

## 13 Alexander Colville

PC CC 1920 – 2013

### Woman with Revolver

acrylic polymer emulsion on board, on verso signed, titled, dated 1987, inscribed *Untempered Masonite with gesso and paint acrylic polymer emulsion by Windsor + Newton. Final varnish 10% acryloid B 72 by Rohm + Haas in xylene. Alex Colville, 11 Feb. 88* and stamped Mira Godard Gallery 23 3/8 x 11 1/2 in, 60 x 29.2 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist  
Private Collection of Mira Godard, Toronto  
Estate of Mira Godard  
Acquired from the above by the present  
Private Collection

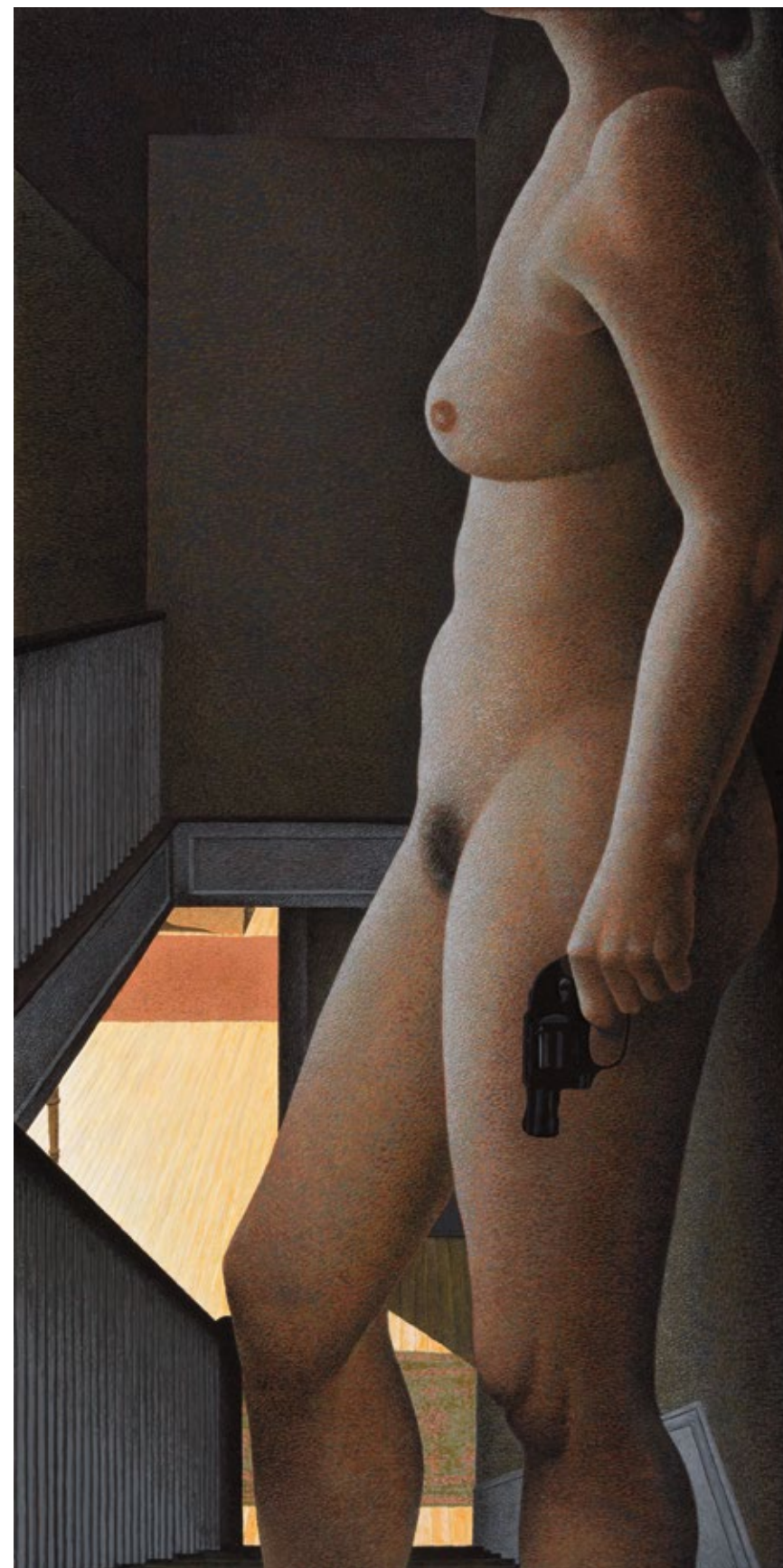
#### LITERATURE

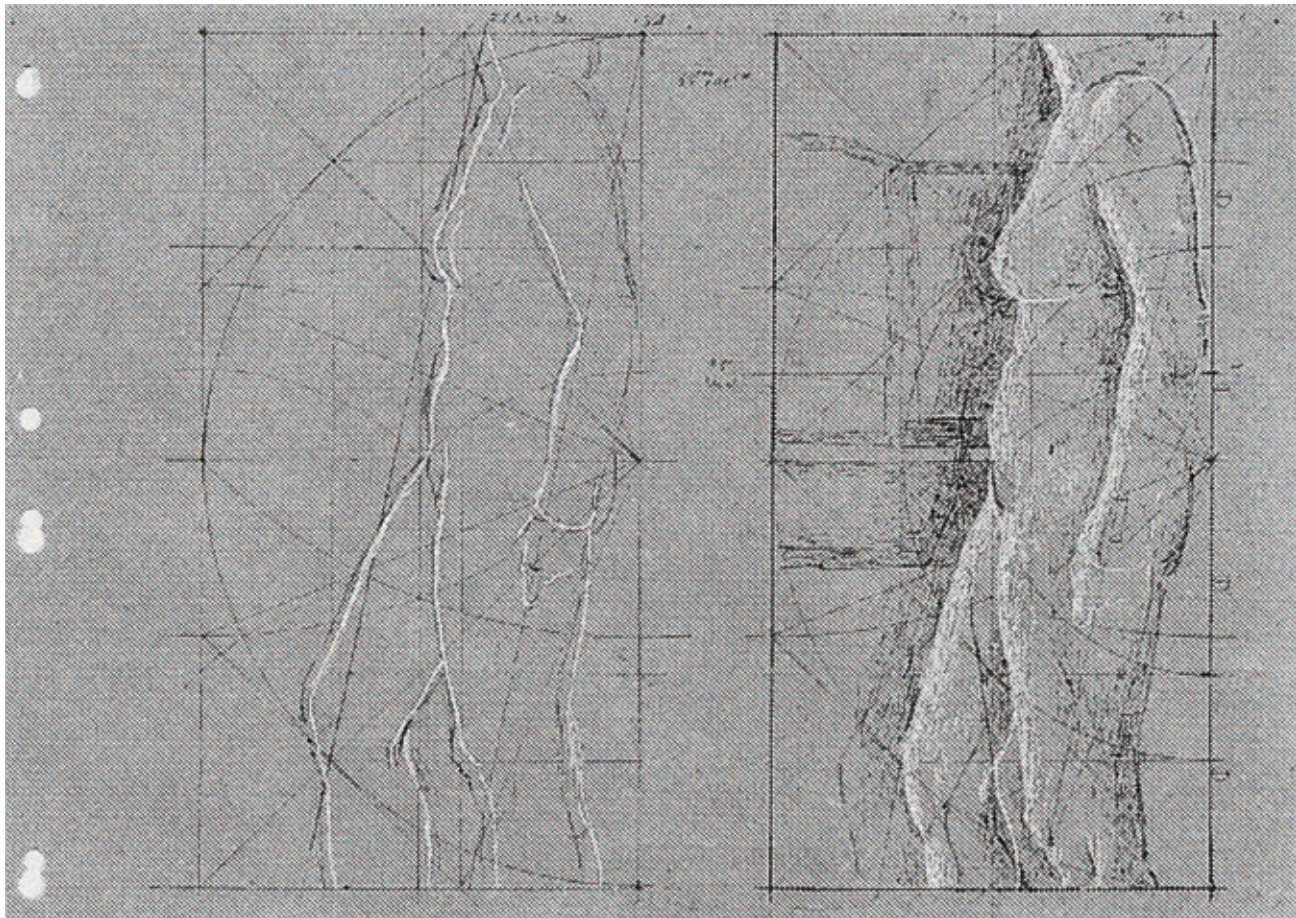
David Burnett, *Alex Colville*, Heffel Gallery Limited, 1989, the 1987 related acrylic on paper finished study entitled *Woman with Revolver* reproduced, unpaginated  
Lisa Balfour Bowen, “Alex Colville: A Portrait of the Realist in His Seventieth Year,” *Sunday Sun* (Toronto), January 28, 1990  
*Alex Colville: Paintings from the Eighties*, Mira Godard Gallery, 1990, reproduced on the invitation  
David Burnett, *Colville*, Drabinsky Gallery, 1991, page 22  
Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*, 1994, mentioned pages 75 and 132  
