

VANCOUVER IS AWESOME

The Opening – Elizabeth McIntosh

By **Anne Cottingham** - October 27, 2011



THE OPENING is all about introducing the fascinating, quirky and wonderful people working in and around the visual arts in Vancouver. Each week, we'll feature an artist, collective, curator or administrator to delve deep into who and what makes art happen!

To the novice art aficionado, the paintings **Elizabeth McIntosh** makes could be described as abstract. She prefers to leave it more open-ended than that however, feeling that painting "exists now as a whole mixture of all the histories [of painting movements] combined together." Abstraction "just seems like a word that can't encompass all that painting can now encompass." Her paintings hover around pattern, decoration, collage and representation that say more about the process of creating the composition than they do about the composition as a whole.



'Zig Zag' 2009, approx. 24 x 32 in., construction paper

McIntosh has been painting since she was a teenager, when she took a summer art class and fell in love with the medium. Eventually that love led her to study art at York University in Toronto, and while she painted the whole time, got caught up in the feminist agenda of the 80s and produced a lot of performance work. In one performance she cut herself out of a cardboard box; in another she strapped a tape recorder to her front with a baby harness, which alternated between playing the sound of children booing or cheering while she tried not to show emotion to the sounds. While she enjoyed the performance work she found it “nerve-wracking to get in front of an audience,” and realized in time that she preferred painting and the solitary time doing so in the studio. Many of her fellow students and even some teachers suggested painting was not the medium she should pursue, but McIntosh would not be persuaded and went on to Chelsea College in London to obtain an MFA in painting.



'Cat' 2010, 75 x 90 in., oil on canvas

Eventually she ended up in Vancouver, with its large but oft-overlooked painting community. To her, painting is a “geeky thing,” equating it with ceramics and the technical knowledge about the medium that only other practitioners care to know or pay attention to. Her paintings are a process that begin and end in different places, but always lead to something new for McIntosh. She had a large show at the Contemporary Art Gallery late last year entitled “Violet’s Hair,” in which she exhibited a group of large paintings in one room, and turned the other room and the outside windows into large-scale collage works. Collage plays a huge influence on her paintings; in fact, she often creates quick collaged drawings in her sketchbook of different patterns that ultimately end up as one of her huge paintings. Sometimes the compositions happen almost by accident – a cut out section in one page can end up forming a border around an existing image on the next page and become a part of the resulting painting.

