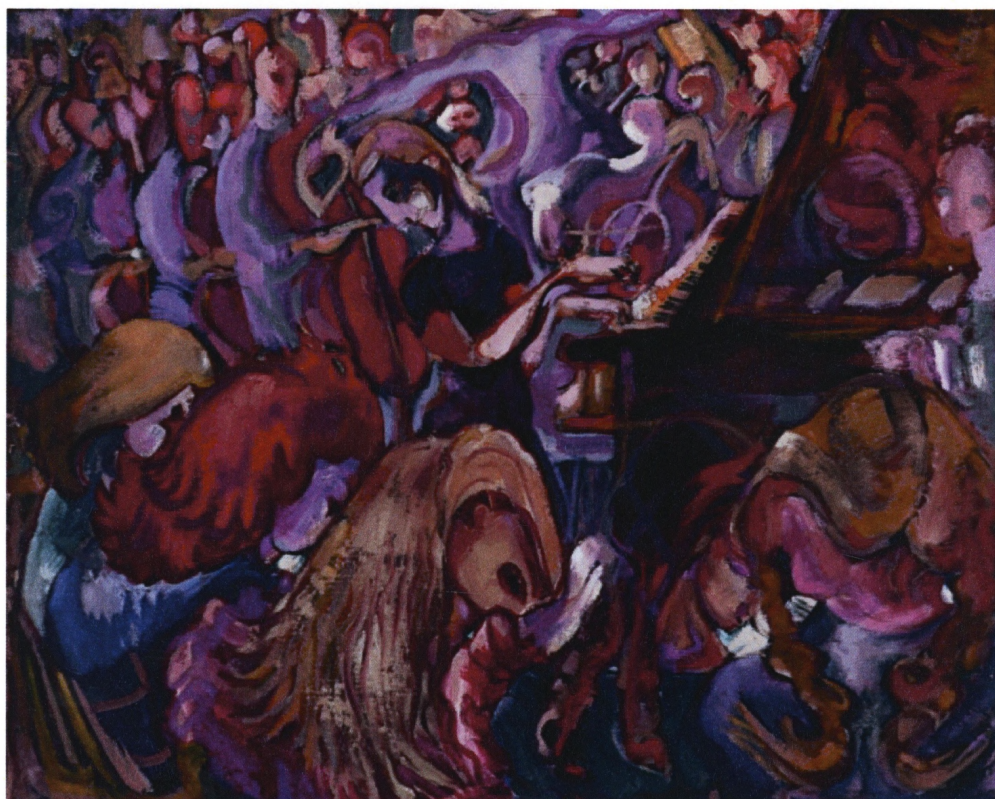


Fig. 28



Fig. 29

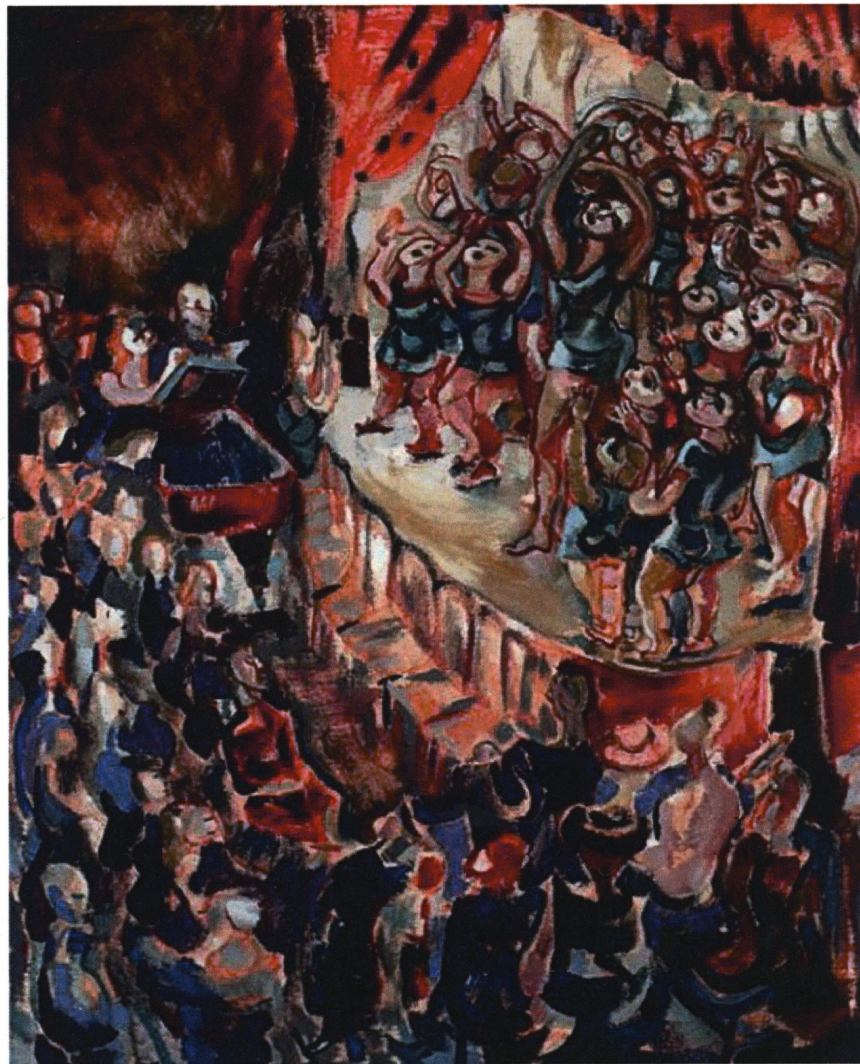


Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38

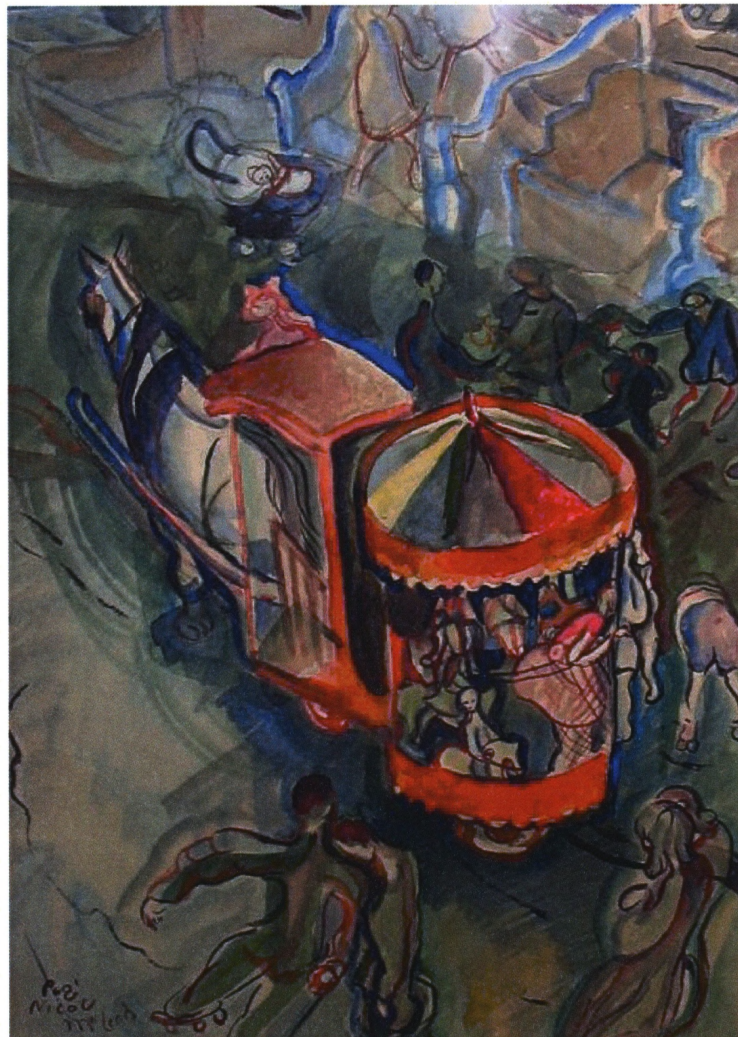
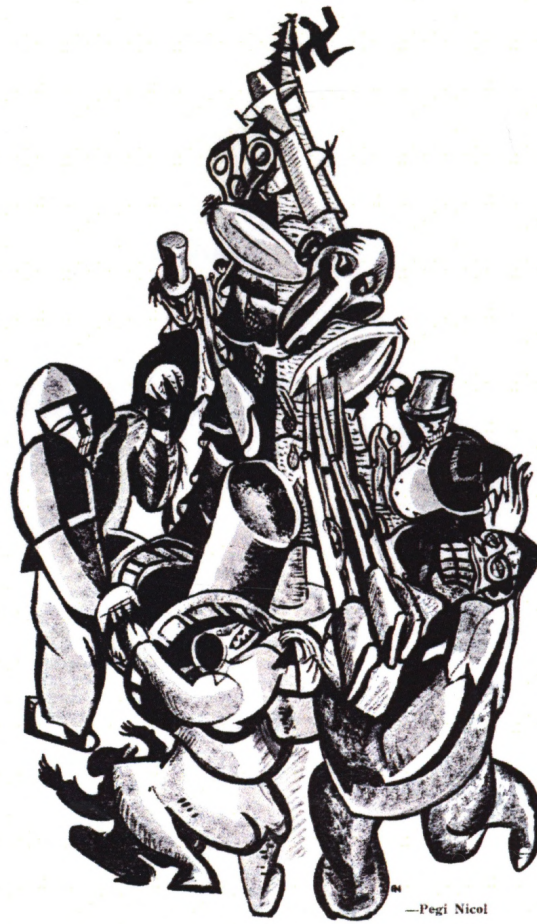