Philip Fry, *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes, 1983–1994*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994, discussed pages 61–63 and 106, listed page 174, reproduced page 63, and related studies reproduced pages 62 (#11.09), 107 (#11.10), 124 (#11.01, #11.02 and #11.03), 125 (#11.04, #11.05, #11.07, #11.08 and #11.11) and listed page 176  
Philip Fry, *Alex Colville: Embarkation—The Genesis of a Painting*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994, page 19  
Ann Duncan, “Inside Alex Colville,” *Montreal Gazette*, October 1, 1994  
Stéphane Baillargeon, “L’art en ses tâtonnements: Le processus créatif du peintre canadien Alex Colville au Musée des Beaux-Arts,” *Le Devoir*, October 2, 1994, reproduced  
John Demont, “Alex Colville’s Terrible Beauty,” *Maclean’s*, October 10, 1994, page 61  
John Bentley Mays, “Chill of Death Pervades Images in Colville Show,” *Globe and Mail*, November 5, 1994, page C17  
Gerta Moray and Murray Pomerance, “Six Paintings by Alex Colville: A Symposium,” Murray Pomerance, “Woman with Revolver,” *Canadian Art*, Winter 1994, pages 24–26  
John K. Grande, “Montreal: Alex Colville—Montreal Museum of Fine Arts,” *Artforum*, December 1994, page 89  
J.R.C. Perkin, *Ordinary Magic: A Biographical Sketch of Alex Colville*, Robert Pope Foundation, 1995, pages 17 and 123 and reproduced plate 16, page 122  
C.E.S. Franks, review of *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* by Mark A. Cheetham, and *Ordinary Magic: A Biographical*

