The Sky as Threshold:
Greg Hardy and the Phenomenology of Prairie Weather

By Gerald McMaster

Introduction

Greg Hardy's paintings open like weather fronts. They do not simply depict landscape; they translate the sensation of being claimed by it, including the pressure shift before a storm, the drift of cloud mass over open fields, the mirrored stillness of northern water, the immensity of Prairie light. Across five decades, Hardy has developed one of the most distinctive and enduring practices in Euro-Canadian landscape art, building a body of work rooted not in representation but in perception, not in scenery but in sensory experience. Born and based in Saskatchewan, Hardy works within, and subtly reconfigures, the national discourse on land, identity, and the sublime.

This exhibition and its accompanying essay examine the evolution of Hardy's atmospheric intelligence: the intuitive and formal decisions that bring his skies to life, the perceptual training of his Prairie childhood, the crucial influence of the Emma Lake Workshops, and his deep engagements with the northern regions around La Ronge. Hardy's paintings invite us not only to see weather, but to feel ourselves inside it.

Prairie Childhood: Learning to See in Wide Space

Greg Hardy grew up on the edge of the Saskatchewan prairie, where the horizon surrounds the body with a sense of unbroken openness. From an early age, he learned to watch the sky not as background but as a living, shifting presence. Clouds gathered and dissolved, storms built slowly from the west, and the quality of light changed with the seasons in ways that quietly trained his perception. "I became a daydreamer very early, and eventually a skywatcher," he later recalled. These early experiences formed his intuitive understanding of atmosphere, space, and movement.

In the Prairies, weather is intimate.[1] It sets emotional tone, imposes scale, and

[1] When I lived in the United States, people often complained about the weather. When they asked what Canadians do instead, I said, "We talk about it." It was only half a joke. Prairie life teaches a

shapes memory. Where some see flatness or monotony, Hardy perceived a dynamic field of change: a sky that breathes, expands, contracts, and asserts its presence with quiet authority. This childhood apprenticeship to light and weather became the perceptual foundation of his career.

Return to Saskatchewan: Becoming an Artist

Although Hardy left the Prairies in the early 1970s to study Media Arts at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto, then a hub for experimentation in photography, film, and new media, the pull of home remained strong. Toronto offered stimulation, but its compressed verticality contrasted starkly with the expansive horizontality that shaped his early imagination. During his final year, he undertook an ambitious project visiting artists across Saskatchewan, including Joe Fafard in Pense, Russel Yuristy in Silton, Vic Cicansky in Craven, and in Saskatoon, Bob Christie, Doug Bentham, William Perehudoff, Dorothy Knowles, Otto Rogers, and Ernest Lindner. These encounters were transformative.

“They were passionate, dedicated artists who encouraged me to follow my instincts,” Hardy reflects. The trip clarified his path: he returned to Saskatchewan, moved into his parents’ basement, and began painting in earnest. This return was not just a change of location; it was a re-entry into the land that had shaped how he sensed and understood the world. Indigenous people have long known that land holds us as much as we hold it, that we are embodied in nature, and it in us. The Prairie, for him, was not a subject but a field of relation, the very ground from which his way of seeing emerged.

That empathy arises from Hardy’s early intimacy with the Prairie. As a child, he often lay on the ground and watched the stars emerge from dusk, the clouds shifting slowly above him. He learned that vastness could feel both humbling and protective, and the horizon, rather than dividing land and sky, became a line of connection. These early sensations remain embedded in his work, where the sky carries the memory of looking upward into an expanding world. His paintings retain the wonder of those childhood encounters with immensity and translate that experience into a mature visual language of openness and depth.

Many viewers from outside the Prairies imagine the region as flat, empty, or monotonous, an abstraction rather than a lived environment. Perhaps it was Charles Dickens who started it all off by describing the Illinois prairie as “lonely

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certain steadiness: weather comes as it comes, and one accepts and works with it—an ethos embedded in generations of farmers who read the sky as closely as any map.

and wild, but oppressive in its barren monotony."[2] Hardy's work counters that stereotype by insisting upon the Prairie's dynamism. His paintings reveal how that expanse moves, gathers, breaks open, and holds presence.

