



Painting and Obstinacy

Review , May 9, 2018

By Andrew Witt

Last year a number exhibitions, events and talks addressed the state of contemporary painting in Vancouver. The following essay is a belated survey of these exhibitions and events but also an analysis of the blind spots, clichés and missed opportunities that have stood out during the discussion. Paying close attention to the works on display, 'Painting and Obstinacy' attempts to short-circuit the dominant currents and tendencies of the debate by thinking through how the artworks themselves, through their formal

manoeuvres and political content, shore up a new vocabulary for the reception of contemporary painting in the present.

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What concepts should we mobilize to grasp the disorienting expansion of contemporary painting? In the current critical discourse, words from the previous century, such as 'obsolescence' and 'exhaustion' are no longer uttered to chart the medium's aesthetic horizon. Any talk of the 'depletion of the painterly gesture' or the 'deconstruction' of the conventions of looking, so characteristic of the debates over painting of the 1960s, has been evacuated from the conversation. (1) In the eyes of artists and historians alike, contemporary painting appears infused with added value, vitality and expressivity. This renewed currency, however, has not secured the medium's material consistency. The pendulum has swung, but in an unlikely direction. Older problems tied to the previous century have reared their head again: a return to the subject, to gesture, to materialism, and finally, to thinking through tradition and history. These questions assume the following form: What is painting now? What theoretical issues have given this question urgency? Lastly, and generally speaking, how has a reinvigorated conversation and debate over painting intensified the stakes of what art is and what art can do in the present?



Image: Doug Ashford, *Six Moments in 1967 #3*, (2010–11). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Contemporary painting can potentially encompass almost anything: mixed-media performance (DAS INSTITUT), digital prints (Wade Guyton), woven supports (Brent Wadden), or even iPad color studies (Amy Sillman). The recent trend to include everything under the sun goes against the twentieth century's tendency to disavow the name (think here of the litany of 'post-studio' practices). Theodor Adorno's famous opening sentence in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), a text written almost fifty years ago, appears more pertinent to painting now than ever: '*It is self-evident that nothing concerning [painting] is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.*' (2)



Image: DAS INSTITUT (Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder), Adele Röder *COMCORRODER* (2015), Kerstin Brätsch *KAYA Mylars* (2015), Sergei Tcherepnin *Flame Creatures* (2015). Photo courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Galleries.

The interest in painting today is inextricably entwined with forces that are both critical as well as cynical. Undeterred by the periodic crises of capitalism, the medium continues to fetch astronomical prices at art fairs and art markets, serving as a gold standard for dealers and collectors. (3) Nevertheless, the desire to chart a path forward for advanced art *through* painting, still endures as a viable project. Part of this discussion has involved the rethinking of aesthetic autonomy, in which the artwork being incommensurable to the logic of the world is imagined to channel non-instrumentalized forms of life and expression located at a distance from the state and capital.



Image: Doug Ashford, *Six Paintings and One Photo from Saturday, June 25, 2005*, (2014). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Today, there are many expressions for this type of incommensurability, whether it is expressed as art's 'terror' ([Jaleh Mansoor](#)) or as 'the disordering of the world's restrictions' ([Doug Ashford](#)). Local tendencies, such as [Charlene Vicker's](#) aspiration to rethink the utopian project of painting within the formal vocabulary of abstraction (as stated in

her contribution to the *Crimp in the Fabric* symposium), or Rebecca Brewer's inclination to reconsider the medium through the circuitous movements of involuntary memory (as recalled in her contribution to the exhibition [Ambivalent Pleasures](#)), serve as two recent examples which have attempted to chart a theoretically advanced notion of painting outside of the previous strategies of the historical avant-garde. According to these two models, to speak of the medium of

painting today involves not only the necessity to address the medium's material and conceptual expansion, but also the urgency to confront painting's *obstinate* power and presence. Painting and obstinacy, then.

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It feels historically expedient, if not necessary, to respond to the expansion of the medium with a series of local exhibitions, talks and informal conversations held throughout Vancouver during the past few months. These events have sought, with wildly mixed results, to clarify, theorize and map the stakes of contemporary painting. By no means have these discussions been undertaken in isolation. Over the past decade internationally, a number of publications and exhibitions have set the bar and tone for this undertaking. (4) Locally, however, a selection of exhibitions have served as the locus of these debates: principal among them include the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibition, *Entangled: Two Views on Contemporary Canadian Painting* (September 30 – January 1, 2017). Accompanying the VAG exhibition was the artist-led symposium, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today*, with a keynote lecture from theorist and art historian, Isabelle Graw.

Occupying the second floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Entangled* was organized along two thematic currents, 'Painting as Idea,' curated by Emily Carr University Professor, David MacWilliam and 'Performative Painting' curated by the VAG's Senior Curator, Bruce Grenville. According to the two curators, the exhibition was not intended to serve as a historical survey *per se*, even though the exhibition adopted the sub-title, 'Two Views of Contemporary Canadian Painting.' The impetus of the exhibition was, in their words, due to the fact that '*nobody is talking about [painting].*' Perhaps this statement was a slip of the tongue, since the exhibition and symposium were in part a product of a long conversation amongst local painters (MacWilliam, McIntosh, Roy, Clay, et al.). Strangely, this statement also happened to contradict the VAG's own recent history that has placed the medium at the center of a number of group exhibitions and surveys over the past decade, as well as an impressive range of notable, smaller shows throughout the city. The shows held at the VAG have included *Paint* (2006), *Painted Past: A History of Canadian Painting from the Collection* (2014), and *Ambivalent Pleasures: Vancouver Special* (2016), whereas the exhibitions held throughout the city's private galleries and artist-run centres have included Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder's *Night Shift*, (Or Gallery, July 1 – 31, 2012), Mina Totino's *Persian Rose Chartreuse Muse Vancouver Grey*, (Equinox Gallery, March 12 – April 19, 2014), and Rodney Graham's *Props and other Paintings* (Charles H. Scott Gallery, September 17 – November 16, 2014).



Image: Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder, *Night Shift*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artists and Or Gallery.

To even suggest that painting has ‘[come back from the dead](#),’ or is ‘[alive and well](#),’ as stated in a number of reviews of *Entangled*, was to employ a somewhat hackneyed cliché and turn a blind eye to the many ambitious shows, exhibitions and spaces which have addressed painting over the past few decades. Even the magazine *Canadian Art* put forward the rather spurious claim that, in Vancouver, ‘painterly practice has otherwise been little championed in art education or artist-run centres over the past half-century.’ As someone who has spent the past two decades in-and-out of the city’s educational institutions and artist-run centres, no claim seems further from the truth. In fact, once artists, critics and curators focus their attention elsewhere—and for a start, stop talking about how the medium has been neglected or persecuted—will the conversation be redirected towards painting’s power and potential.

Although the two separate views curated for *Entangled* were conceptually distinct, the two themes were surprisingly uniform in their look, thrust and scope, emphasising a short history of pictorial abstraction at the expense of other models, genres and histories of painting (portraiture, still-life, or landscape, for instance). The

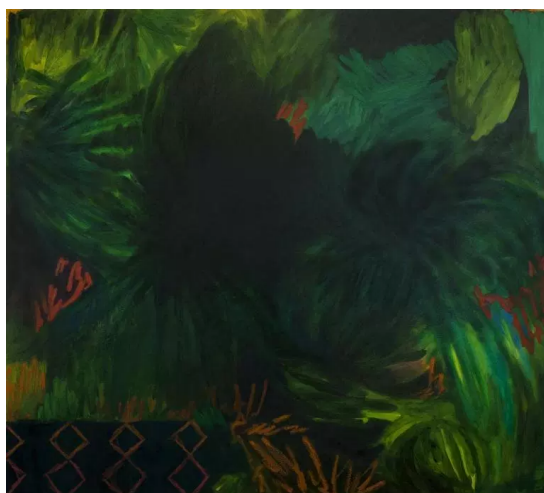


Image: Megan Hepburn, *The Garden*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist.

The exclusion of portraiture seems especially odd in the international context, where a number of the key debates involving painting, if not contemporary art in general, have revolved around the intersections of figuration, abstraction and the politics of representation (re: Dana Schutz [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Even stranger, perhaps, was the omission of any discussion of painting's troubled relation to contemporary media, in particular digital networks and culture, which was the central focus of Museum Brandhorst and mumok's ambitious exhibition, *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* (Summer 2016), as well as Tate Modern's *Painting after Technology* (Summer 2015). In their own way, the two exhibitions investigated what can be called 'the traffic in painting'—the accelerated networks involved in the mode of production, distribution, circulation and reception of paintings in a society based on commodity production and exchange. (5) But in addition, the two exhibitions also rethought the typically slower forms of attention and perception demanded by painting and pictures in a digitally mediated world.



Image: Rodney Graham, *The Gifted Amateur*, Nov. 10th, 1962, (2007). Photo courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Viewed within the context of Canada 150 celebrations, the exhibition's subtitle, 'Contemporary Canadian Painting,' appeared as a misnomer. For a show that rolled out a nationalist qualifier, it was odd that the exhibition did not include any indigenous artists, especially in light of the failed attempts by the Canadian state and its institutions for reconciliation, in which the work of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Charlene Vickers or Kent Monkman, for instance, seems more pertinent than ever.



Image: Charlene Vickers, *Sunken Gardens*, (2016). Photo courtesy of the artist and Fazakas Gallery.

It could be argued that these under-investigated strands of both media and politics were the consequence of the related but divergent frames of the two thematic

currents of the exhibition— ‘painting as idea’ and ‘performative painting’—two themes that may seem more appropriate to the latter half of the twentieth century and its histories of painting than to our present moment. Although a concept such as the ‘performative’ is far removed from Harold Rosenberg’s original theory that defined painting as a type of *performance* in the 1950s (*‘The American action painters’* (1952)), the *performative* is associated with the work of theorists Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, which charts a mode of ‘doing’ and ‘making’ outside of representation. In contrast to Rosenberg’s concept of *performance* (which Grenville’s curatorial programme distances itself from), the *performative* is not firmly anchored to any notion of medium specificity. What this concept means for contemporary painting and its reception, for instance, as differentiated from other media such as sculpture or photography, is by no means clear. No doubt, the concept could just as easily be mobilized in the discussion of contemporary sculpture. (6)

With all of these elisions and missed opportunities, a number of questions still persist: Why painting and why now? And perhaps, more importantly, why abstraction as the central aesthetic current?

Isabelle Graw’s keynote lecture for the conference, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today* (28–29, September 2018), addressed these questions within a Marxist argument and perspective. Graw’s project is founded on the belief that painting represents a commodity of a ‘special type’ all the while attempting to argue how the medium is not merely reducible to the vicissitudes of the commodity form. Her principle critique of contemporary painting is the tendency for the genre’s discourse to project a ‘vitalist fantasy,’ a tendency to treat actual paintings as if they were imbued with life or subjectivity (ie. thought, presence, agency etc.). This vitalism tethered to the medium projects a fantasy, in Graw’s words, of a life lived ‘without negativity.’



Image: Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder, *Night Shift*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artists and Or Gallery.

Graw’s vitalist notion should be read as a tendency of contemporary painting rather than as a comprehensive history. Missing from her lecture was a vision of a *non-vitalist* conception of painting, or, to put it in her words, a mode of painting that

projects a life lived *with* negativity. This condition is what Adorno once called art's 'asociality' ('the determinate negation of a determinate society'). (7) Graw's elision of the negative seems odd since one advanced history of modernist painting has continually envisioned the medium as one of negativity. Think here of Kazimir Malevich's apocalyptic conceptualization of his black monochrome as a 'desert,' Agnes Martin's 'annihilation' of form (to use art historian Annette Michelson's phrase), Ellsworth Kelly's adoption of **non-compositional strategies** (monochrome, chance, and the grid), or, to provide a local example, Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder's month-long performance at the Or Gallery, *Night Shift* (July 1-31, 2012).

This singular focus on the relationship between painting and vitalism also overlooks the central argument of UBC professor Jaleh Mansoor's recent book on the Italian neo-avantgarde, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (2016). In a novel reading of the gestures of the Italian avant-garde—such as burning, piercing and cutting of the support by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Alberto Burri—Mansoor argues how the volatility of the artwork in post-war Italy served as a 'repository of historical symptoms,' as well as a unique strand of resistance against capital and the state in which these gestures were politically and socially mobilised. And like her contemporaries in the studio, Mansoor's project is tied to a rethinking of aesthetic autonomy as a prefigurative political gesture.



Image: Ellsworth Kelly, *Méditerranée*, (1952). Photo courtesy of Tate Modern.

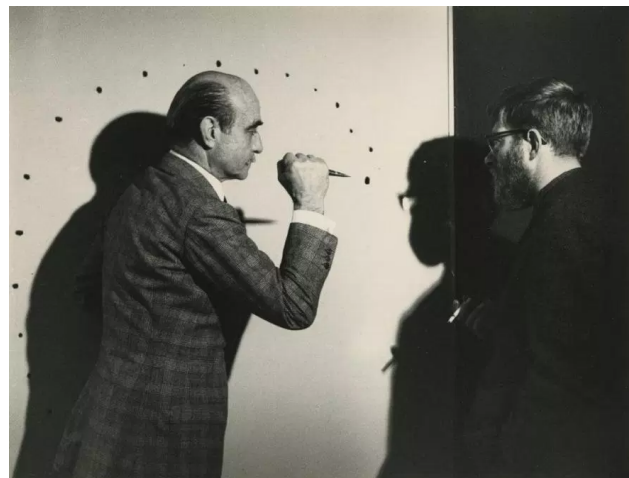


Image: Lucio Fontana, *Le Jour*, (1962). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Autonomy is a central current in these contemporary debates. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's magisterial study of the political economy of labor power, *History and Obstinacy* (1981/2014), elaborates how the subject counters capitalism's daily and violent forces of expropriation with obstinate feelings and characteristics. Negt and Kluge's concept of *Eigensinn* can be loosely translated into English as 'one's

own sense' (sometimes translated as autonomy). With this definition we should emphasize how the characteristic of obstinacy incorporates feelings of stubbornness and irreverence. Obstinacy is not a 'natural' characteristic, Negt and Kluge argue, but these feelings emerge from experiences of destitution and expropriation, and it is in this mode that we are forced to think obstinacy as a form of autonomy. In contrast to artistic modernism, where art's separateness from life and its uselessness is self-consciously mobilized as autonomy. In our contemporary period, aesthetic and political autonomy is now inexplicably entwined with everyday life. The autonomous, in this particular case, is distinctly social, collective and historical.