*Sketch of Alex Colville* by J.R.C. Perkin, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2/3, Summer/Fall 1995, pages 371–374  
*Alex Colville: Milestones = jalons*, insert in *Vernissage*, vol. 2, no. 3, exhibition catalogue by Denise Leclerc, National Gallery of Canada, 2000, pages 5, 7 and 13, reproduced  
Robert Fulford, “Regarding Alex Colville,” *Saturday Night*, June 17, 2000, page 39  
Paul Gessell, “Milestone: Colville Marks 80th,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 20, 2000  
Ève Dumas, “L’angoisse du quotidien: Colville,” *Le Droit*, June 24, 2000  
Rob O’Flanagan, “Canadian Artists Shine at National Gallery,” *Sudbury Star*, July 8, 2000  
Anne Marie Todkill, “The Existential Art of Alex Colville,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 163, no. 6, September 19, 2000, page 748  
Jan Wong, “Lunch With: Alex Colville—‘I’ve been able to tell people to go to hell,’ ” *Globe and Mail*, April 7, 2001, page F2  
Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2003, reproduced page 133  
Robert Fulford, “Intimate Icons: Colville the Authenticator,” *Colville Tributes*, 2011, pages 82–83  
Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 3rd edition, 2012, page 446  
Andrew Hunter, *Alex Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014, pages 30, 31, 32, 112 and 115, reproduced page 112, listed page 147  
James Adams, “Visual Art,” *Globe and Mail*, August 23, 2014, page R3  
Eva Seidner, *Artist and Model*, Mira Godard Gallery, 2015, pages 18, 34–35, reproduced pages 35 and 81  
*Alex Colville: Official Site of Canadian Artist Alex Colville*, reproduced, gallery section, [http://alexcolville.ca/gallery/alex\\_colville\\_1987\\_woman\\_with\\_revolver](http://alexcolville.ca/gallery/alex_colville_1987_woman_with_revolver), accessed February 11, 2020