This sensibility becomes the ground on which Hardy engages with a broader Prairie tradition of seeing.

Negotiating Prairie Modernism: Emotion and Structure

Saskatchewan's visual culture offers a wider context for understanding this approach to perception, and several artists provide the lineage through which Hardy's work can be situated. Allan Sapp (nêhiyaw/Plains Cree) offers one such perspective. His paintings dwell in the everyday: homes, horses, winter roads, moments of labour and kinship. Yet his contribution extends beyond subject matter. Sapp developed a way of seeing grounded in attentiveness, where land, weather, and community are held in reciprocal relation. His work affirms that the Prairie is never backdrop or symbol; it is a companion formed through memory, endurance, and care.

Dorothy Knowles brings another dimension to this lineage. Her luminous panoramas redefined the Prairie as a site of intimacy rather than desolation. Knowles' brushwork captures the tender immediacy of perception: the flicker of looking, the shimmer of air, the sensation of standing inside light. Hardy builds upon that foundation and pushes it further. His clouds do not float; they surge. His horizons vibrate with tension. Where Knowles whispers, Hardy roars, yet both share a devotion to seeing as an act of feeling.

Ernest Lindner provides a useful counterpoint. His meticulous studies of forest undergrowth reveal nature's complexity at the micro level, a world of intricate entanglements. Hardy, by contrast, operates at the macro, drawing the viewer into vast atmospheric systems. Taken together, Lindner and Hardy form a continuum of attention, from the minute to the immense, that has come to define Saskatchewan's artistic imagination. Both insist that nature is not passive but animated, demanding reciprocity and respect.

Placed alongside Sapp's relational attentiveness, Knowles' luminous perception, and Lindner's disciplined scrutiny, Hardy's work emerges within this Prairie tradition of looking. At the same time, he presses against it. His paintings absorb these precedents but expand them into meteorological drama. In Hardy's hands,

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[2] Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1842), Chapter XIII.

the sky becomes an active force that reorganizes the viewer's sense of scale, orientation, and even self.

Hardy emerged at a moment when Saskatchewan's artistic landscape was defined by two powerful currents: the narrative wit and folk sensibilities of the Regina clay and Funk artists, and the cool formalism favoured by Saskatoon's abstractionists. As a young artist, Hardy was drawn to elements of both yet fully belonged to neither. He admired the generosity and community ethos of artists like Fafard, but he was equally compelled by the intensity and rigor of abstraction.

From the beginning, Hardy resisted positions that demanded allegiance to style or doctrine. Where the Saskatoon abstractionists pursued purity of form, Hardy pursued the emotional weather inside form. Where Regina artists leaned toward figuration and story, Hardy leaned toward perceptual experience and atmospheric change.

This tension, between the expressive and the ordered, became foundational to his practice. New York writer, Karen Wilkin, writing on Hardy's early work, noted that beneath his expressive surfaces lay "a subtle sense of underlying order"[3]: compressed depths, stabilized horizon lines, and a compositional intelligence that anchored even his most improvisational passages. Hardy's mature paintings synthesize these influences into a language where atmospheric intensity coexists with formal clarity.

For viewers accustomed to the vertical drama of cities and large metropolitan regions, Hardy's horizontality can be disorienting. His skies don't merely hover; they advance. The horizon isn't a line separating land and air; it becomes a zone of exchange where weather gathers and disperses. The Prairie, seen through his eyes, is not a backdrop but an actor. This reorientation of perception is central to Hardy's art. It proposes that seeing is not neutral; it is shaped by geography, by memory, by the body's relation to space. To stand in front of one of his canvases is to experience that spatial shift viscerally. In dense urban environments, where the visual field is compressed by architecture and infrastructure, such openness can feel almost metaphysical. The sheer expanse of Hardy's imagery reminds us what it means to live without boundaries, to confront distance not as emptiness but as presence. His paintings open up a field of vision that resists ownership and insists on humility, challenging urban viewers to unlearn their sense of centrality and to recognize that beauty may lie in the seemingly uneventful.