In our particular historical moment when the violence of capitalism has 'migrated inwards,' permeating all aspects of everyday life, the subject increasingly confronts expropriation with stubborn and impervious gestures and attitudes. To quote Devin Fore's thorough [Introduction](#) to the work Negt and Kluge's work, 'obstinacy' should be understood as the 'underside of history':

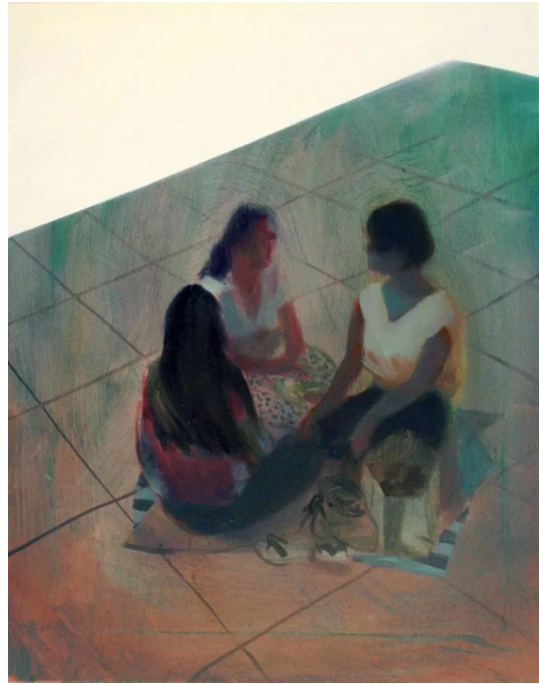


Image: Alison Yip, *Picnic in the Shade*, (2008). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

"For each entry in the valorized record of human culture—a record that, as Benjamin wrote, is always a documentation of barbarism—a countervailing act of obstinacy pushes back against the thrust of so-called progress; for each luminous vista cleared by instrumental reason, a dense scotoma of stupidity emerges to blight the view; for every human trait that is singled out and capitalized, a resistant trait gathers force underground." (8)

To address the obstinate strands and tendencies within painting is to speak to the underground currents that snake through the medium's history.

The obstinate, however, does not signify the ineffable or inexpressible—a perspective that was advanced during the aforementioned symposium, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today*. It did not help the symposium that the only position on offer was the artist's own. Aside from Isabelle Graw's keynote lecture, it was a conscious choice for the organizers not to invite curators, art historians or art critics to present papers. Even though each painter was invited to address a pertinent issue about the medium, the thirteen artists who were invited to speak only spoke to their individual practice as painters. Historical analysis was checked

at the door. As a consequence, the desire to have a conversation about painting was superseded for a self-reflexive conversation about the singularity of the artist's own work.



Image: Rodney Graham, *Anamorphic Psychomania Variation I*, (2010). Photo courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

For the final panel of the symposium, 'Hands Stuck in the Mattress,' most of the panelists recalled the well-worn cliché that language is insufficient and inadequate in describing the formal operations and qualities of a work of art. The underlying assumption was one that accepted the empty claim that language 'dissolves' or 'falls apart' in front of a painting. (9) Taken as a whole, the perspectives on offer felt myopic, if not deeply cynical—cynicism, of course, being the prevalent position amply available to contemporary thought and experience. To an outsider looking in, it seemed disingenuous to lament the fact that 'nobody is talking about painting,' and then invite no one to talk about the historical problems and questions of contemporary painting.

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There is a peculiar way that artworks evade their public at the point of their presentation, but occasionally come into relief in a belated manner. One recent show that '[flew] under the radar,' to quote one review of the show, was Alison Yip's exhibition *Hagazussa* (2017) at Monte Clark Gallery. In a way, Yip channels the obstinate force of painting by working through outmoded compositional strategies. The question that the artist asks is not how to bring the new into the world, as it is often the case with historic avant-garde, but rather, how to be untimely in the present. In a contradictory fashion, to act in an untimely manner is to be both belated but also ahead of time. Painter Amy Sillman once claimed that the contemporary painter is often pulled in a conflicting range of temporal directions. As a painter, Sillman writes, 'you have to simultaneously diagnose the present, predict the future, and ignore the past—to both remember and forget.' (10)



Image: Alison Yip, *Hagazussa*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

Evidence of this desire was emphasised in the title of Yip's show, *Hagazussa*, an old Germanic word for 'fence rider' (also witch), but also with artist's peculiar use of a range of compositional strategies, such as trompe l'oeil, reverse perspective, Cezanne-like brushwork, and flat decorative patterns. Yip's resuscitation of outmoded pictorial strategies demonstrates how certain traits, feelings and gestures can go *underground* (like most studiowork), only to have them reconsidered and revisited in the present.

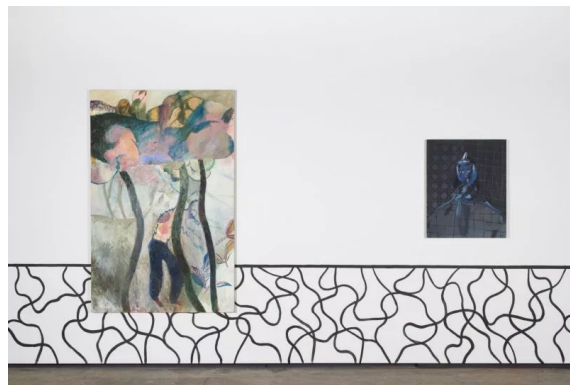


Image: Alison Yip, *Footsie Chain*, (2013). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

Reverse perspective, for instance, popularized by the photographic avant-gardes of the 1920s, was imagined both as a construction of a new vision but also as a wholesale assault on a bourgeois subjectivity sutured to the humanist ideology of linear perspective. And unlike linear perspective, which is often marshalled with order and hierarchy in mind, reverse perspective—as one early commentator on the technique has observed—produces an 'eccentric space.' In Yip's work, the picture's 'eccentric space'—composed sometimes also in trompe l'oeil—unravels outwards, in direct opposition to the rules of classical perspective which forces space to recede internally from within the picture.

Image: Alison Yip, *Recipe*, (2016). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

Otherworldly, but still of this world, Yip's vision is so disorienting because it often foregrounds a ghostly human



figure—or at times, a hybrid figure that shares human and animal traits—within an abstract yet quasi-realist space that shuttles between recession and projection. This borderline state is often intuited by Yip in her repeated reference to twilight scenes and states. The moment of twilight not only breeds transformation (day transforms into night), but also conjures a moment of *transfiguration*. Like any ‘witching-hour,’ it is a time where corporeal and psychic states loosen. One should add that this crepuscular vision of

nature was also present in Megan Hepburn’s recent paintings on show at Duplex gallery, where nature was rendered with dark chiaroscuro, pulsating with a radiant but estranged light.

Locked into these moments of transfiguration, Yip draws our attention to a litany of irreverent traits and gestures (a stooped drinker, a convulsive dancer, a fence-walker)—figures shown during moments of sensuous vibrancy and defiant autonomy. These figures are ones of pathos, shown in both struggle and suffering. When viewed together as a mass, however, these characters—spectral and aglow—commune in a fleeting dance-like movement. Yip’s vision can be understood as a type of *dark illumination*: a vision which shines its oblique light onto that which is often ignored but still is nevertheless present.

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By no means was it coincidental that two works featured in the exhibition *Entangled* make reference to the ‘underground,’ as evidenced in Rebecca Brewer’s *Bones Stuck Underground* (2017) and Sandra Meigs *The Basement Piles* series (2013). The painter is imagined here in all seriousness, like an obstinate mole, insofar as they seek to activate undervalued ‘faculties of labor,’ to use Negt and Kluge’s phrasing. They have gone underground, but have temporarily come to the surface (like a repressed symptom), mobilised during unexpected historical moments. It is for this reason, perhaps, that art historical writing on painting seems well suited to think the *unconscious of history*—a model of history that works through the elisions, excesses, and impurities constitutive of ‘official’ history.

It should come to no surprise, then, that Brewer and her contemporaries often cite models of painting not taken from our past century. No simple chronology works here. In this mode, history reveals itself through a series of knight moves and tiger leaps. The model on offer can be as disparate and anachronistic as the fusion of the prehistoric with the 15th Century. Instead of dismissing these works as a postmodern pastiche of cultural styles and modes, the artwork should be thought as

of the picture plane. It is here where Matisse and McIntosh demonstrate their intolerance towards the historical conventions of perspective.

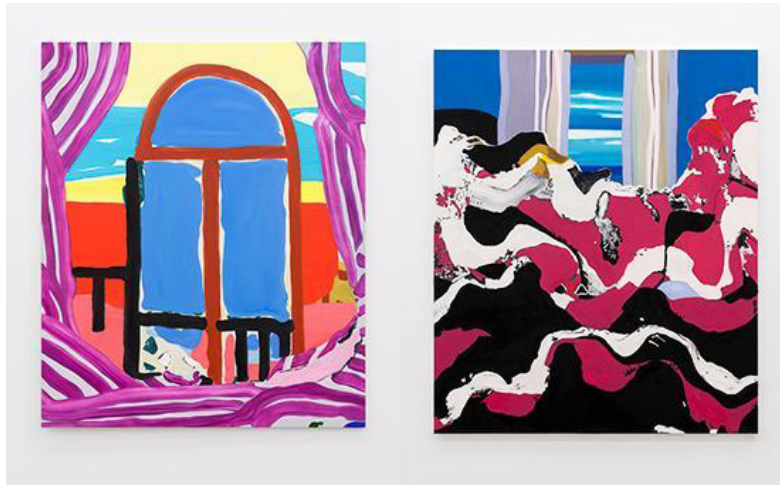


Image (left): Elizabeth McIntosh, *Prop Window*, (2017). Image (right): McIntosh, *Window*, (2017). Photos courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

In a sense, Matisse's *Open Window* achieves something that modern painting in twentieth century cannot get over: the equalization of figure and ground. As a product of design, each gesture is made in relation to the total surface—the plane—not as a consequence of structural demands of linear perspective. To push the relation between Matisse and McIntosh to a greater degree, one can make the comparison with Matisse's *Red Interior: Still-life on a Blue Table* (1947), where irregular lightning shaped zigzags break through the frame and proliferate throughout the interior. What makes McIntosh's *Window* so inexplicable, however, was that within her picture a formless mass had taken over the surface of the picture, as if some strange geological force had crystallised within the interior.

It is not surprising, then, that McIntosh's most recent work (not on show in the VAG's exhibition), imagines painting as a residual or leftover mark. McIntosh's diminutively sized canvases—an anomaly in her typically larger and grander mode—reuses the remaining paint from a brush that she used for other works. A history of painting as leftover, or provisional, aligns closely to Briony Fer's argument of the artwork as indeterminate in her extraordinary catalogue, *Studiowork* (2009), for the Fruitmarket Gallery retrospective on Eva Hesse. The work of the artist's studio—in the case of Hesse, cluttered, with a range of test pieces, studio leavings, and residues—is envisioned as a 'subterranean world,' in Fer's words, which puts pressure on where the work of art begins and where it ends. (11) It is a vision of the artwork as contingent and non-synchronous. In a similar mode, McIntosh negates painting's triumphant history for a vision that is made from leftovers, as if painting was, in fact, [provisional](#) (to use art critic Raphael Rubinstein's concept).

Image: Stephanie Aitken, *Calypso*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Likewise, Stephanie Aitken's contribution to the *Entangled* exhibition constellates a range of painterly gestures to index



the polymorphic capacities of abstraction. Similar to McIntosh's work, the model of painting on display here was one which registers a restless attitude towards its modes of production. Spaces on the canvas were primed and re-primed, layered and erased, lacerated and re-sewn in what resembles a continual state of re-working. One method, which she calls 'spot-priming,' re-applies slabs of linen over formed sections of the support,

which is then subsequently painted over with washed-out layers of paint. The edges of the support were noticeably torn and degraded, as if to exemplify an agitated attitude towards its painterly mode and material.



Image: Patrick Cruz, *Titig Kayumanggi (Brown Gaze)*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and PlugIn ICA.

One of Aitken's studio mates, Steven Hubert, has called her palette a type of 'primordial ooze.' Hubert's observation is keyed, similarly, to the underground currents of painting—what can be envisioned as painting's 'deep time'—a mobile and liquid force that works through its indeterminate prehistory. Even though Aitken associates her work with vitalism, in no way is this a straightforward description of the medium's work and materials. A subterranean current pulses through her work, one that disregards preciousness for an obstinate vision of abstraction and its history. Toronto and Vancouver based painter Patrick Cruz has also echoed this sentiment in his usage of the prehistoric as an influence in his most recent paintings and multimedia works. The prehistoric in this mode, is not



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imagined as a prelapsarian ideal, but as a source infused with comedy and tragedy. 'Nuclear Age to the Stone Age,' as Cruz once [remarked](#).



Image: Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Wil Aballe Art Projects.

These subterranean currents of abstraction also pervade Marina Roy's latest group of paintings recently on display at the Wil Aballe Art Projects (November 16 – December 16, 2017). The subterranean in her series was influenced, Roy tells us, by the representational difficulties of dark matter. As Roy states in the press release to the exhibition, the group of paintings came out of a discussion between artists and physicists on antimatter. 'The matter we see around us,' Roy writes, 'is what is left over from billions of years of creation-annihilation, energy passed between fermion and boson, and other elemental and energy states known and unknown.' And when matter first formed, it also formed a negative imprint — anti-matter. From Roy's inquiry a question still persists: how to provide form to this negative imprint?

Contemporary physicist, Lawrence Krauss, has reminded us how the material of the earth, as well as our own bodies, is made from the dust of exploded stars. Alongside Roy, the most poignant image of painting's relation to the cosmos comes from Helio Oiticica's *Bolide* (1964), or 'fireballs' series. To engage with the material of paint, Oiticica claims, is to work with the dust of Suns. Similar to Oiticica, Roy physically engages with these traditions by grinding her own pigment, predominantly red oxide and bitumen. Instead of poeticizing these materials, or reflecting on the mystical or transcendental tenor of this exercise, Roy emphasizes the contingent and unwieldy nature of her practice: 'I throw some paint down and make a mess,' the artist stated in a recent artist talk.