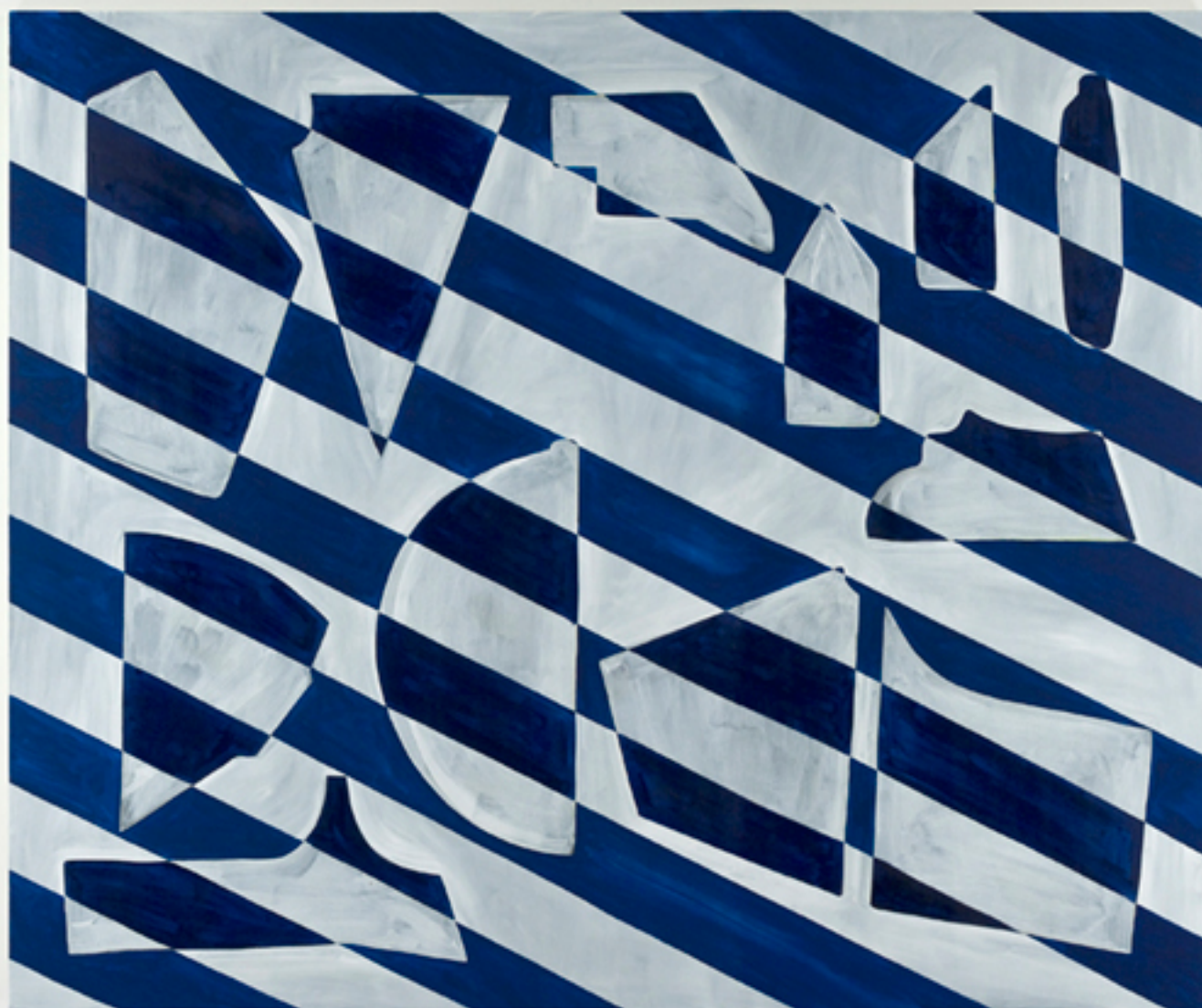


Installation view – Violet's Hair, Contemporary Art Gallery 2010/2011



'Colours From a Story', Violet's Hair, Contemporary Art Gallery, 2010/2011, photo backdrop paper, vellum goauche, acrylic paint

It's this process of play and discovery that keeps her work fresh and each painting different from the last. McIntosh "can never keep making the same kind of painting. I would be completely bored." She has no idea what she will end up with, and only looks for the inspiration to start – what happens in the middle is based purely on feeling. She wants each painting "to be unique and have its own logic, to operate a little differently from something else I've made before." Each one stands on its own as an individual painting, but together they chart a visual path of her thoughts and inspirations. Sometimes if you look closely you can see the remnants of an older painting underneath, revealed in a faint hint of colour poking through.



'Paul Klee Fragments' 2009, 75 x 90 in., oil on canvas

Recently she has been working on paintings inspired by small, unimportant details in paintings by modernist artists such as Paul Klee, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Usually the "quote" from the painting is a patterned detail that she expands onto a huge canvas, making something that perhaps would have previously been considered minor the entire focus. She has even, somewhat uncharacteristically, painted a large still-life that despite being clearly representational, somehow works with the rest of her less-literal works. There was no plan for that to work – she just put paint to canvas as she usually does and painted until it began to feel right. There is "no point in me making a painting if I know what it's going to look like at the end." So the results are just as much a pleasant surprise to her as they are to us.



'Flags and Crowns' 2008, 75 x 90 in., oil on canvas

Elizabeth McIntosh lives and works in Vancouver. She received a BFA (Honours) from York University in 1992 and a MFA in painting from Chelsea College in London in 1996. Her work has been exhibited the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Blanket Gallery, Vancouver; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; Parisian Laundry, Montreal; The Balmoral, Los Angeles; Perugi Artecontemporane, Padova (Italy); and Galleri Susanne Hojriis, Copenhagen. She is represented by [Diaz Contemporary](#) in Toronto.

All images courtesy Elizabeth McIntosh.

Anne Cottingham

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