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[3] Karen Wilkin, *Gregory Hardy: Paintings 1984–1989* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 2001).

Emma Lake: A Crucible of Influence

Hardy's participation in the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops between 1973 and 1988 brought him into direct conversation with leading figures in North American modernism. These workshops were more than professional opportunities; they were crucibles of dialogue, critique, and artistic testing. Hardy credits Emma Lake with intensifying both his discipline and his confidence.

Two figures in particular shaped his development. In 1979, the German-American painter Friedel Dzubas arrived with an approach to colour structure and atmospheric intensity that resonated immediately with Hardy's own inclinations. Dzubas's smoldering colour fields, suspended between abstraction and landscape, demonstrated how gesture and chromatic architecture could coexist without contradiction. His influence affirmed Hardy's instinct that expressive mark-making could be held within a broader compositional logic.

Building on this widening set of influences, Hardy increasingly turned to the Prairies as a site of the sublime. He invites viewers to slow down, to look again, and to find beauty not in spectacle but in what endures. In doing so, he repositions the Prairie landscape within a tradition of places worth seeing, and celebrating.

This shift in perspective was tied to his evolving studio practice. Artists often solve problems not by forcing ideas but by adjusting their approach, and Hardy's work is a testament to this. His canvases usually stretch wide and horizontal, echoing the Prairie's vast horizons, yet he periodically breaks from this format to disrupt habit and refresh perception. He recalls an Emma Lake conversation with another painter who returned to a familiar square format whenever he felt stuck; the structure itself became a way forward. The idea stayed with Hardy. Changing a painting's orientation, from horizontal to vertical or vice versa, became a way of unsettling expectations and opening new possibilities. These formal shifts allowed him to reimagine space, movement, and balance – and, ultimately, the emotional force of the Prairies.

This willingness to rethink form is central to his portrayal of the sublime. For Hardy, the sky, especially the storms that sweep across the plains, embodies this immense, otherworldly power. "A favourite part of the Prairies is when a storm is brewing," he says. On the open plains, where nothing interrupts the view, weather arrives with an immediacy that is both exhilarating and terrifying.

That same summer, curator and critic John Elderfield famously told Hardy that he had “too vivid an imagination.” The remark landed as both warning and encouragement. Imagination, Elderfield suggested, can drive a painting, but only when it is anchored; vision without discipline can just as easily collapse. Hardy took this to heart. The tension between intuition and control became a defining element of his mature work, as he learned to balance the freedom of gesture with a deep respect for the physical and emotional truth of the prairie landscape.

Emma Lake sharpened Hardy’s sense of structure without dulling the sensory force of his skies. It gave him permission to trust improvisation while insisting that every gesture serve the integrity of the whole picture. The workshops fortified his vision and solidified his position within the evolving trajectory of Prairie modernism.

Light as Material, Weather as Revelation

For Hardy, light is not only a condition of seeing but a material in its own right. It determines the emotional temperature of a painting, the rhythm of its movement, and the internal coherence of its space. “The quality of light shifts colour, and colour shifts the quality of light,” he has said. It’s a reciprocal transformation that lies at the core of his work. Light is not something that falls upon the landscape; it is something that becomes landscape.

In Hardy’s paintings, clouds operate as dynamic chambers of illumination. They glow from within, build mass through layered tonal shifts, and diffuse outward into atmospheric veils. His brushwork, alternating between charged impasto and translucent washes, captures the instability of weather as it gathers, peaks, and dissipates. This is not the decorative sky of picturesque convention but the expressive sky of lived experience.