Image: Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Wil Aballe Art Projects.



Image: Helio Oiticica, *Bolide*, (1964). Photo courtesy of Tate Modern.

What we make of this mess, however, is precisely what is up for grabs. The *Dark Clouds* referenced in Roy's title, then, is at once *metaphorical* as it is *literal*, as much dark to the imagination as it is dark to the physicists' model. For the press release to the show, Roy recognizes her own limitations in finding an appropriate painterly model to address the dark and obscure forms of anti-matter. As

illustrations of physical phenomena therefore, Roy's series fails to convince. Nevertheless, when considered as paintings they are compelling experiments; not compelling as metaphors *per se*, but as studies in the possibilities and limitations of abstraction. This theory of the image advances the argument that pictures do not merely reproduce reality, but rather operate to actively create our reality. Roy's work, like most of the paintings discussed in this review, poses a challenge to the critic and historian: one that forces the writer to match the obscurity of the artwork with eloquence.

Indeed to talk about painting is difficult, but this difficulty is what makes the medium so appealing, so enticing, so worthwhile and urgent as an aesthetic and social project. Like a hand skimming the surface of an ocean, the work of art always holds the capacity to operate as a moment of clarity in the midst of chaos—a moment that persuasively and forcefully conveys the complexity of a life lived. Enigmas and blind spots will always persist, but writing often serves as the most vivid and generous medium to think through

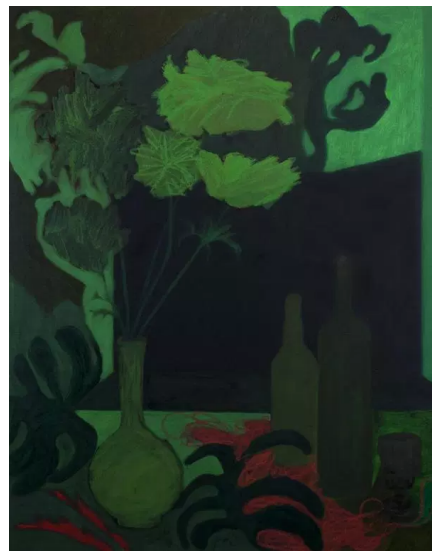


Image: Megan Hepburn, *Craig's List*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist.

the strange sensuousness and obstinacy of everyday life (in which the reception of painting can be a part). If writing has any power at all, it is found in its capacity to act as a spark, or flash, that illuminates and opens up experience and perception. 'What one offers in a description,' art historian Michael Baxandall once remarked, 'is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture.'⁽¹²⁾ Such writing does not simply explain away the artwork's difficulty, but draws us closer to the artwork's inexplicable nature, adding a greater level of complexity to the encounter. To suggest otherwise—that painting exceeds language—forecloses the debate, but also surrenders to cynicism and cliché. The impasse of the current conjuncture demands nothing less than a new theory of painting.

(*) I want to thank Alexandra Fraser, Amy Kazzymerchyk, Justin Devries, Lauren Lavery and Nathan Crompton whose conversations have been influential and encouraging during the writing of this essay.

1. My analysis is informed by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's observations in his article "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm of the Neo-Avantgarde." On the dialectical movements of painting, Buchloh writes: 'Mechanical and organic aspects of the painterly procedure are the two oppositional terms between which modernist painting has shifted since Manet with ever increasing radicality. Whenever the seemingly *mechanical* aspect of the application of pigment on canvas was emphasized, when the brushwork was presented as labor, when the brushstroke appeared as a fragmented unit of repetitive activity, the approach was cyclically hailed or condemned (dependent on ideological and aesthetic investment of the critics and audiences) as the end of painting. Whenever, by contrast, the apparently organic aspects of the painterly procedure were reins tributes, when the brushwork presented itself as a gesture of symbolic liberation, as the scriptural performance of unconscious forces, this position of expressivity was celebrated by the anti-modernist factions as a recovery of the ties between aesthetic, emotional, and sensuous experience against the positivist rationality governing the modernist practice of painting.' See: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Primary Colours a Second Time," in *Formalism and Historicity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 345).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann, (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

3. It is not coincidental, then, that the painter's brush is the central pivot around which Westbank Corporation has positioned its condominium advertisement, *Fight for Beauty*. The director of the short video promoting the show, Lukas Dong, has placed the painter, Tristesse Seeliger, as the privileged subject who is shown during various stages of production. Dong has slowed down each brushstroke to a snail-like pace as if to endow the gesture with divine status and grace. The painter's brush is guided by the words of Shane Koyczan, muzak-performer-and-ad-man-for-hire. Like all ads, Koyczan's words float freely, without intensity.

4. Alongside countless one person shows, these exhibitions have included such examples as *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* (mumok June 04, 2016 – November 06, 2016), *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (MoMA, December 14, 2014 – April 5, 2015), and *Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, May 5 – October 21, 2012). The flurry of exhibitions and the events in Vancouver should therefore be read as a participant within this contemporary trajectory.

5. The phrase 'the traffic in painting' is borrowed from Allan Sekula's discussion of 'the traffic in photography.' See: Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

6. Generally speaking (and looking beyond the exhibition *Entangled*), one could argue that it is a consequence of the evacuation of formal analysis and historical rigour from exhibition making and so-called 'art writing'—and with it the

pertinences of critical judgement—that curators and writers fall back onto contemporary philosophy to undertake all of the text’s heavy lifting. Where immanent critique and historical analysis used to dwell, now stands huge blocks of text taken over by the latest and most *en vogue* philosophy. Read on a local level, this phenomena appears as ever present, permeating press releases, artist talks and exhibition catalogues. Art historian David Joselit has recently called this phenomena, ‘[Art history without art.](#)’

7. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 308.

8. Kluge, Alexander and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*. Translated by Richard Langston. (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2014).

9. Initially, one of the panelists first stated he was ‘not interested in talking about painting’ (even when he was invited to talk on a panel about ‘talking about painting’) and then proceeded to describe his genesis as a painter in art school.

10. Amy Sillman, “On Color,” *Painting beyond itself: The Medium in a Post-medium Condition*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 110.

11. Briony Fer, *Studiowork*, (Glasgow: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009).

12. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

Feature Image: Elizabeth McIntosh, *Window*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

ARTFORUM

Elizabeth McIntosh
CANADA



Elizabeth McIntosh, Black Dress, 2016, oil on canvas, 85 x 75".

It's been fourteen years since Elizabeth McIntosh has had a one-person show in New York. Her work has changed since then, not surprisingly, and twice over. The Canadian painter's work of the early 2000s was strictly abstract—in fact, as I remember, it was strict altogether: rather tight and orderly. A break from the studio following the birth of her daughter shortly after that 2002 show was followed by the first shift: Her paintings started looking looser, faster, more playful. This tendency has only intensified as time has gone on. Her use of flatness, pattern, and geometry remained certifiably modernist, yet the insouciance of her approach kept the work fresh and unpredictable.

The second shift came much more recently: It would no longer be quite accurate to describe the paintings in McIntosh's recent exhibition "Bricks Are Heavy" as abstract. By the same token, though, you'd be hard put to classify her works as figurative, either. Perhaps the best way to describe the new paintings would be to say that they employ imagistic fragments with an

improvisational liberty—a heady sense that anything can happen—that feels like a kind of abstraction by default, although there is no shying away from referentiality. Take *Black Dress* (all works 2016), my favorite piece in this show: It's a mostly black, white, and yellow concatenation of elastic forms that very quickly read, from right to left, as a triad of variations on a single form or figure. The way that it insists on making its viewer scan against the grain of an eye that's been trained by Western textuality to move from left to right is part of the painting's power. The figure itself is that of a tall, slender woman in a long black dress, like something you'd imagine Emily Dickinson wearing, but whose head and feet are edited out at the top and bottom of the canvas, respectively. All that appears of her beyond the dress is a forearm and hand, from which dangles a yellow . . . something. What? That it's rectangular is about all that can be said with certainty. A purse, maybe? Why not—but for some reason I can't help seeing it anachronistically as a cell phone in a Day-Glo cover. The central vertical portion of the painting is occupied by a sort of cut-up remake of the same image, interrupted by a blank white zone that could well be an upside-down negative of the skirt of the same dress—and there's part of that yellow appendage again—while the left shows the same black-clad figure, but upside down (as in a playing card) and a bit smaller in scale, so that there's some blank space at the top (bottom) where the feet ought to be but aren't.

McIntosh's acute sense of rhythm, her ruthless exactness of placement and formal precision, are what make *Black Dress* more than a spirited conundrum, though it is undeniably that too. How does it manage to be severe and exuberant all at once? Each of the six paintings on view in this show was quite distinct from the others—from the Matissean *Windows*, with its slightly dizzying play between interior and exterior space to *Chlose + Agnes*, with its blunt linearity—but all of them engage mind and eye in ways that only painting can. Of late, word has been circulating of a surprising revival of that art in Vancouver, a city whose scene has long been dominated by great Photoconceptualists (Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ian Wallace, and company), and those in the know credit McIntosh with inspiring it. It's easy to see what the excitement's about.

—Barry Schwabsky

SOFTEDGE IS HARDCORE

In response to Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings

Jan Verwoert

Be bold. I beg you. Don't hesitate. It's good this way. And it won't get any better if we make each other believe that there is a long story behind every thing we do to explain why we have to do it in this, not that, particular manner. This is how we do it. For now. Not that it couldn't have been different; of course it could. None of this was decided in advance. There was no plan, no scheme, no set of declared intentions. Who needs those anyway? Plans, schemes and good intentions are fictions we invent to pretend that we know what the next day will bring. The next day will bring the next day. That much is certain, dead certain. And that dead certainty is harder to bear than the false certainties that plans, schemes and long stories provide. So what are you going to do on the next day and the day after that? How do you even begin a single new day, when one day has just passed and another is about to follow? You perform a simple act, that is yet a radical leap of faith: you return and pick up where you left off. In your thinking, in your painting, in your life. It is the boldest thing to do: you resume and continue. You repeat some things, you vary others, you modulate a great deal, you gradually change.

Changes grow. Growth is amazing to behold. It occurs around the edges. Edges form a horizon. The horizon of our experience is a plane with sensitive edges. As it unfolds and spreads itself out, one plane will touch—and be touched by—others. When this happens the temperature of its colour will heat up the others or cool them down and its weight will be carried by others or be the basis for others to rest on. Mutuality does not require symmetry. Asymmetry much rather is the milieu in which mutuality grows, as things never quite fall into place but keep shifting, sliding, rearranging themselves in patterns that stay the same only in that they keep differing from themselves, slightly but decisively, over time. To linger, however, asymmetry needs to be re-engendered out of its own peculiar logic of aligning the unalignable, continuously.

This is a portrait of painting. It seeks to picture the spirit in which a particular series of paintings are made. Learning from looking at them, it wants to render the implications tangible that painting in this manner may have for living life and thinking thoughts: an attunement to the experience of asymmetry and a readiness to, out of this experience, still, dare, boldly to continue, modulate.

Yet, even if you dare to continue for years on end, that doesn't mean that things ever get any easier. They don't. And they probably never will. Problems you struggle with on one day will likely present themselves again, if not right away, then soon enough. Facing the reality of your own affects and affiliations, this is what it's going to be. To live with this understanding is tough. So people seek relief in the belief that long stories, resolute decisions or masterpieces can set things straight, for once and for all. As if somebody, some idea, some image, some stroke of genius would present you with an escape hatch through which you could exit into an untouchable place. *As if...*

As if we could control our experiences from the point of view of some superintendend managerial intelligence. *As if* affects and affiliations were assets to be administered at will. *As if* we could live *as if* we lived. Absurd! *As ifs* are buffers. Why not be bold and renounce the false relief they seem to offer? It's the modernist intuition: to renounce all *as ifs* and hope for life to be better without illusions, schemes and stories. *As if* there were some other, some miraculously more real reality we could break through to! What a contradiction in terms! To make it seem *as if* we could abolish all *as ifs*. *As if* the very words on paper and the paints on canvas that we use to conjure up the illusion of that other reality would not constantly belie its very possibility!

It's a blunt paradox, the modernist infatuation with the mirage of the real. But perhaps it should not trouble us any more. Because it may no longer be (if it ever was) necessary to summon the spectre of the *miraculously real* in order to dispel those illusions. Having grown up a little, we might not need this spectre's support. The spirit of the *mundane real* could in fact prove to be a much stronger ally. After all, it is the challenge of facing the profane demands of each single day, one day after another, of painting a painting, layer by layer, or thinking a thought through step by step, that most effectively puts all ploys, good intentions and illusions to the test. To take on that challenge means to confront living, painting, thinking *boldly*.

But what does it mean to face the mundane boldly? In their deflationist manner, the schools of Angloamerican pragmatism have argued that the rock bottom of reality is the world of hard facts, common languages, flat surfaces and basic logical operations. As if the simple matters of life were ever that easy to reckon with! As if the existential problems philosophy has grappled with for centuries could be solved if one only described them in a more literal-minded key! As if the task of structuring the immanent space and time of (a) painting could be solved if one made all the edges in it look a bit harder! As if hard edges were more suited for touching the putative rock bottom of painting than soft ones! Why would anyone assume that literal minds were touched by philosophical questions, or canvasses made of rock?

In fact, in the flow of everyday life, the hardest thing may be to even recognize when you hit an existential obstacle, since its edges may at first feel so soft that the initial impact hardly registers. Tips of icebergs

tend to melt in with their surroundings so as to only be recognizable to someone experienced enough to intuitively grasp the full dimension of their bulk. Being experienced in such matters has little to do with expertise in the operative logic of hard facts. Such a logic only teaches you how things work when they do; when they don't, it leaves you at a loss. And why would we assume that they ever did just work according to plan? As if there was a working order to life! Just as we, strange creatures that we are, don't just "work." We are more beautiful than that, and much more difficult. So if there is to be any "work," any work of art or thinking, that is to testify, to truly testify to how things and us happen to be, it won't be a work that just works according to this or that order. It will be a work that will trip itself up. A work that will fall out of step with itself ever so slightly but still—while boldly facing the profane realities of things—keep the make-up of its structures soft enough to respond to and resonate with the touch of something real, when the real won't work.