#### EXHIBITED

Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, *Alex Colville: Paintings from the Eighties*, February 3–21, 1990  
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes*, September 30, 1994–January 15, 1995, catalogue #11  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Alex Colville: Milestones*, June 23–September 17, 2000, catalogue #13  
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, *Alex Colville: Return*, September 27–November 30, 2003, traveling in 2003–2005 to Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton; Museum London; University of Toronto Art Centre; Edmonton Art Gallery; and Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, *hors catalogue*  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Alex Colville*, August 23, 2014–January 5, 2015, traveling to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, April 24–September 7, 2015





**ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Study for Woman with Revolver**  
 raw sienna, blue, white and black ink on grey-green paper, November 27, 1986  
 8 ½ x 11 ¾ in, 21.7 x 30 cm  
 Private Collection. Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc. Not for sale with this lot

**ESSAY BY MARK CHEETHAM—WOMAN WITH REVOLVER**

WE DO NOT expect Alex Colville to startle us, but this he does in several ways with the arresting *Woman with Revolver*. A nude woman stands motionless in a dusky domestic staircase. A light in a room below illuminates her for our gaze. She holds a pistol in her left hand. Typically, Colville does not show her face; is she frightened, or instead determined? we wonder. The former seems likely, given that her nudity suggests she is at home, but then domestic violence is all too common.

Colville is one of the most acclaimed artists in Canada, and his precise, direct paintings and prints of seemingly everyday events have been seen and applauded by hundreds of thousands of people who have attended his exhibitions over many decades. Even more have seen reproductions of his paintings. The Art Gallery of Ontario's large Colville retrospective in 2014 to 2015 received over 166,000 visitors, the largest attendance for a Canadian artist recorded at this art museum. Documentaries detail Colville's life and artistic techniques. The familiarity of his habitual themes—his wife Rhoda, their home, views in the Maritimes, pets and other animals—leads us to think that we know his work better, perhaps, than we do.

Nudity itself is not what disturbs or startles us in *Woman with Revolver*; most people who view art understand that the female nude is a significant, if sometimes prurient, genre with an ancient lineage. What is distressing here is the implied violence, the threat. Even if we cannot at first decide whether the woman is ready to defend herself or about to be an aggressor, her nudity and our ability to see her make her doubly vulnerable. Colville did not paint many female nudes, yet a cognate scenario plays out in *Woman in Bathtub* (1973, collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario). Here we see Rhoda in a tub, partly immersed in clear water, facing the spectator. Behind her is a man in a bathrobe. We do not see his face, but the form suggests Colville himself. He has insisted that this is a moment of caring and intimacy, a loving scene. But for many viewers, the woman is not only literally exposed but also helpless vis-à-vis the man behind her, whose actions are anything but clear. Colville does not see things this way, construing the scene in line with *Refrigerator* (1977, in a private collection), in which a nude woman with her back turned to us is again partnered, this time with a full-frontal nude man (Colville) and their three cats. The almost playful drama is lit by the open door of the appliance as the family enjoys a “midnight snack.” Here too Colville sees both nudity and its display as innocent.