Hardy’s skies form atmospheres of revelation. Like William Turner’s dissolving storms or Dzubas’s monumental chromatic blocks, they embody sensation as much as description. Yet Hardy’s sublime is quieter and more intimate than these precedents. It rises not from spectacle but from perception: from noticing the slow thickening of cloud, the shifting colour before dusk, the tension carried in humid air before lightning. These are the subtleties of a lifetime spent attending to the Prairie sky.

Water as Threshold: La Ronge and the Northern Imaginary

Between 2007 and 2016, Hardy's practice expanded northward as he spent extended periods around Lac La Ronge and the Churchill River system[4]. These journeys opened new perceptual and emotional registers within his work. The North offered a different kind of vastness, one shaped not by open grassland but by the interplay of granite, forest, and deep water. "It was a feeling like 'I'm home,'" Hardy recalls. "Almost like I'd found a natural studio."

In his La Ronge paintings, water becomes a threshold between worlds. At times, the lake mirrors the sky so precisely that the distinction between above and below collapses into a single plane of ambiguous depth. In others, the surface thickens into bands of colour that feel almost geological, as if influenced by the slow time of rock rather than the quick volatility of weather.

Water, in Hardy's northern works, is never merely reflective. It holds memory – tonal, emotional, sensory. Toni Morrison's observation that "water has a perfect memory"[5] resonates here: it becomes a repository of place, a carrier of story, and a dynamic surface where light and atmosphere meet. Hardy's north is subtle and contemplative, suffused with a sense of solitude that deepens rather than quiets the drama of perception.

Prairie Spaces: The Archaeology of Quiet Terrain

In addition to his larger body of Prairie paintings, Hardy has long been drawn to the quieter and more understated reaches of the region. These landscapes demand a slower form of attention. They reveal themselves through subtle shifts of colour, faint undulations of terrain, and the rhythmic movement of wind-bent grasses. Compared with the dramatic volatility of storms or the reflective depths

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[4] The Churchill River—*Missinipî* in Cree ("big water")—is among the largest undammed river systems left on Earth. It drains 285,000 km² across the northern Shield and historically functioned as the continent's major east–west route. Long before the creation of highways, this was the central artery of travel and trade, its cliffs and portages still bearing Indigenous pictographs and archaeological traces of thousands of years of use.

[5] Morrison, Toni. *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Edited by Carolyn C. Denard. University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. 77. — "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."

of northern lakes, these subdued environments speak through nuance rather than spectacle.

In this setting, Hardy found a terrain that is both austere and deeply expressive. Its muted palette of tawny yellows, soft greys, and cool blues allowed him to explore a language of restraint, where even small tonal changes carry emotional weight. The space here is not empty but resonant, alive with memory, erosion, and the long arc of geological time.

Hardy's Prairie paintings acknowledge the land as an archive, a place in which centuries of habitation, weather, and ecological change are recorded. His canvases translate this quiet archaeology into painterly terms, revealing a landscape whose power emerges not from drama but from steady presence.

Toward the Exhibition: Key Works and the Arc of a Career

The works gathered for this exhibition reveal the breadth of Greg Hardy's atmospheric intelligence. Together they trace a sustained inquiry into weather, perception, and the emotional charge of place. Presented thematically rather than chronologically, the paintings illuminate the experiential continuities that define Hardy's evolving vision.

Northern Works: Lakes, Tree lines, and Shifting Weather

In *Afternoon Dreaming*, the sky unfolds as a densely layered structure of purples, mauves, and iridescent whites. Each passage of colour moves like a living surface, generating a slow internal turbulence. Small orange inflections signal the passage of time within an otherwise suspended atmosphere, revealing Hardy's attentive study of northern light.

Day of Remembering turns toward water as a site of reflection and perceptual ambiguity. The lake becomes a muted echo of the sky, softening cloud movement into stillness. Vertical energies above meet the horizontal plane below, creating a steady visual rhythm. The work captures the quiet tension that defines northern weather at rest.