How do you do this? Boldly face things, yet softly allow for them to touch you? It's not a matter of singular *decisions*. There is not *one* moment in which you can decide that herewith your life, work and thinking have changed to be miraculously more attuned to the assumed order of things. Decisions—plans, ploys, declared intentions—can only determine what kinds of future experiences you expose yourself to, and what kinds you exclude from your life. Decisions are a means of filtering down the breadth of experiences. They cut off the uncontrollable overtones that life's contingencies produce. Filters may be a necessary means for emotional survival, but they do not respond to the erratic oscillations that the unpredictable joys and pains of mundane life generate. To make those resonate you need to play with the filter, to open and close it while modulating its resonance, so as to let the tone of your tunes slowly sweep across the subfrequencies and overtones that lie outside the realm of what can be controlled, planned or plotted.

So there are decisions. Because maybe there must be. But there are also modulations. And these allow us to respond to the often barely perceptible and unpredictable turns, twists, shifts and sweeps that characterize the motion of life as it continues in its ever-so-slight transformation, day in, day out. Only a language of form that models the modulation of its vocabulary on the immanent dynamics of this continuous motion can in the end actually testify to how things unfold, over time.

So for there to be boldness, there may have to be clear decisions about which concepts, expressions, colours and shapes to use and which to avoid. And for there to be modulation, there has to be a certain ease in their use, an intuitive fluidity in the way vowels are molded and consonants rhythmicized, how colours are lightened up or toned down and lines are drawn individually or repeatedly to create structures. Yet to have that particular kind of boldness—the one that embraces soft edges—determination is not the only quality that counts, just as keeping its flow won't guarantee modulation in its depth and range. To dare to

soften edges to make them undulate to the rhythm of a sweeping motion is truly bold, when the motion of that sweep is edgy enough to dip into mellow patches and then to hit sudden peaks again.

Rendering such a motion cannot be accomplished in a singular gesture. It's not something you can just get right, first take, once and for all. That particular edgy, flowing rhythm, that shape of boldly soft motions, will only gradually emerge when you continue modulating those motions, in time, over time. Because these motions capture time in motion. They *are* time captured in motions, duration inscribed in a practice that is bold enough to let itself be touched by the passing of time. As you return and pick up where you left off, over and over again, the traces of time will be recorded into the immanent memory of your medium. A painting painted on one particular day and continued on another particular day will look different from paintings painted on other days. Just as words written in the morning are different from words written in the evening of the same day. Immersed in the particularities of the days of our lives, it is only through reiteration that we can aspire to gradually extrapolate what it is that we might have meant, felt, desired or wanted to say at any moment in time. So we take a leap of faith, resume, continue, reiterate.

Please look at these thoughts as a portrait. They are an abstraction modelled on the paintings of Elizabeth McIntosh. They seek to mimic, in words, the character, spirit, attitude, humour and philosophy that are inherent to her way of painting: a philosophy of being bold, that is, of boldly going beyond the false belief in plans, ploys and declared intentions to expose painting to the profane reality of hard things with soft edges, ever-undulating shapes and barely controllable resonances. McIntosh's paintings are so philosophical in their very form. She doesn't content herself with treating them as exercises in tastefully resolving individual compositions, but instead continues unfolding the implications of particular structural intuitions by reiterating and modulating these intuitions.

For this is philosophy: a continuous elaboration on structural intuitions of how things come together and fall apart. You can see it happen in McIntosh's paintings, physically, painterly and figuratively; spiritually, if you will. The manner in which she treats the material potentials of painting to evoke space and time is alive with a particular spirit: the structures that organize the space of the canvas and direct the gaze across the image at a particular speed, exciting the gaze's motion or slowing it down, are rendered in a particular manner, with a particular humour. They boldly communicate a desire to structure and rhythmicize, yet—and this is crucial—without ever bluntly asserting the existence of a structure or a rhythm as a given. McIntosh refrains from summoning the spectre of some celestial grammar of painting, a grammar that would miraculously reveal itself if only she painted all her edges hard enough. None of the structural elements in her pictures comport themselves with the air of heaven-sent geometrical authority. Neither do they lay claim to the mind-numbing assertiveness of brute facts. The triangulated fields, triangle waves,

boxy squares or flocks of circles that structure, rhythmicize and traverse her paintings are where they are to do what they do right where they are. But this fact in itself is not simply a fact but a lively motion. The motion of their unfolding follows no pre-established rules but initiates and builds up its own momentum on the canvas, right there in front of you. The forms exist in a state that is neither absolute grace nor mere facticity, but rather a state of motion that carefully opens up the potential of things being either thus or different through the bold embrace of them actually being both thus and different.

Bold enough that they never apologize for being in motion. Yet blunt they are not. Because the patterns waver and undulate as they expand to—in varying degrees, wholly or partially—cover the expanses of the canvas. If there is a boldness to their presence on the canvas caused by the visible absence of any celestial justification for their being thus, there is also a tentativeness to the way they proceed to occupy the space they structured. They do not follow the territorial imperative of imposing rigid grids on the painted fields to forcefully claim these spaces as conquered. Neither are they necessarily peaceful; at times they visibly battle each other or negotiate their coexistence on the canvas in terms that don't seem altogether amicable. There is quite a lot of pushing and shoving going on sometimes. But not always. In other moments you can sense the inherent social intelligence of triangles building the architecture of their conviviality by touching each other on all sides. Their society is founded on mutual touchability.

At any rate, you see the shapes work it out between themselves, as if in real time (though real time here may span many days, weeks or months, as the latent presence of many overpainted layers evinces). Overpainting in McIntosh's work tends to be no slick job. The traces of time passing are neither fully cleaned up nor stylized to seem mysterious. Some colours are allowed to become as smudgy as colours get when they undergo many modulations; others openly delight in their luminescence, as if they had only seconds ago been freshly born into the visible world. These colours are almost brazen in how they take pleasure in their existence. Yet they are never blunt. Just like those waves of triangles, they neither present themselves as emanations of some pure logic, as primary colours would, nor do they merely seek to grab your attention like the blaring colours of tabloid front pages. The sole principle of their boldness is the pleasure of being thus: bright orange, smudgily purple or tentatively greenish.

This testifies to a particular attitude towards the power to create. In McIntosh's paintings this power of creation is never simply interpreted as a power to decide upon the shape, placement and order of things. It is always also—in fact, in the paintings' boldest moments it tends to be—realized in the act of letting things be the way they turned out to be. It takes some courage to handle things that way: to not force them into being and make it seem as if some authoritative rationale of ostentatiously rigorous decisions demanded that force. Through handling structure and rhythm thus, McIntosh renounces the lie that there are higher

ends justifying painterly means. Yet this renunciation only prepares the ground for an engagement with the possibilities of painting as a form of structural thinking that is made more audacious, more bold if you will, because it proceeds without the safety net of a rigid grid suggesting indubitable law and order. Structural thinking in McIntosh's work truly is a philosophical elaboration of structural intuitions, exposing what structures of thinking are and can be: not laws, but intuitions.

For this is the lie that propelled so much bluntly assertive work during and, even more so, after modernism (fetishizing its presumed achievements in retrospect): the lie that there was a law to how to do things and that strong work was needed to lay it down. A boy's dream of imitating the voice of the father speaking the law! What a mistake to confuse this pathetic stance with a dedication to artistic rigour! Being rigorous, being modernist, being bold—it is now becoming clear—has little to do with such male adolescent posturing. It is becoming clear precisely because artists like McIntosh are formulating a different philosophy of what being rigorous, being modernist, being bold can mean and what it, for starters, may have always meant. Why was it necessary to write manifestoes, if not because the intuitions that most modernists were seeking to advance seemed both too tentative in the early stages of their development and too bold in their concentrated form?

The turn towards abstraction in painting is an exemplary case in point. What is abstract painting in its early stages but a series of tentative experiments in visual boldness? Not knowing how to fill a canvas after they had abolished the pretext of pictorial representation, early abstract painters tentatively tried out various bold gestures, claiming basic organic or geometric shapes as possible subjects. It is precisely the initial challenge, joy, absurdity and potential gonzo humour (think Klee) of these ungrounded experiments in abstraction that McIntosh brings back by daring to tentatively be boldly abstract. The decisive difference, however, is that she does so unapologetically, without pretending to lay down laws, recognizing instead the full potential of abstraction in its principle of ungroundedness.

With no celestial laws to ground it, the basis for abstraction that McIntosh proposes in her work is the practice of its continuation, elaboration and modulation in the face of the challenges that abstraction encounters as a mundane material practice. Her works raise no false hopes of a final escape or ultimate solution. Instead, she boldly confronts the fact that, no matter how often you try, fail or succeed, the basic crux of convincingly structuring a canvas with abstract forms will never resolve itself easily. The struggle of taking on this task is tangible in the irony of attempting it anyway, and doing so boldly. Yet part and parcel of these bold attempts is the philosophical humour inherent to the way in which McIntosh allows things to find a different rhythm of coming together and falling apart when they don't just work out according to plan. To try to make things work yet also allow for them to not work is a form of being bold in

being tentative, and tentative in being bold. It is a different philosophy of abstraction, of what it might have been, what it now is and what it can still be. That formulating this philosophy is a matter, not of momentary decisions, but of continuous elaboration and modulation is an understanding that McIntosh casually but insistently advances. Could you imagine her work ending in one final picture? No. Would you want it to? Certainly not. Because there is more, there is always, again and again, a little more than one had ever thought before. The joy of following McIntosh's work thus lies, among many other things, in realizing that there can be more, and that therefore whatever is seen and thought at a given moment in time, in and through the work, is to be continued...

UNTITLED (WORKS ON PAINTINGS ON PAPER)

Monika Szeweczk

ONE. Whenever I walk into Elizabeth McIntosh's studio I am a little afraid. Chances are high that one of my favorite compositions from the last visit, usually a new one she had just began that felt fresh and direct and distributed colours and shapes with unapologetic, somewhat awkward umph, is by now likely to be painted over, layered, recomposed, and reworked beyond recognition. I am never, or rarely, sure about the final painting—the memory of its first or early state is too strong. But memory is a funny thing in the experience of works of art, and the strength of it is actually always already the strength of the pain of memory loss. Perhaps this is especially important to note, given that the artist herself has increasingly articulated the criteria for her work (and that of certain colleagues) as a matter of the facticity and transparency of decision-making. This linguistic reframing also allows for a rethinking of staid, increasingly meaningless terminology, like “abstraction.” Indeed, the project is thereby pushed towards more subjective and even political terms, if not ends. And yet, as hard as I look, I cannot say that the process of getting from A to B is really that transparent for me in the final work. What I experience are layers that cover unseen depths. This process and the pangs of fear (say of a better picture underneath) that it engenders—is perfectly embodied in the relatively small, recent canvas entitled, *The Brute*.

ONE, TWO. Most of McIntosh's paintings, however, are not so suggestively titled. Or when bracketed qualifiers accompany Untitled, the emphasis is on a “just the facts ma'am” notation of the colours (and sometimes shapes) used. Red, Purple, Blue, Orange, Yellow, Green, Silver, Black—these are the bracketed protagonists. Call it the deadpan suspension of a constant struggle to provide just enough verbal information, to let the paint do its work and not let language skew the viewer. But this is something that does not sit easily with a writer. I recall a moment when I resisted the lack of meaningful words, and in a studio visit actually misheard *Red, Blue and Purple* as *Red, Blue and the People!* Lodged somewhere deep inside my psyche was a notion that paintings this bright and this big had a kind of public function (one that the artist did not embrace fully). And this particular painting, to my eyes at least, veered very close to the representation of a very public realm. An uneven geodesic expanse, composed so as to recompose

continually in front of the eyes, covered most of the canvas, but not all. The reticular pattern, spread across the full width and about nine tenths of the height of the painting, was strangely propped up on (what looked like) brown, blue, red, pink and black rounded stumps, painted at the bottom of the canvas. Beyond the stumps, one can glimpse a totally different painting: a red, orange and purple haze, almost a landscape at sunset, whose presence periodically transformed the entire scene into something I could call “landscape with abstract billboard.” oops! Here is that pesky word again—abstraction—revealing itself to be a representational element.

ONE, TWO, THREE. To paint like McIntosh does and to insist on not calling it abstraction, puts some pressure on the viewer, not to mention the writer, to come up with new terms. In part, I’m going to reject the notion of facticity and transparency floated by the artist and her colleagues (in an unpublished conversation I’ve had the privilege to read) because, for one, I do not think the moves are so obvious, indeed much is hidden *beyond recognition*; two, paint is anything but a transparent medium; and three, it seems important here to go against the grain of what the artist is saying and to offer some resistance. Paradoxically perhaps, this is the way to create some parallels between how (I think) Elizabeth McIntosh paints and how this text is written. It all feels a bit like the work of a musician improvising—one who continues to realize how difficult it is *not to* fall into a familiar, scripted tune.

FOR ONCE, SOMETHING NEW. Abstract painting is relatively old. This is to say that most non-representational images today tend to look like representations of something we now comfortably call abstraction (though it also had names like non-objective art in the early part of the last century). Mary Heilmann’s work is thus often introduced as a funky loosening of Piet Mondriaan’s grid, before it is celebrated for its own frankness and freshness. And this raises the question of what tradition best befits a contemporary work. If Elizabeth McIntosh is fond of Heilmann (indeed she introduced me to the painter way back when we first began to talk about painting on a regular basis), she is *not* fond of quotation. Heilmann’s path to freshness is more of a crutch, something to try to forget, all the while proverbially aiming to hang in the same room. I get the sense when visiting McIntosh’s studio that comparisons to other artists present a problem rather than the point of departure. This is in direct counterpoint to much post-conceptual work, which innovates by piling on the references. In McIntosh’s work, the post-modernist escape from originality into the reassuring world of nods and allusions that inscribe one’s work into one’s chosen tradition is tripped up. She works with the energy of this shaky ground (and even of the full stumble or fall). The artist’s unwillingness to admit success too quickly, indeed, her obdurate insistence on renewing her composition to the point of non-recognition (even mild terror) on the part of regular visitors to the studio, replaces the logic of novelty with the threat of restless renewal. Few of McIntosh’s paintings are new, *once*. Indeed, they may be new several times over, and what remains is only that composition which achieves a threat of de-composition.

