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Birth, New Art

I've never met painter Elizabeth McIntosh, and when I talk to her on the phone from her office at Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, she sounds about 12 years old. She can't be, though, because she has a 2½-year-old daughter named Chlose. "I guess I have a very young-sounding voice," she says.

It was her reading to Chlose from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* that gave McIntosh the title for her current exhibition at Toronto's Diaz Contemporary -- Young Night Thought -- and, she says, the illustrations in the book even lent her some ideas for the rich, bountiful colour in the exhilarating paintings that make up the new show. "The poem *Young Night Thought* is one of Chlose's favourites," McIntosh says (. . . *Armies and emperors and kings,/ All carrying different kinds of things,/ And marching in so grand a way,/ You never saw the like by day.*).

Untitled (Spell), from 2004, reproduced here, is the first painting McIntosh made after having her baby. She says it represents a "dramatic shift" from what she used to do. "I'd been painting circles and stripes in a very tight, organized way," she says. But when she got pregnant, she more or less stopped painting and turned to the making of collages, evidently spending a lot of time reflecting on what she had done in the past and what she wanted to do next. Three months after Chlose was born, she returned to painting -- and straightaway made this gloriously antic, boisterous harlequinade of a picture.

"The process definitely seems freer now," she says. "The compositions aren't as preplanned as they used to be, and I find myself, more and more, playing around with silly, awkward things." Silly, awkward things such as the five brightly painted "legs" across the bottom of the canvas, which, she says, suggest a number of people who, for some reason, are now holding up a big abstract painting.

The generating of this kind of illusory space is partly traceable to her use of the triangle, which allows her to add one wedge-like segment of the painting to another, gradually building up a sense of three-dimensional, almost architectural space across her canvases -- space that, cunningly, she then tends to subvert by -- in *Untitled (Spell)*, for example -- pinning the picture flat again by her use of those odd, thumbtack-like dots of paint in three of the picture's four corners.

Where McIntosh's paintings had always been clean and precise, now they feature passages of mussy, "dirty" painting: A lot of the dark underpainting shows through, for example, especially

in the grey, silvery and off-white triangles that shingle the picture's surface (a painterly roughness she amplifies by painting these sections with a coarse, hog's-hair brush). "It's all very intuitive now," she says, "including the colour I use."

McIntosh is, in fact, a beautiful colourist, bracingly inventive when it comes to juxtaposing -- as in *Untitled (Spell)* -- unlikely hues: brick red to cream, for example, and light green to brown, and dark red to front-porch green. And these colour choices now lead her through the painting instead of the other way around. "I'm revealing more and more of the process of the painting lately," she tells me. "There's less covering up of mistakes."

"Why is that, do you think?" She thinks about it for a minute. "It's probably having Chlose," she says. "The paintings are faster and more forgiving now. And since I have a lot less time in the studio than I used to have, it all works out."