Fig. 39



Fig. 40



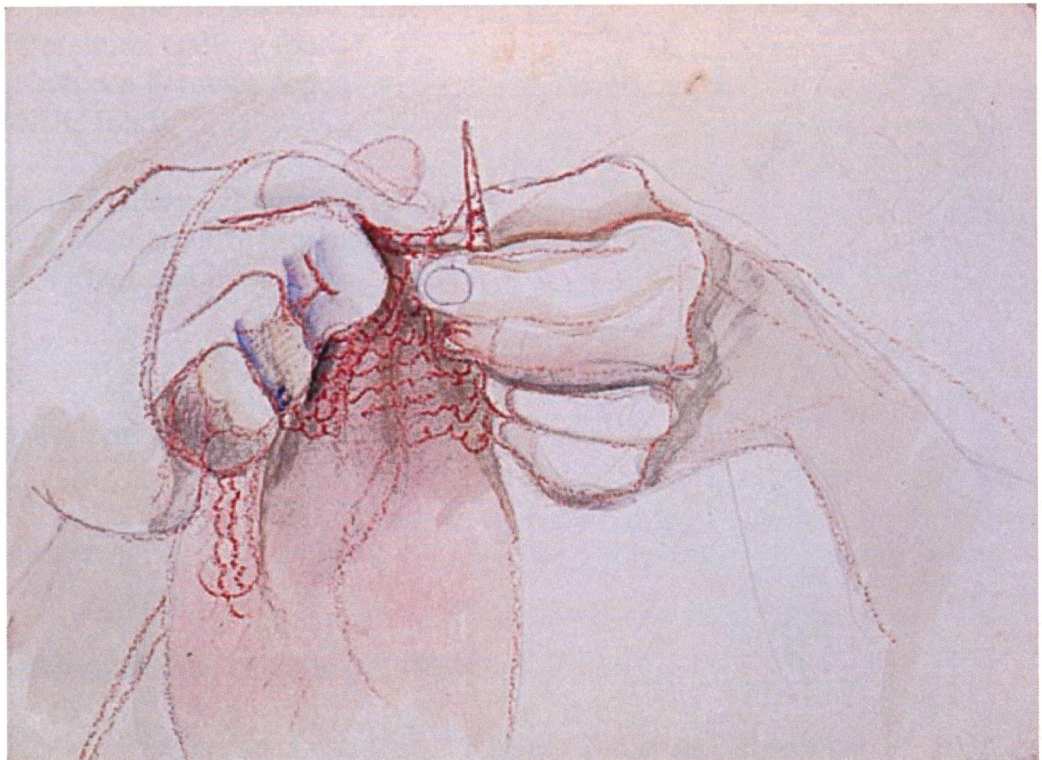
—Pegi Nicol

MERRY CHRISTMAS

December, 1936

13

Fig. 41



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