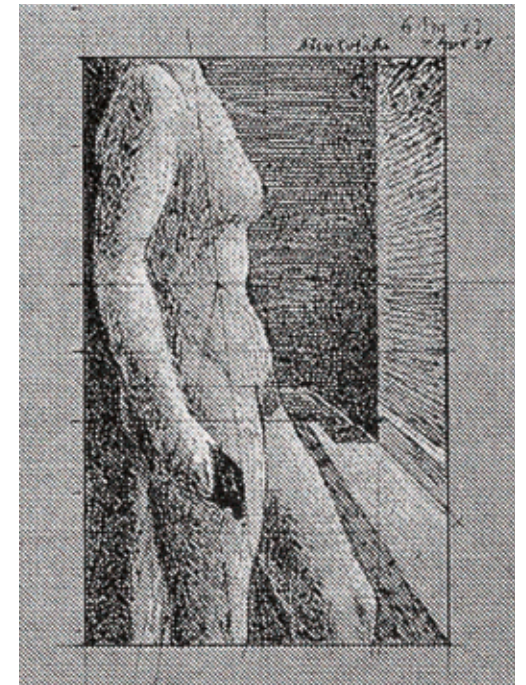
While Colville acknowledges the menace in *Woman with Revolver*, he believes himself to be showing a woman's power. He stated explicitly in an interview that his idea came from an episode of the popular TV crime series *Miami Vice*, in which a female police officer shoots an intruder wielding a knife, using a gun that has a two-inch barrel. He recalls that he was also thinking of the then-famous Maoist phrase “Power comes out of the barrel of a gun.” For him, the woman is threatened but not powerless. He holds that he shows us her control of a dangerous situation, not her vulnerability. Colville seeks to explore the “possibility of women being powerful figures.”<sup>1</sup>

Colville is such an assured and, in his quiet way, declarative artist that some may be surprised at the evidence for experimentation and visual thinking “out loud” seen in his many drawings. For *Woman with Revolver*, he employed an extended and various array of preparatory studies, which are on the one hand works of art in their own right, and also witnesses to his meticulous planning process. That progression is not always linear; in a complex painting such as *Woman with Revolver*, he tried more options than usual. For example, he auditioned different places in the home to set the drama, including a bathroom, before settling on the staircase. An expert geometer, Colville creates a precise linear armature for the woman, fitting her into a tight, claustrophobic space from which we wonder whether she can escape. Less expected for those who know the artist's work are the more expressive, freer drawings that seem in effect to test her body, the living form, against the architecture, the inanimate. The cross-hatched drawings of the woman and her shadowy confines are even reminiscent of Henri Matisse's sculptural experiments with block-like female forms in three-dimensional spaces. These formal and atmospheric concerns ramify the intricacy of an already bold image.

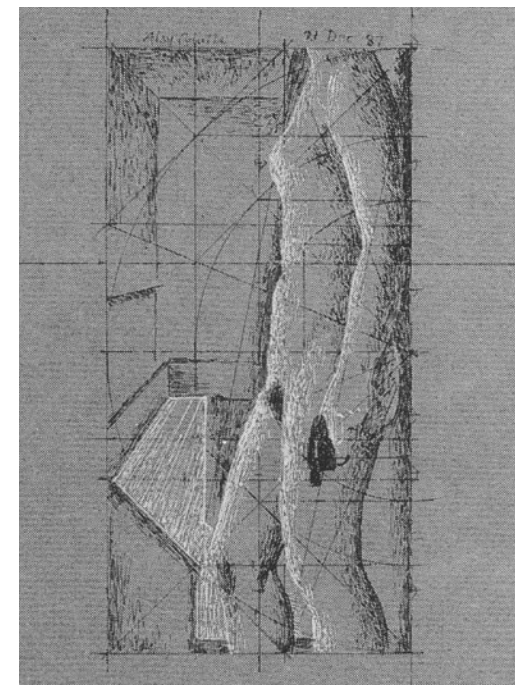
As always with Colville's art, we must digest the many details he includes to form our own opinion about a work's meaning. The revolver is one such specific: a target shooter himself, Colville would never use a generic term such as “gun” or “pistol.” The weapon is identified in a preparatory drawing as a Smith & Wesson “Bodyguard.” Of course, this information is not visible in the painting; if it were—or if we had Colville's knowledge of weapons—his intended meaning for this disturbing image would be clear. This is the case in another of his potentially alarming images, the self-portrait *Target Pistol and Man* (1980, in a private collection). Here we see the artist in his studio, a prominent pistol apparently ready to hand on his drawing table. But the title tells us why no true threat is there: a target pistol is for Colville an instrument of precision, not danger. Yet the peril that most would agree is palpable in *Woman with Revolver* is not spelled out and thus makes this one of his most affecting paintings. There are several possible explanations for this ambiguity. As suggested, he might have thought that his take on what we see is clear: the woman is powerful. He could have realized that our uncertainties in seeing this painting give it more power. Or Colville might have underestimated the power of his own work.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*, for contributing the above essay.