IN OTHER WORDS. Searching for a foil to the conventional notion of composition, I'm tempted to compare McIntosh's process to improvisation. But in the back of my mind are the words of Mina Totino, McIntosh's fellow painter and my fellow writer, who once remarked to me (when I floated the notion of improvisation in relation to McIntosh's work) that she doubted this was a good paradigm for painting since you cannot improvise alone. I would agree in so far as you need to have someone or at least something other to listen and respond to, and more importantly to resist, in order to make a peep, to make a mark, to begin to improvise. And this something else may be difficult to detect inside the work of a painter who is not fond of quotation or even representation. But what if that something to listen to is the paint itself? In my experience of free jazz improvisations—say of Peter Brötzmann's wild windy experiments - not only is the idea of composition contradicted, but also the idea of harmony among players. They no longer really call themselves a band, but an ensemble, which has a slightly looser feel to it. The musicians definitely listen to each other, but often it feels like they are waiting for a break to sound a different and a dissident chord. One will out-do another, resist and compete; albeit, this is done with just enough nonchalance to make it friendly and also make it sound like he, and sometimes she, is momentarily the only player in the room. The requirement of not being alone is complicated by this lonestar aspect of improvisation. And it is perhaps with this strange tension, that improvisation begins to inform McIntosh's paintings. It is as if she is laying down colours so as to watch them out-sing each other and if by chance they hang together like an ensemble, they cannot forsake the autonomy of parts.

BETTER STILL. Improvisation comes from the Latin *improvisus*, or in [not] + *provisus* [foreseen or provided]. But if you look at it, improvisation begins with the same letters as improvement. The semantic link is weak as the latter derives from the Latinate *emprouwer* "to turn to profit," but, however im-probably, the terms mix well in McIntosh's paintings. For all this talk of improvisation as de-composition, the horizon is never a bad painting, but a *better* one. Moreover in McIntosh's work, the sense that things could be different can lead to rather radical differentiation. If the geodesic matrix dominated a lot of work ca. 2004/2005, this was not the only thing on the artist's mind. The one exception I cannot get out of mine, although it is out of sight in this catalogue, is an experiment with a blocky tree motif so black, blunt, leafless (though not lifeless!) and downright un-natural as to make me wonder how the artist viewed her new habitat of Vancouver or whether, for all its famed foliage, the views outside the studio were what mattered. I only once saw similar, chthonic specimen in the real world, but far from super-natural British Columbia, outside a military academy in Kaliningrad. I am still curious whether the tree paintings disappeared because they were too real or not real enough—i.e. if they were ever meant to re-present anything or use a representational motif to underscore the rejection of painting as a representational medium. Words cannot preserve what has been painted over, which makes me wonder about their usefulness as representational media. How

better to use them in relation to this artist's work? Of late, McIntosh's canvases seem increasingly inflected with a parallel practice of paper collage (underway for some years, but rising to the fore of late). Working with coloured or geometrically patterned paper allows for surprise and quick experiments with shape and colour combinations that the slow-drying medium of paint resists. But if a change of mind is rendered more quickly with the dry, light medium of paper, it is also more decisive. Once you make a cut, then set a shape in place with glue or tape, a certain logic sets in—one that is more prone to the laws of physics than the fluid medium of paint. To continue changing things, you might have to start again. Recently, McIntosh installed a wall-sized collage at Goodwater gallery in Toronto. There was about one week to work and after several adjustments on large chunks of (this time un-cut) coloured paper, the entire thing was taken down in the last evening. All needed to be reformed and improved. In the end, McIntosh's is never alone, always in a kind of friendly conflict with her materials. And I suspect that her paintings are large—and the collage needed to be unwieldy and wall sized—to remind her that each work must have a mind of its own.

AUTONOMOUS AND EXEMPLARY. With the sudden compositional shifts, the restless refusal of visual harmony, but also the refusal of clear refusals (of representation for instance, given the temporary appearance of the aforementioned trees and one elementary table, to name my personal favorites), it might seem strange to discuss style in Elizabeth MacIntosh's paintings. But style is something I'm compelled to speak about, recalling Susan Sontag's last words in her essay on the subject (an essay which is mainly concerned with literature, but which holds especially for the kind of painting McIntosh makes, as it proceeds from a refusal to separate style and content): "Whenever speech or movement or behavior or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having a "style," and being both autonomous and exemplary." What makes McIntosh's paintings interesting is that—in the absence of any sense of what is in fact direct, useful or insensible (after all anything goes in painting and in art in general so the norm from which we may diverge is rather elusive)—her work still embodies a sense of deviation, albeit from itself. It is as if the work (and the artist) was signaling away from a signature look, away from what we might conventionally identify with style. This restless deviation has become more palpable in a recent series of smaller canvases (likely chosen to allow for swifter completion, swifter variation), each of which seems to be testing altogether different compositional elements. Autonomous, but are they exemplary? What might be different in McIntosh's sense of style, from that described by Sontag, is that the distinct works, which definitely aim at autonomy, cannot really be viewed as cases in point, cannot really be seen as examples. If you look at one (letter-sized, intricate, geometric) painting by Tomma Abts (a close colleague of McIntosh's from art school), you are looking at an example of a painting program. The same could be said of works by Jutta Koether, or Mina

Totino, or Silke Otto-Knapp, who work in series and have much more of a signature vocabulary of motifs and gestures. These are some painters McIntosh admires. But her own work does something very different.

THE MOTHER OF ALL STYLES. This is what I first thought of calling the text. I knew I wanted to say something about this strange thing we call style, which might be compared to “having a voice,” the embodiment of distinction. The question I kept coming back to is whether, in her constant and often drastic deviations from her own work, McIntosh is looking for the ultimate style or attempting to master ever more idioms. But she bristled at this phrase, partly because the mother metaphor sounded cliché to an actual mother. And, to be sure, maybe too much has been made of the fact that she is a painter and a woman. So I buried it—this issue of what it means to paint as a woman is, for me, best addressed by the question of what it means to paint an abstraction (yes, I still really like this pesky term). For the record, my sense of “mother” was more Beastie Boys than baby boom—i.e. *mothr*. There was the duplicity of the phrase, but ultimately I wanted to evoke something of the *baaaad* attitude of the paintings. But evoking anything of them in words is bound to present a problem. So what to do next? Stop writing? Not quite. After all, that would mean—forgive the extended metaphor—throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

NAME-NEEDS. Some weeks ago, and some weeks after I had written the first paragraphs of this essay, McIntosh sent me three new titles of three new paintings. It is not important what these titles were. What is important is that she sent them to me without the images, and with an aside “oh and by the way - I have a few new paintings that have titles—no brackets even! only because they seemed to name themselves...” The question of titles had become almost a game—almost a joke—between us. I would come into the studio, look at a new work, or a couple, and promptly ask: what is it called? There is something about abstract paintings that makes titles all-important. A title can change everything, much more so than when, say, seeing a painting of a cat, you find out it is called “Queen.” In such a case, you get a sovereign cat. But the cat remains. The title is subject to the representation. But in an abstract painting, you always direct the eye with the word. Untitled has become the conventional decree of freedom for interpretation, the primacy of the eye, of the experience. Now imagine if *The Brute* was actually called *Untitled*, would it still produce a sense of a work of art that names itself, that has a mind of its own? Would it still meet the viewer as a body meets another body? We are talking about a relatively small painting, so the title is bigger than the canvas. The name does something physical. And it is perhaps only when this happens that it is necessary.

KILOS. In writing about Elizabeth McIntosh’s work, you begin to weigh your words. Each word is a world, especially when applied to paint. The choice to let paint be paint, to let it be a colour first and foremost, still proceeds in words: *Untitled (red, blue and purple)*. The choice to let a painting measure up to something in the world, or in the mind—a brute, a swoop, spider legs, the people—is the choice to forsake absolute autonomy, to give up the facticity of “what you see is what you see,” for something more messy and potentially more blinding. The question becomes one of how to create a balance where the painting and the words carry equal weight.

NEOLOGISMS. “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” These words come from the King in *Hamlet* (III, iii, 100-103). They fly into my head while I’m considering the down-to-earth aspect of McIntosh’s painting, which is a kind of thinking that can escape words. For an wordsmith, it is sometimes hell to confront the world of things untitled. And this, not because of some stubborn *horror vacui*. It is not so much that one finds the work void of meaning, but that one confronts the stranger question of the emptiness of words. One medium for thinking is being fundamentally challenged by another. In many ways, this is why I am drawn to thinking and writing about painting, especially when it appears (what I still prefer to call) abstract. In the past, I’ve proposed that, in a world of conceptual (and therefore language-based) art making, the practice of painting remains more fundamentally psychedelic. This has nothing to do with whether or not it assumes swirly seventies patterns (i.e. “codes” for the mind-expanding promise of hallucinogens). Rather, I am curious about the ability of this morphing medium to manifest (*dellen*) changing states of mind (*psyche*). Aldus Huxley (one of two men who coined the term psychedelic) spoke of his excitement at discovering how the bond between words and thoughts can be relaxed, not just under the influence of LSD, but under the influence of a Vermeer. Let’s not forget, however, that Huxley was first and foremost a writer. The idea was not to stop with words altogether, but to find new ones (such as psychedelic) that might render more clearly the condition of the mind.

BOOM. Ever since painting “came back” with the market boom of the naughties (2000s), it has been called “conservative”—for many observers it is the *quintessential commodity*, paid for by funny money from secondary and tertiary derivative trades. It cannot be political because it’s an old, spent medium. It cannot be political because it’s lapped up by the speculators of the brave new world. Behind this critique is a very narrow view of painting and of the commodity. Today, you can commodify anything and the more immaterial (and the more generic) the image, the better it seems to sell. Porno-graphy (quite literally the most bought and sold of images, as porno is the Greek term for bought, purchased, sold, etc.) is an image form increasingly rooted in immateriality, albeit with a twist. Both the inability to connect with *and* the lack of desire for “real bodies” produces a market in their (pixilated) images. If painting used to be a matter of images, it is now increasingly a matter of matter. And if any new task may be assigned to good old painting today, it is surely the resistance to (or at least “a certain deviation from”) the army of images that (for all their representation of body parts) have no bodies of their own; images that flicker in, out and around virtual space—a bit like the buckets of money without a gold backing. Perhaps this has something to do with the way McIntosh treats paintings (also paper) as matter, first and foremost, or as bodies that confront other bodies, with minds of their own.

BAM!

Divided Pathways: Painting's Choice

An interview with Elizabeth McIntosh

Interview by Robert Enright

In the following interview, Elizabeth McIntosh expresses her admiration for the ingenuity of Paul Klee. Her assessment is that “the quantity of his exploration made a lot of pretty weird paintings.”

She, too, is ingenious and has made some pretty weird paintings of her own. The Vancouver-based artist has a work from 2007 called *Untitled (odd shapes with green borders)* which looks exactly like its name, and another from the following year, *Warm and Cold*, in which the irregular lines and awkwardly placed rectangles on a bright yellow ground make you think that BC Binning took a trip on the Psychedelic Ferry. These are deliberate moves. McIntosh is a highly intelligent painter whose predisposition is to be on the lookout for new ways of using colour and form. “I never want to fully know what I am going to have at the end because then I wouldn't need to make the painting.” She is especially interested in a wilfully induced pictorial alienation in which what she sees is what she hasn't seen before.

The other side of the perceptual coin is that like all serious painters, she is also heavily invested in the history of the medium. She has always looked to other painters for something that could play a

catalytic role in her own practice, something as insignificant as a gesture, a colour or a line taken from a sticker book on modern artists. One example I had in mind in connection with McIntosh's *Warm and Cold* was a painting by BC Binning called *Device for Aesthetic Response*, 1954. This is precisely the way she uses paintings by other artists; they are devices that provoke an aesthetic response.

More recently her looking has led her into the studios of a number of modernist giants, particularly Picasso and Matisse. She indicates a conscious engagement with their subjects, palette and sensuality. She is attracted to what she calls “the breadth of experimentation” in the period of high Modernism, a weight and range she has found wanting in the generations that followed.

McIntosh first referenced Picasso in *Beginner's Luck*, 2011, and she picks him up again in *Picasso's Dream*, 2012, and in *Picasso Nude*, 2014, although before she makes this painting her own she filters the Spaniard's gaze through George Condo, with a pink wink at de Kooning.

But it is Matisse who more thoroughly occupies her painterly imagination. A painting like *Girl*, 2014, has the awkward delicacy of one of his Cambodian dancers and *Big Lady*, 2014, suggests an attenuated



Elizabeth McIntosh, *Sit and Spin*, 2014, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Scott Massey.

line that the French painter would admire. He would be equally approving of the unusual way that she fragments the composition. Her lady retains a fleshy languor, the full appreciation of which is impeded by the red shape outlined in black that sits uncomfortably where the woman's armpit would be. Her anatomy is thoroughly skewed; the indentation under her breast assumes the character of a pubic cleft, and suddenly Matisse's odalisque morphs into Duchamp's *Étant donnés*. *Ballsy*, the title of an oil on canvas from 2013, sums up her process and her attitude; it both recognizes a painting with many tributaries as well as articulates an admirably abusive understanding of the uses of art history. In *Conversation*, 2013, McIntosh lifts some patterns and motifs from Matisse but her title more directly references *The Conversation*, a painting begun in 1908, finished four years later, and now in the collection of The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The painting shows Matisse and his wife in morning dress on either side of a window that looks onto a garden with flower-covered ponds. In an earlier painting called *From a Fauve Landscape*, 2011, McIntosh's marks and ground resemble Matisse's garden. The conversation she is having with art, then, is a polyphonic one, as likely to talk through the fabric designs of Sonia Delaunay as the dreams of Picasso.

Not surprisingly, McIntosh rejects any sense of regret in the notion of the road not taken. For her, painting offers a limitless number of possibilities. "There are so many routes you could take," she says. "It is like a path that keeps dividing and each new path is a new canvas."

The following interview was conducted by phone to the artist's home in Vancouver on June 23, 2014.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I'm intrigued by the idea that you start a painting with a quotation from a painter you admire.

ELIZABETH MCINTOSH: That is something that developed more in the last few years. It started with the discovery of these sticker books and then morphed into different processes and ways of using other material. Before that my process was more straightforward. When I was initially making the geometric paintings there was a base vocabulary that was repeated in all the paintings. The starting point was knowing that the composition would be built out of particular forms. I was also looking at other paintings I had made, so the previous painting would inform the next one. But what really started the ball rolling was finding the sticker books, which extracted elements from existing paintings in particularly interesting ways. It was also a way to continue to be excited and inspired about painting. Getting lots of new stuff

to look at was a great way to generate a whole new body of work.

