“Innovating Modernism in Provincial Toronto: The Painters Eleven and Abstraction in the 1950s”

Jessica Poon (PhD Candidate, University of British Columbia)

Provincial imitation or Canadian innovation? It is often said that the rise of abstract painting in Toronto was the result of New York influence, that the Painters Eleven produced mere provincial imitations of the American Abstract Expressionist movement championed by Clement Greenberg. This perspective is an erroneous denial of Canadian accomplishments in aesthetic innovation during the immediate post-WWII era. In this paper, I will challenge the idea that meaning in the works of the Painters Eleven exists only in peripheral relation to a central American “influence,” and will argue that the group took part in a critical attempt to create a new aesthetic form for a modern Canadian cultural identity in the 1950s. The catalyst for abstract painting in Toronto during this period, I argue, was not New York Abstract Expressionism but a impetus towards Canadian-borne artistic innovation, propelled not only by a growing dissatisfaction with conservative ideas about painting and the Group of Seven’s stagnating legacy of regional landscapes, but also by modernist ideas about aesthetic progress. Playing a key part in the destabilization of geographically-defined notions of nationalism, the Painters Eleven offered a new mode of artistic production to match Canada’s strengthening political role in international affairs after WWII. Here, the idea of artistic innovation is linked critically to socio-historical transformation, its revolutionary potential tied to worldwide shifts in geopolitical as well as cultural structures. Leading with the repercussions of the Massey Report’s call for Canadian cultural fortitude, this paper will examine the special circumstances of Toronto in this postwar era of cultural conflict as a crucial backdrop to understanding the Painters Eleven’s contribution to Canadian art as a unique endeavor of Canadian aesthetic modernism.