1. Alex Colville quoted in Mark A. Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 75.



**TOP: ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Study for Woman with Revolver**  
 raw sienna, white and black ink on photocopy on grey-green paper, April 6 – 7, 1987  
 11 ¾ x 8 ¾ in, 30 x 22 cm  
 Private Collection. Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc. Not for sale with this lot



**BOTTOM: ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Study for Woman with Revolver**  
 raw sienna, blue, white, grey and black ink on grey-green paper, December 21, 1987  
 8 x 5 ¼ in, 20.3 x 14.9 cm  
 Private Collection. Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc. Not for sale with this lot



**ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Woman with Revolver**  
 acrylic on white paper, December 9, 1987  
 7 ¾ x 4 in, 19.7 x 10.2 cm  
 Private Collection  
 Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Not for sale with this lot

**ESSAY BY RAY CRONIN—A MEDITATION ON POWER:  
 ALEX COLVILLE'S WOMAN WITH REVOLVER**

ALEX COLVILLE'S 1987 painting *Woman with Revolver* is one of the most powerful and enigmatic works in a body of work known for both qualities. It is one of his strongest works, one that biographer Jeffrey Meyers called, in *Modern Painters*, Colville's "greatest and most ambiguous work."<sup>1</sup> As with all of Colville's mature work, *Woman with Revolver* conveys a world in a single, cohesive image. Everything we need to know about the scene is present in the image we see, communicated at once, in a flash.

Colville attributed many sources to this work. He told Mark Cheetham of a scene in the television show *Miami Vice* and recalled a quote by Chairman Mao ("Power comes out of the barrel of a gun").<sup>2</sup> He also told Meyers that the work was inspired in part by Edgar Degas's painting *The Rape*. But where Degas painted a victim, Colville painted a woman with power.

There are many works of his own that inform this painting: *Target Pistol and Man*, from 1980, and *Pacific*, from 1967. Each feature guns as prominent aspects of the composition, and each take power as their subject. Another work is 2002's *Dressing Room*, which features the same revolver and nude woman, a work which he told Tom Smart was also partly inspired by Degas's *The Rape*. Then there is that other enigmatic nude, the woman in the attic studio who so coolly looks at the viewer in *Nude and Dummy*, from 1950, the work that Colville believed was his first mature painting.

Colville painted ideas. He was not interested in depicting the events of reality, but strove to show the underlying forces that drive events. "The use of power," he told Meyers, "is a key moral and physical problem, and that's what my paintings featuring pistols are about. Power is a condition of life: a thing that must be handled."<sup>3</sup> Colville always disputed any claim that his paintings with guns were about suicide, instead asserting that he was interested in power's potential to hurt others. One thinks of Albert Camus's great novel *The Stranger*, where the protagonist, Mersault, inexplicably kills an Arab man on an Algerian beach, or Raskolnikov killing his landlady in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Both Dostoevsky and Camus were interested in the effects on our humanity in the use of power against others.

Existentialism, the philosophy most often linked with Colville's work, was popularized after the traumas of the Second World War, not least by the novels and essays of Camus, a veteran of the French Resistance. Existentialism, which held that people willed themselves into being, was a philosophy haunted by power and the human capacity to will evil. What were the limits of power? What held humans back from its excesses? Colville, who was present at the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, harboured few illusions about power. He told Meyers that he found it "abhorrent to be defenceless."<sup>4</sup> The pistol in *Pacific*

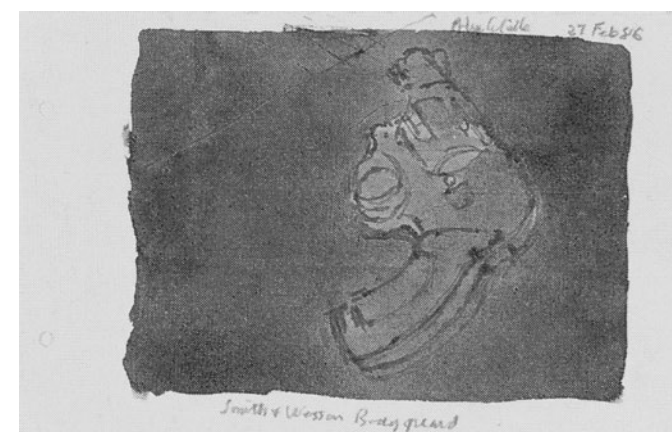
was his service revolver from the Second World War. *Woman with Revolver* portrays a Smith & Wesson Bodyguard Airweight, a .38 calibre, five-shot revolver that was a replacement for the Canadian Army Browning automatic that he had given away.