I know you have been interested in Sonia Delaunay, Paul Klee and Matisse, among many others. How do you choose the artists?



The rediscovery of Paul Klee came through the sticker books. He is interesting because of the variety of his transitions. There wasn't a single motif that was repeated. There is so much play within his body of work and no signature style, except for the quantity of exploration. He made a lot of pretty weird paintings. Matisse is a steady source and Delaunay interests me because of her work in the decorative arts, where she designed fabric and costumes for performances.

When you do *Taking a Walk*, 2011, the word missing from the naming is "line." "Taking a line for a walk" is Klee's famous definition of drawing. The title came from the fact that I was tracing the edges of the support with a dotted line. Defining the edges seemed like a nice way to explore the framework of the painting. The titles are not necessarily descriptive.

In *Technique*, 2011, you use exactly the same palette on the outer edges of the composition as in *Taking a Walk*. Do you decide on your colours ahead of time?

No. Those paintings from that year were the first smaller paintings I ever made. The simple challenge was, Can I make a small painting? They all went through quite a few changes. I remember *Talking*

1. *Untitled (composition with round feet)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photographs: Scott Massey.

2. *Untitled (windows)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist.

3. *Cut Out*, 2009, photo backdrop paper, pushpins, 11 x 37 feet, 15 x 18 feet. Courtesy the artist.

a *Walk* had a glaze on top that was brushed out and then blurred. Sometimes I'll blend the paint out before I leave the studio in case I don't like it. I don't want the material of the paint to accumulate. But the colours are not planned. *Technique* is based on the inside of a basket from a Bonnard still life.



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It is interesting that a number of the painters you admire come from that moment in high Modernism when all hell seemed to be breaking loose. Is that a period you find particularly attractive?

Over the last couple of years that has definitely been my focus because the breadth of experimentation seems so much more exciting than what came later.

Is predictability your biggest enemy in the studio; you don't want to repeat yourself, or do something that either you or the viewer would expect you to do?

That is a good way to phrase it. Though the larger paintings in the body of work I recently exhibited in Toronto are made from a plan which is a completely new and radical shift for me. The two types of work in "Fairy Bread," my show at Diaz, played off each other. There were small, completely improvised paintings that were made quite quickly and with no conscious reference. I was just exploring moving the paint around. Then there were larger works with elements that were cut out, taken out of a context, and repositioned on a new support. I enjoyed both ways of working. I could have the planning aspect and there was still a lot of unpredictability. Each painting had a plan but I didn't know if the plan would work, so a lot of assessment happened as I cycled through things. I never want to fully know what I am going to have at the end because then I wouldn't need to make the painting. But having a subject or a model to base the painting on has been a relief because the vocabulary over the last few years has expanded to the point where there is no way to gather it all together. It was feeling a little overwhelming.

The American novelist William Faulkner said he wanted to get the entire world into one sentence. I gather from what you are saying that there is a whole world in your pictorial imagination that you want to get down, but you recognize the impossibility of getting it onto one canvas. So, do you have to fragment the vision and realize it in a series of works?

Yes, because there are so many routes you could take. It is like a path that keeps dividing and each new path is a new canvas. I admire artists like Giorgio Morandi, who choose one subject that they explore for a long period of time. That seems kind of perfect, but painting can do so many things that limiting it feels wrong for me.

Jan Verwoert says in an essay on your work that your thinking is intuitive. Do you operate primarily by intuition rather than through the application of an idea?

Yes. I always find it difficult to even find words to have a discussion about my work. At the outset, it's definitely not about the idea and that's why this new group of paintings, which were planned, came as such surprise. Typically, I start with a blank canvas and an almost blank mind, and without pre-conceiving the painting in any way. Those quotations you asked about were chosen at the moment just before beginning a painting—with a quick glance at

my table of source material, something will catch my eye that will kick-start the painting. Whatever is first put there dictates the next move and then the painting unfolds from all the relationships that exist within that developing field.

So that original gesture would almost necessarily get covered up, or get buried deep in pentimento? Yes. I think whatever I need to start is one thing and whatever develops from that is where the process becomes interesting. The source is something I find beautiful but it's not important to the outcome of the painting.

Your paintings assume the character of recognizable objects in the world, say a table, a geodesic dome or even the spindly legs of a spider. Is that a deliberate association or one that comes to you after the piece has been made?

It depends on the painting. *Untitled (table)* is a pretty old painting from 2005 where there was an idea at the outset. Because it is a literal description it seems fine to call the table what it is. The spider painting was titled after the painting was finished and is perhaps a little too close to the subject and dictates too much how the painting should be interpreted.

I was interested in the idea of making strange, which one of your paintings refers to. Making strange is a literary and aesthetic strategy for making art in which the senses get destabilized. Is that what you want to do to the viewer?

I think about it pretty loosely, but it has been an influence from when I first started painting. When I make something I don't understand, or that I haven't seen before, or that surprises me, or seems unexpected, I'm doing it for myself. The need to alienate my way of seeing things or to take away a sense of familiarity is always there. I used to try more consciously to make awkward paintings.

In *Shapes or Things*, 2011, I hear two possible reads in the title—a painterly one where the shapes come in, and a representational one where the things come in. I read both of them as possible but as almost mutually exclusive.

I don't think they have to be mutually exclusive; I think that they can flip back and forth as you're looking at them. In one instance, it may allude to something in the world that we're familiar with and at another moment they may be shapes that only have relationships within that painting. In the process of viewing, you could go one way or the other. I like how that ambiguity can open up much wider possibilities for each viewer.

When you parenthetically subtitle a piece *Untitled (flags and crowns)* I see the pennant flags and then paper hat crowns. But that subtitle makes a move back to the representational world rather than staying inside the world of abstraction. Do you want to encourage the viewer to do that?



Yes. That painting was made toward the beginning of when I started using titles. I'm not opposed to those connections and *flags and crowns* probably had something to do with what I was thinking about at the time. I was looking a lot at Brian Wildsmith illustrations, so there is a fanciful element in those paintings. As I've titled more, I've tried to not have them become too specifically descriptive.

The combination of intersecting triangles and paint application in some of your *Untitled* pieces in 2006 creates the suggestion of volume, as if there were an unstated cubist insinuation operating. They don't read in a purely flat, two-dimensional way.

I was pretty excited to have an element of depth incorporated in my work. Up until that point my paintings had been super-flat, so when I started working with triangles I enjoyed playing with that illusionistic aspect, with creating

1. *Bally*, 2013, oil on canvas, 85 x 75 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photographs: Scott Massey.

2. *Conversation*, 2013, oil on canvas, 75 x 85 inches. Courtesy the artist.

and then destroying depth, or cancelling it out in some other way. It is obviously a trick, but it can make a painting more interesting to look at. I never did figurative painting. I always thought about painting as organizing shapes on a two-dimensional support. There was never a desire to



create illusion. When I was in school I didn't know what I wanted to do with illusion but as soon as I started making work in my own studio it wasn't something I was interested in or had really considered. When I studied there wasn't a lot of instruction on how to paint. There were so many more pressing concerns; it felt backward to make a painting, and a woman making a painting was almost a radical gesture. I was at York University where they had an especially strong Women's Studies Department and that dialogue was invigorating.

You seem fearless in accepting the possibility of failure in the making of a painting. Do you ever have any doubts about doubt?

I'm riddled with doubt. Last year I was becoming crippled and there is a whole group of paintings I have never shown—I made them between shows and then something else developed that seemed more exciting—but in my studio things had slowed down to a snail's pace. I was going through this anguishing, plodding process. But the paintings were some of the best I have ever made, so maybe that says something about how I'm supposed to work. I'm not sure.

When you do *Beginner's Luck*, 2011, you're not a beginner?

The title is tongue-in-cheek—I think it was the first time I was referencing Picasso. That painting didn't involve any of the long drawn-out processes that many paintings go through so it seemed lucky. When I give an artist's talk I have a slide show with photos of my work in progress and I take the audience through the process of one or two paintings being made. All of the stages can look very different from one another. It's pretty crazy and the logic of decision-making only makes sense to me.

Do you deliberately mess with the viewer's perception of what they're looking at?

Yes. I like to throw a wrench into things. With pattern, for example, your eye will go into auto-pilot to complete the pattern if you don't interrupt it. I often use a compositional device where I paint certain shapes in colours that are very close in hue and value, so they read as one larger shape. Or I create different focal points by varying the colour—a lime green shape in a field of grey shapes, for example.

You do interesting things to interrupt pattern, so the black dots on *Untitled (black dots on swatches)*, 2009, get sliced into different thicknesses, and they get placed horizontally and vertically. Is that another strategy that keeps both you and the viewer perceptually off-balance?

Yes. I made that painting after I was in Toronto for my project at Goodwater Gallery. It was my first large-scale collage. I came back to Vancouver and made *Untitled (black dots on swatches)* right away—it was mimicking the way the paper cropped the layers underneath. I was also thinking about the use of random patterns in quilt-making and the way that a shape is cut out and then joined to another shape. It could be the same piece of fabric but the pattern doesn't match up, which creates a tension. Each layer could be its own field, and yet it is cut up and put back together. It is a kind of collage.

***Untitled (silver blocks)*, 2006, puts me in a quotidian frame of mind because it looks like floor tiles. Then you throw off that perception by connecting them in such an irregular way that were you a floor installer, you'd have to be fired. I made two versions of that painting and one was based on a collage. It wasn't scaled up exactly but the painting was drawn out and then painted. So if you imagine that in the collage each block is a different colour, then the way the spaces are divided makes sense. I would say it's not topographical—it is more like an architectural elevation. The silver is**



metallic paint over a washy black ground and the lines you see are the negative space.

How do you make decisions about scale? “Cut Out,” the Goodwater installation in 2009, was a whole wall, but you have also worked with various scales of painting.

For years I had this standard horizontal size that started out at 75 by 90 inches. It was a scale that was comfortable for the breadth of my gesture and it corresponded to the size of the wall that I use in my studio and how far I could stand back from it. I think of body scale. When I was invited to do a show at Exercise, a project space in Vancouver, I think the curators assumed I would make a site-specific collage. But I thought it would be more interesting to make some small paintings. I had to see if I could scale down and I only had three months to make that show. Previous to that my little paintings always looked like they were part of a big painting, as if they were cropped out of something. I had one format that I considered small, like *Spider Legs*, 2009, but at 30 by 40 inches it wasn't very small.

What interests me about the Goodwater show is that it is an installation as much as a painting. You seem to have an interest in an overall environment that can absorb painting into it. Is that

compensation for some inadequacies of the medium?

It's definitely not compensation for something that painting lacks. I don't feel it is important to add anything to what a painting is. I don't typically think of architecture or the context for showing the work; the works are made in the studio and transported to a space.

You mention architecture and there seem to be occasions when you engage in defining an inside and an outside. So we're looking out a window or looking into an interior space.

I think that as soon as the paintings become somewhat illusionistic they reference the way buildings sit in space and also landscape, but it is not a goal. I'm interested in two-dimensional work and what can be accomplished within the rectangle and I don't feel the need to comment beyond that. Paintings become their own entity; I don't think they need to allude to the physical world in an obvious way.

In the realm of abstraction, *Untitled (intersecting lines)*, 2008, reads as an abstract composition, whereas *Slats*, 2009, reads as if it could be blinds on a window looking out. So even though it is an abstract painting it insinuates a space outside the painting.



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1. *Big Lady*, 2014, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 107 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Scott Massey.

2. Installation view, "Fairy Bread," 2014. Diaz Contemporary, Toronto. Courtesy Diaz Contemporary. Photograph: Toni Kalkenscheid.

Yes, I don't think I actually make that many paintings that are purely abstract but *Intersecting Lines* is an abstract composition. *Slats*, on the other hand, is both abstract and figurative. The proportion of each rectangle within the larger rectangle of the frame reads quite differently and there is the suggestion of an illusionistic space. I didn't set out to reference blinds, but it definitely does.

What is it about that composition that you find so appealing?

The horizontal lines are a light yellow colour and they're painted by hand. You can't really control the way the paint comes off the brush. Some of the lines veer off a bit; the thickness of the lines determines the spacing between them. In one section it looks like the yellow lines are on top and in another it looks like the blue lines are on top. It's hard to decipher the figure/ground relationship. The painting has such a simple structure, but there are a lot of variables.

Your rectangular forms in *Untitled (windows)*, 2006, look less like windows than paintings. My read is that you don't put windows onto the world; you just make paintings that may be about the world.

That painting is definitely many paintings within a painting. I think the window is probably more of an art historical reference for me. I am interested in the way Matisse and Bonnard use windows in such inventive ways in their paintings. When Bonnard uses a window, the foliage on the outside is often painted in a way that is more animated than what is in the room itself. The windows in this case are a device that doesn't make much sense illusionistically, but are interesting in the way they create multiple spaces within one painting.

What role does collage play in your practice? Has it always been a part of it in different scales?

No. I started making collages about 11 years ago after discovering a really great collage that my mom made in 1972. She also paints, and we have it hanging in our house. Also, I was pregnant and I didn't want to expose myself to oil paints, so I started making collages and drawings. The first collages I made helped me to switch tracks and to open up something new in my work. They are fun because they are so quick and not labour intensive, like the process of painting. I like the directness and the flatness of the coloured paper and the way it doesn't have all the options available with paint, like scumbling and glazing and impasto. In collage those choices are pared down to colour, shape and composition.

One critic writing about your work talks about you "zooming in during moments of epiphany in modern painting." I'm paraphrasing but it is an interesting idea. It suggests that you're in search of the high, intense points. Do you think of your movement through modern art as a search for those epiphanic moments?

No. The quotations I use are mostly from little corners or backgrounds.



Eighties Rainbow, 2014,
oil on canvas, 24 x 20
inches. Courtesy the
artist. Photograph:
Scott Massey.

They're incidental rather than epiphanic?

Yes. Certain elements, like the leaves that turn up in *Conversation*, 2013, and *Leaves*, 2014, are a pretty big moment from Matisse, but a lot of the inspiration comes from choosing a small, insignificant detail from a great painting.

So your quotation is about homage and not competition and doing it better?

Exactly. I do feel that I am messing with it in a way but not as a challenge. It is out of respect and as a way of studying something and learning about it.

Barry Schwabsky characterized painting today as “multiple, simultaneous and decentred,” and he says that in an approving way.