In *Sky Turning Dark*, a familiar northern horizon becomes the setting for atmospheric upheaval. Rising clouds gather weight and density as illumination struggles through shifting shadow. Bursts of orange and gold intensify the drama. The darkened treeline anchors the composition, placing the viewer within a moment poised between calm and transformation.

Good Day in the Bay offers a counterpoint to this tension. Tall northern pines rise in rhythmic procession, mirrored in calm water. Behind them, clouds lift in apricot, lemon, and soft pink. The scene carries a sense of clarity and renewal. Though serene, the work remains alive through the subtle interplay of reflection and colour.

Prairie Works: Storms, Fields, and Expansive Light

Big Sky Glowing introduces the defining force of Prairie atmosphere. Hardy reduces the land to a narrow grounding strip, allowing the sky to dominate. Billowing formations shift from cool greys to warm golds, capturing a moment of luminous expansion. The painting highlights how Prairie space is shaped by the immensity of air and light.

In *Wild Night*, the build toward a storm becomes a study in charged transition. Cascading ribbons of blues, violets, greens, and golds tremble with kinetic energy. Below, a band of yellow and deep teal signals the final seconds before rainfall. The work reveals Hardy's sensitivity to the pressure and intensity that precede dramatic weather.

A related energy appears in *Distant Sheet Lightning*. The storm has not yet broken, yet the sky feels electrically charged. Nuanced greys shift across the surface, animated by a faint violet pulse above the land. Hardy paints the illumination that precedes the flash rather than the lightning itself, capturing the atmosphere's anticipatory hum.

First Snow, Early Fall shifts the palette while maintaining Hardy's interest in transitional states. Returning to fields near Saskatoon, he distills the land to early frost, muted grasses, and a low sky. Clusters of poplars gather in their characteristic formation, leaning into one another for shelter. A thin gold horizon preserves a sense of enduring light.

Gentle Rain Brings Calm offers a final moment of quietude within the Prairie cycle. A soft grey permeates the scene, dissolving contour and reducing reflection to muted tone. Small drifting clouds form a constellation across the sky. Hardy captures the clarity that follows rainfall, inviting a slower and more attentive way of seeing.

Taken together, these northern and Prairie paintings trace Hardy's pursuit of atmospheric thresholds. Across distinct geographies, he moves between calm and storm, reflection and dissolution, sensation and structure. The landscape

becomes an active field of relation shaped by weather and light. In Hardy's hands, it is never fixed but continually unfolding.

Conclusion: The Sky That Looks Back

Greg Hardy's paintings remind us that landscape is not scenery but relationship. His works do not simply portray the Prairie or the North; they enact the sensory and emotional conditions through which these places are known. In Hardy's hands, the sky becomes a threshold: a living presence that moves, breathes, remembers, and occasionally confronts the viewer with its immensity.

Across five decades, Hardy has cultivated a practice grounded in both intuition and discipline, in the charged interplay of light and colour, and in an attentiveness to weather as the medium through which we encounter the world. His paintings reveal that perception is not passive; it is a form of participation. To stand before a Hardy painting is to feel oneself inside the atmosphere it conjures, suspended between calm and volatility, surface and depth, memory and sensation.

In an era marked by environmental precarity, Hardy's work carries particular resonance. His paintings acknowledge the atmosphere as a fragile, relational field, something we move through, depend upon, and must honour. They offer encounters rather than views, invitations rather than statements. They ask us to meet the sky as he meets it: with wonder, humility, and a willingness to see more deeply.

In this way, Hardy's work extends beyond aesthetics into an ethics of perception. It demonstrates that to look carefully is to care, and that the landscapes that shape us also ask something of us in return. His paintings hold open that space, the threshold where attention becomes reverence, and where the sky, in all its shifting beauty, looks back.