In a preparatory sketch for *Woman with Revolver*, Colville drew the woman standing in front of a cluttered dressing table. Fifteen years later he returned to that theme with *Dressing Room*. In that work, the Bodyguard revolver plays a major role; it is not being held, but instead lies amid the toiletries and makeup on the dressing table pictured in the preparatory sketch from 1987. The same woman, still nude, stands in the room, looking into a hand mirror. Behind her, partially swathed in shadow, is a male figure in evening dress. Waiting? Or lurking? It is unclear. Colville maintained that the female figure in this painting was "an imagined projection of the man's thoughts into the room."<sup>5</sup> There is a sense of menace in this painting, as there is in *Woman with Revolver*. Here, the woman is alert, watchful. In *Dressing Room* she is less guarded, despite the presence of the pistol behind her. Perhaps both women are projections, one in the calm moments before fear strikes, the other taking control and exercising her power. Indeed, the "Woman with Revolver" is no victim. She is a conception of feminine power, an image that one critic considered "one of the most powerful images of women in all of Canadian art."<sup>6</sup>

*Woman with Revolver* is not a painting of a victim. As Philip Fry wrote, "The woman is attentive, her body at ease but ready to respond. She is in control."<sup>7</sup> Colville, too, emphasized that sense of control: "The woman is of course not a helpless creature."<sup>8</sup> Indeed she is not, though it is easy to perceive her as vulnerable. Nudity does that. As art historian Gerta Moray, speaking of this painting, noted: "If I heard a prowler in my house at night I would reach for my dressing gown."<sup>9</sup> The woman pictured is both powerful and vulnerable at once; it is in that dichotomy that the power of the painting lies. Talking about *Pacific*, another meditation on power, Colville described it as being "an image of the dichotomies of life," contrasting the "purity and eternity" of the ocean and the "nasty business of actual life."<sup>10</sup>

Colville's art exists between these dichotomies, equally capable of showing the strength and safety created by bonds of family and community, and the edges where those bonds fray and tear. Power is a condition of life. Like the woman at the top of the stairs, like Camus's Mersault, we find ourselves teetering at the edge of the shadow, unsure which way to step, and not knowing whether any step will lead to danger or safety, to order or chaos. That uncertainty, too, is a condition of life, as is the search for order amidst the chaos that underpins all of Colville's work, *Woman with Revolver* included.

We thank Ray Cronin, author of *Alex Colville: Life & Work*, a digital book available online through the Art Canada Institute, Toronto, for contributing the above essay.



**ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Study for Woman with Revolver**  
 raw sienna ink and grey wash on white paper  
 5 ¾ x 9 in, 14.8 x 22.8 cm  
 Private Collection  
 Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Not for sale with this lot

1. Jeffrey Meyers, "Dangerously Real," *Modern Painters*, Autumn 2000, 97.
2. Mark A. Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 75.
3. Alex Colville quoted in Meyers, "Dangerously Real," 97.
4. Ibid, 96.
5. Colville quoted in Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2004), exhibition catalogue, 128.
6. Anne Marie Todkill, "The Existential Art of Alex Colville," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 163, no. 6 (September 19, 2000): 748.
7. Philip Fry, *Alex Colville: Paintings, Prints and Processes, 1983-1994* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 61.
8. Colville quoted in Fry, *Alex Colville*, 61.
9. Gerta Moray et al., "Six Paintings by Alex Colville: A Symposium," *Canadian Art*, Winter 1994, 21-29.
10. Colville quoted in Meyers, "Dangerously Real," 97.

This work is in the original frame made by Colville. With the frame, this work measures 30 ¼ x 19 ½ inches.

**ESTIMATE: \$600,000 – 800,000**