I think the big thing right now with art in general is the return to making things that are physical and tactile in juxtaposition to our Internet age. Within painting there is no specific approach being championed and that has been the case for my entire career. With no rules, overarching ideology or philosophy, anything goes. It is exciting as well as confusing at times, but I enjoy the freedom of choosing my own agenda. Painting is an intimate and in some ways a romantic choice, but at this point in time it's the small gestures that are important. ■

Artspace

THE PHAIDON FOLIO

Northern Exposure: 3 Game-Changing Canadian Painters You Need to Know

By Artspace Editors

DEC. 31, 2016

ELIZABETH MCINTOSH
Born 1967, Simcoe, ON, Canada.



Batts Rock, 2015

Using repetition of basic forms and pure saturated color, Elizabeth McIntosh has been exploring abstraction for over twenty years. Moving beyond the conventions established by modernist abstract painting, she is seemingly unconcerned with trying to “resolve” the image. Instead, she provides an open-ended response to traditional hard-edged abstraction. Teetering between finished and unfinished, figurative and abstract, raw and refined, there is something tangible about McIntosh’s paintings despite

the fact that shapes linger without resolution. Take, for instance, *With the Moon Under My Arm* (2015), where the breast of the reclining blue figure in the foreground reappears as the yellow moon above. For McIntosh, painting is a deliberately undefined journey. She works in a spirit of play where aesthetic development is not contingent on beginnings or ends, but is continually renewing itself. The decisions she makes are formed through an instinctive process that varies from painting to painting. McIntosh often begins by priming the canvas with either white base coat or occasionally black gesso, progressively filling the surface with colored shapes until it is enveloped in pigment. From this starting point, she goes on to apply numerous subsequent layers and over-painted forms. For example, in *Batts Rock* (2015), blocks of bold orange and yellow sit underneath a semi-translucent female figure, reclining on a sofa. The colors seem to warm each other up or cool each other down, and there is no clear, balanced composition but a symbiosis between the parts. McIntosh's rigorous compositional use of color has become the linchpin to her paintings. For example, in *Tequila Sunrise* (2015), the application of warm, opaque, purples and browns, nestled against the sketchy pinks and yellows, set against the more graphic blue and red lines, harnesses the whole composition and carries the viewer through the picture. The shards of color waver and feel impermanent, giving the work an improvisational feel. Looking at McIntosh's paintings one might think of the early Cubists (Braque and Picasso) but the artist re-appropriates these reference points to create a new, twenty-first-century Cubism. Through soft edges, awkward shapes and intriguing underpaintings, her finished paintings resist the finality of rationalized abstraction.



With the Moon Under My Arm, 2015

Collage is also an important influence on McIntosh's painting and in her sketchbooks she creates collaged drawings of different patterns that often end up as one of her large-scale paintings. On a few occasions, McIntosh has also created collaged installations. In an exhibition in 2011, "Violet's Hair," at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, she covered a room from floor to ceiling in sheets of colored paper, tacked to the wall in patterns. As with some of her paintings, McIntosh worked in a shallow pictorial space, decisively arranging and re-arranging forms over the colored sheets. The resulting holes or "cut-outs"—a nod to the late work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954)—allowed flashes of color to peek through at various intersections, paralleling McIntosh's painting process.

– Leila Hasham

Elizabeth McIntosh

Different Uses

by Mitch Speed

They're alien to themselves. And that's the way they like it. They're definitely paintings. But lately it seems that they're paintings in the way that novels are books. Put another way, painting is the format: the empirically verifiable thing. What happens within that format is something else. It's similar to the way that walking is not only choreography between tissue and reflex, but also thought. One of painting's unique qualities is that it thematizes the simultaneous presence of multiple actions: a literal one—a paint-laden brush moving over canvas—and metaphorical ones—collaging, editing, montaging, and indexing time. Elizabeth McIntosh's new paintings are willingly alien to themselves because they amplify this situation. They do so by having unusually emphatic relationships to both Modernist painting and other technologies. The former appears in her subject matter and the latter in the mechanisms that she both uses and mimics in deploying that subject matter. Her new paintings seem to operate as models for the way in which painting can be something other than, without becoming irreconcilably unhinged from, itself.

The first thing to notice about these new paintings is their strangeness. From 2005 to 2013, McIntosh made paintings in which bold, radiantly coloured geometric shapes were arranged across the picture plane in quasi-high Modern harmonies. For the viewer, those paintings were unapologetically fun. An important part of their funness was the way they were laced with imperfections: with hard edges becoming tremulous, vivid colours going gossamer, and solid compositions portending wobbliness. For McIntosh, all of these things added up to awkwardness. The works shown here instantiate that quality with an exactitude that amplifies the magnetism of those that came before. Where we used to see colours in escalating hues rambunctiously pushing and pulling against one another, we now see more autonomous ones like burnt orange, rose, and forest green, still humming together, but separated and dampened by nearly white, permeative backgrounds. In the older paintings, flaw accented harmony. Currently, the stakes of this game, in which maladroitness is incorporated into what Peter Schjeldahl would call an "experience of beauty"—not to be confused with normative visual beauty—have been raised.¹

There are two groups of work in "Fairy Bread." First, there are large paintings in which pieces of shapes, bodies, plants, and painterly tropes exist on and within wispy, monochromatic grounds. In being both on and within, they form a correspondence with Western painting's mimicry of empirical vision: its ideal of keeping the eye in a constant state of refocusing by prioritizing an optical equivalence between background and foreground. In the practice of painting, shadows and intimations of architecture have long served as mechanisms to give ambiguous spatial contexts to principal subjects. Because none of the above appears here, these fragments seem to have just shown up. They're like leaves that have somehow floated into a frame before landing flat, or peel-off stickers against cartridge paper. On the level of behaviour, they resemble secular *acheiropoieta*.²

Being all the same size, the big and vibrant paintings McIntosh is most known for highlight her use of the rectangle as a space for the unfolding of intuition. In contrast, these rectangles are specifically proportioned to fit the fragments within them. The most curious one, *Big Lady* (2013), is around three-by-ten feet. Hung horizontally, it makes a perfect frame for what could be a recumbent human figure, were it not for the following: it is uniformly pink, flattened, missing very important pieces, and has had its illusionistic ambitions decisively disabled by thick, dark lines that



¹ This quotation is taken from a talk that Peter Schjeldahl gave at Boston University in October 2007.

² *Acheiropoieta* are images of saints, in icon paintings or otherwise, that are believed to have appeared magically, without human involvement. I learned about the phenomenon through conversations with Kara Hansen.

sporadically trace its edges. It's difficult to parse the attributes of this painting that have been directly copied from Henri Matisse's *Standing Nude* (1947)—the referent for this fragment—from those symptomatic of the technical means by which the fragment has been moved from the picture book into the painting. Here and there, the boundaries between shape and ground switch from decisive and palpable to broken and irregular, suggesting the glitchy edges of objects transmitted through green-screen technology.

That is the way that the first group of paintings looks. Their meaning unfolds in a sequence of movements set in motion by those looks and overlapping those looks, but not necessarily concomitant with them in time. Their strangeness seems to issue from their equivocal nature—how they appear to be half constituted within the picture—and the way they occupy a medial position; between a testing of the most reduced form in which a painting can still be called a painting, on the one hand, and a tradition of lyricism and immersion on the other.³ At this point in the encounter, it seems instructive to dwell on the lightspeed at which strangeness forms in the mind as something essentially Other—to beauty or grace—rather than a positively charged force. Next, in a fast dialectical movement, that highly conditioned reflex is short-circuited by the stubborn presence of composition, in the conscientious frontal placement of the fragments within their rectangles, and craft, in the evident care taken in their rendering; they are not interpretations, but verbatim facsimiles of details, maybe even trivialities, from the corners of Modern paintings.

Topology is a field of mathematics that concentrates on the redistribution and reorganization of equal volumes through processes like stretching and bending, as opposed to cutting and glueing. When, in this show, we see a suite of smaller paintings interspersed amongst the larger ones, we also see painterly data moving between disparate formats. In a kind of topological way, the constituent elements of the first group of paintings appear to be made of the same pictorial matter that fills the latter. Not in the obvious material sense, of pigment, but at the level of visual syntax: hues, the quality of edges, the confident trepidation of shapes. In the smaller paintings, colour, shape, and line have been quickly deployed without reference. It's not easy to understand these paintings. They don't seem interested in compositional mores. Sometimes their contents appear to drift into a limbo space outside the frame. Other times they draw inward, in tumbling and overlapping moves; shapes cut out of linen sit in equivalence with those made of oil paint. In these ways, the paintings divert attention away from accomplishment and towards thought. They appear as vivid residue from a catch-net that apprehends visual ideas at an amoebic stage, before they jell into assimilable information.

In the larger fragment paintings, through a process of dislocation and recreation, historical pictures literally happen again. In a second sense, however, they show those same paintings disappearing. In comparison to the carefully recreated fragments, the larger paintings from which they have been plucked appear only through a memorial fog. Picture the clarity and tangibility of an unearthed ceramic shard in relation to the fictitious memory of archaic conviviality it provokes. In this way, McIntosh incants empirical proof of history while simultaneously erasing the contexts that make them historical. Crucially, these new works are between negation and expansion: the shrewd nullification of problematic models for making art and its opposite—unthinking production. Her modality is something other than the yearning struggle for perfect compositions and hegemonic contributions to history. Here, the simultaneous action of selection and erasure adds up to a third action, which is to put the fragments into a curious vibration between roles: as active, aesthetic things to be experienced in the now, and as new editions in a long chain of original copies.⁴

³ This exploration of the formal limitations of painting is evidenced significantly in the work of Raoul De Keyser and certain paintings by Mary Heilmann, both of whom have influenced McIntosh's work. It is also the central theme of an exhibition called "Persian Rose, Chartreuse Muse, Vancouver Grey" (2014), curated by Mina Totino at Equinox Gallery.

⁴ In reference to the significance of Henri Matisse's and Pablo Picasso's mimicking of figuration in Iberian and African sculpture to the development of their syntaxes.



STRANGE FOREVER

MITCH SPEED ON ELIZABETH MCINTOSH

There are close facts, like the way that a stripe, just in front of your nose, is also an environment. And there are facts that exist in deep perspective, like the way in which artworks participate in geographical, political, and socio-economic complexes. Between those are middle distance facts.

In painting, the latter manifest as dimensions, colours, shapes, and the relationships between those things. Middle distance facts are the most usual, because they can be assimilated at a comfortable distance; six feet from the painting, say. In conversation, they flip off the tongue like gossip, and in that way, become abridgements. This isn't ideal. But it also isn't as bad a thing as it might seem. It's just the painting's becoming socially transmissible, like packets of information that re-expand in the imagination. In this vernacular, Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings appear as large rectangles – 190 x 230 centimetres – filled with big, flat shapes, which are in turn filled with opaque and translucent colours. Their compositions are impactful, although their constituent parts often waver. From a middle distance, they embody bright and lucid myopia.

Picture an expanse of blue and white stripes – each about ten centimetres wide – slanting across a rectangle from low right to high left. And now picture

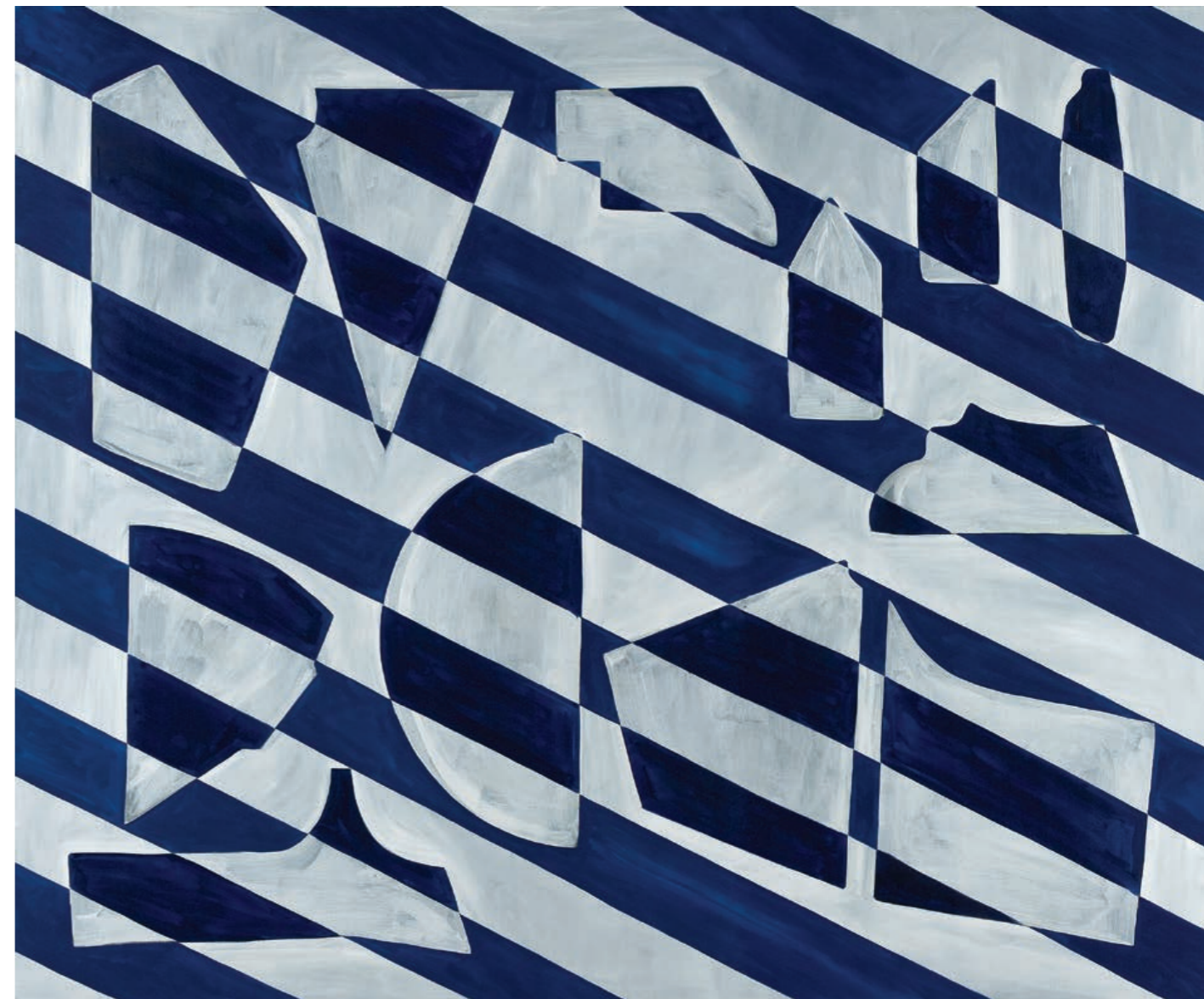
the stripes moving through twelve shapes resembling aberrant puzzle pieces.

Upon crossing the edges of these shapes, the blue stripes flip to white, and white to blue. This is *Paul Klee Fragments* (2009), a painting that makes equal reference to Klee, and a specific form through which his work has been translated.

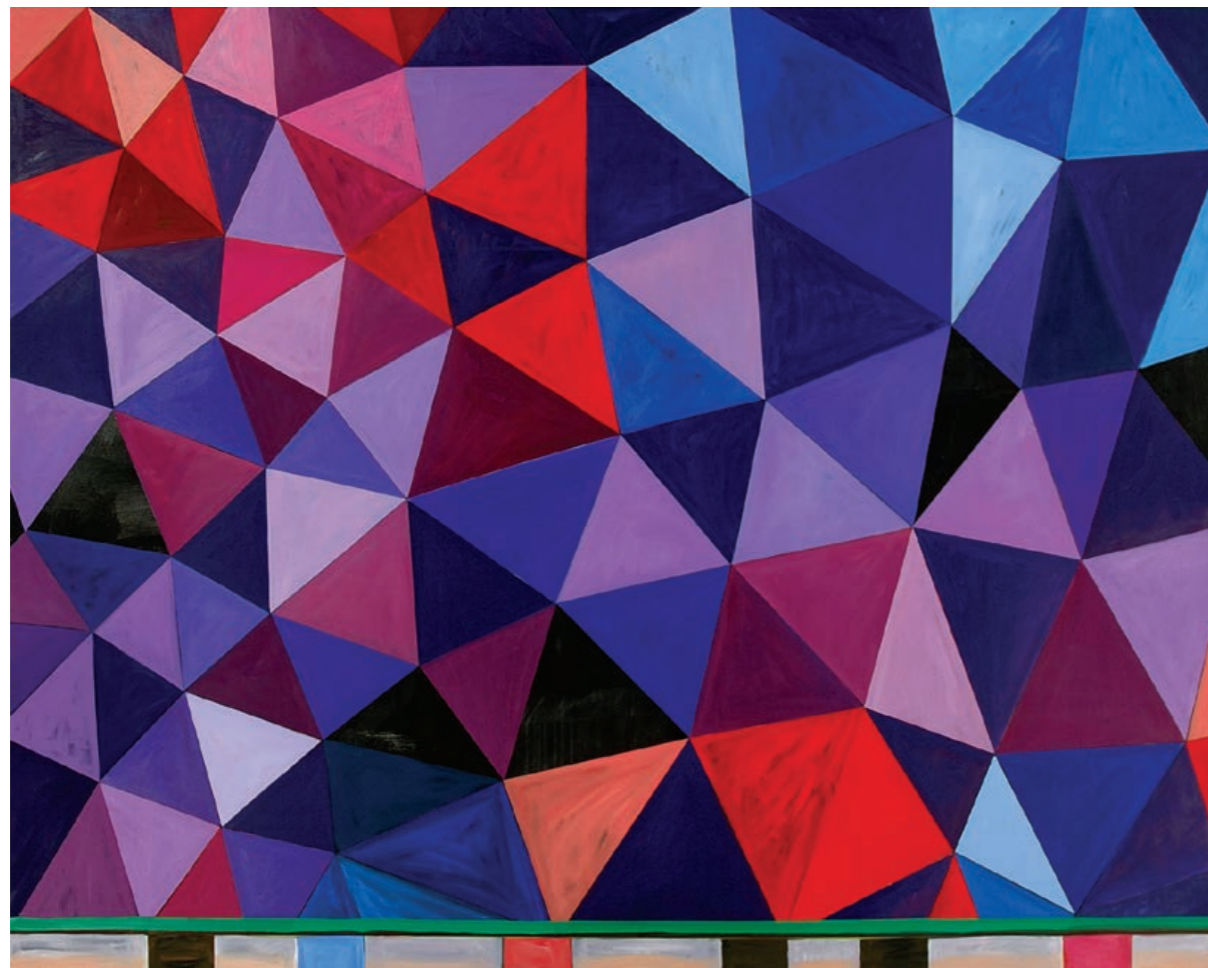
In 2009, McIntosh came across a series of books wherein modern paintings were fragmented into stickers for children. One such book featured Klee. Having already sampled him in other paintings, McIntosh began to mimic the look of these sticker pages – irregular bits and pieces of his paintings against stark white grounds – in paint. Her image was not a facsimile, but an aggregate. She borrowed pieces from this page and that. At a certain point, however, the stripes arrived. The finished painting shows shapes disappearing into their environment, as if under an invisibility spell.

Crucially, *Klee Fragments* also shows a plan disappearing into a process. In this way, McIntosh's paintings move through entropic cycles. These controlled breakdowns encourage unexpected relationships to occur, within a field of quotation. And that paradox produces tension, which produces energy, which propels the paintings through circuits between knowing and dumbness. For McIntosh, painting is thinking. Not like thinking. Not a metaphor for thinking. But, as in the dissolution of the Cartesian boundary between the substance of the body and the substance of the mind, thinking. She becomes herself when moving through painting as exploratory thought.

In a 2009 survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *Enacting Abstraction*, her *Untitled (coloured vertical stripes over black ground)* (2007) was hung next to a painting of sixteen vertical stripes by the seminal Canadian painter Guido Molinari, called *Serieel brun-orange* (1967). Whereas Molinari's surfaces are



Paul Klee Fragments
2009
Oil on canvas
216 x 190.5 cm



Above: **Untitled (Red, Blue and Purple)**
2006
Oil on canvas
183 x 228 cm

Right: **Untitled (black dots on swatches)**
2009
Oil on canvas
216 x 190.5 cm

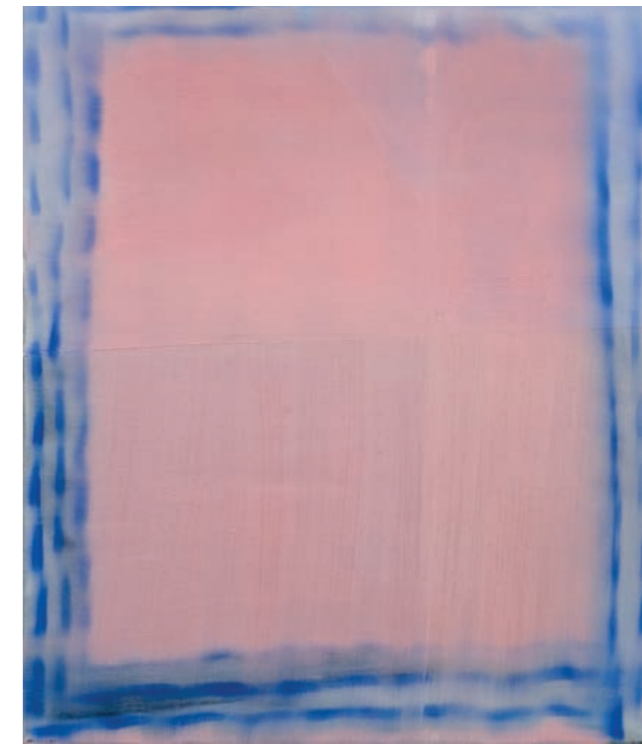


strictly semi gloss, and his edges razor sharp, Mcintosh's surfaces are matte, her edges hard from afar, diffuse up close. Her stripes are powder pink, sour apple green, merlot, sky blue and sunflower yellow. Like Molinari's, they are vertical. Unlike his, they zig and zag through a surface of triangles which, painted in dark and light tones, make the plane into a snapping and buckling undulation. Meanwhile, the odd unpainted triangle reveals a wash of black gesso, like rain in grisaille.

That work was one of Mcintosh's self-described 'triangle plane paintings', wherein triangles painted in every colour imaginable, alternately opaque and translucent, tumbled and interlocked, supporting and hanging off

of one another, sometimes spanning the picture plane, and sometimes grouping into autonomous shapes against colourful grounds which, painted thinly in long horizontal strokes, allow egressions of dark and light. These paintings scintillate in that slow, high modern way. Unfortunately, the seriality that contributed to their hypnotic effect, also contributed to a condition of predictability anathema to Mcintosh's need to think through painting. If you lay out her paintings from that point on, she says, you can probably see geometry disappearing from them altogether.

It's true. From then on, the paintings become more hostile to assimilation within coherent logics. Currently, Mcintosh says, a phone



call will divert the course of a painting as importantly as something more typically inspirational, like spectra through a window, or the serendipitous discovery of an arresting composition, or colour combination. She uses those interferences, and the energies they generate, as opportunities to insert discord, or character changes, into the paintings.

In *Dots on Swatches* (2009) several amorphous black dots float in an imperfectly rhythmic dispersal within a few very light yellow planes. In some cases, the boundaries of these planes are defined by nearly imperceptible changes in the the yellow, like faint shadows. Elsewhere, these divisions dissolve entirely, whereupon straight edges cut into the black dots take up the role of insinuating the planes. This slipping of responsibility for the creation of space, from one element to another, causes the painting to partake in a classically modern coruscation of depths. Concurrently, the pattern within it,

which resembles entoptic phenomena held still in late light, cuts the perceptual gambit with levity. And all the while, a single blank plane in the bottom left corner exerts a soft stabilizing pull, while two errant drips sit, in frozen freefall.

Over and again, McIntosh's paintings have affect moving in collaboration with specific historical resonances. Two reliefs by Sophie Tauber-Arp – *Ei Relief* and *Relief Rectangulaire*, both 1936 – glow through *Dots on Swatches*. In those works, circles appear in subtractive, two dimensional and additive forms over rectangular surfaces. When intact, the circles form a rhythmic matrix for optical movement. When halved, they take up the job of intimating rectilinear divisions in the plane. An influential Bauhaus member, Taueber-Arp was also a signatory of the Dada Manifesto – a history reflected in the mechanically precise randomness of her compositions, and also, now, in McIntosh's confidence in contingency.

There is a table in McIntosh's

From left to right: **Picasso's Dream**
2012
Oil on canvas
61 x 51 cm

From a Fauve Landscape
2011
Oil on canvas
51 x 61 cm

Books on Tables
2011
Oil on canvas
61 x 46 cm

Taking a Walk
2011
Oil on canvas
61 x 51 cm



Above: **Dreamer**
2013
Oil on canvas
216 x 190.5 cm

Right: **Conversation**
2013
Oil on canvas
216 x 190.5 cm

studio, that is covered with notebooks and construction paper cuttings; the wall it abuts, studies for collages, children's drawings and printed reproductions of paintings; an eruption of gushing colour within two interlocking green rectangles from Mary Heilman, for example, and a Matisse, in which the female figure manifested through a field of polychromatic dashes. Sometimes, on this table, paper and pencils and markers are replaced by a laptop, which McIntosh uses to catalogue progress shots of her paintings. The files therein contain a surplus of terminated gestures.

Her immediate context is thus comprised of physical and digital workspaces, as well as nimbus's of latent information. That atmosphere is given an echo in *Untitled (Windows)*, (2006) Therein, rectangles containing myriad colour combinations – acid green meeting purple, rose nudging



blue, and pink blurring into white – hover over a ground made of enigmatic, polychromatic shapes. Bordered by one or two thin bands of colour, like connatural frames, the rectangles appear as autonomous images in an electric environment. Refulgent, and causing the eye to flit here and there and there and back again. And so, although it is a painting and draws on that history in very specific ways, it also recalls a precise sample of contemporary experience; wherein fingertips move everywhere over glowing screens, dancing information in and out of perception, with all the effort of daydreaming.

In hindsight, the rectangles within that painting seem like codes to the way her work would continue to evolve. In them, her application of paint began to draw back, with inchoate brush strokes holding fast, as nothing other than themselves. Their provisionality predicted a series of small paintings – 51 x 61 centimetres – that are presently accumulating in her studio. At times, these smaller works are supple and intimate, like sketches painted from memory after croppings from larger paintings. Other times they turn away from conventions of beauty altogether, manifesting initial thoughts as rough dashes of colour; research without the development; the primary facts of painting, which do not slip off the tongue so much as cramp it.

Currently, the reverberation of qualities moving from painting to painting in McIntosh's studio, is becoming increasingly discordant. The forms in *Dreamer* (2013) are like strange cousins to shapes with names. Here we see baggy shapes made of translucent compounds of pink and white, mauve versions of the same, a white blob running through with red jottings, and little twisting daubs of middle orange and kelly green; all simultaneously adapting to and influencing one another's amoebic aspects. All of this sits atop a fuschia ground, which, run through with faint architectonic forms, invokes interior space. The painting transmits spectra of resonances. It's also like a pile of colourful fabric viewed through a psychotropic lense. It makes shapes without names melt into things of the world – piles, accumulations, folds, laundry, vegetables, interior space – and back again, so that the painting seeps into the mind through multiple passageways.

Within the triangle field paintings, in the interlocking lines formed by abutting shapes, you can see filaments and exoskeletons, like those that appeared in Klee's quasi-scientific drawings. Incognito, the same appear in *La Musique* (2013), looping back into the painting like a diachronic beat. In this painting a set of imperfect ovoids lean lazily against one another, and are backed by warped rectangles of baby and cadmium blue, and by thinner, vaguely anthropomorphic forms in gold and black. At the top of the picture, a patchwork of red rectangles balances the blues while pushing the lower two thirds of the picture down and toward the viewer. The central ovoids are painted in nearly white pastel pinks and blues. Like the triangle planes, their interior space is divided into many shapes, simultaneously architectonic and organic. So in spite of

their chalky colouration they remind of leaves; more so than legs, which is what they were in a former life, in the Matisse painting from which they were lifted.

The working title of this essay, *The Static Slip*, reflected a feeling induced by many of Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings; a slow burn between excitement and anxiety, resultant of the impression of movement in actual stillness; static shapes and colours slipping in perception; the spaces between shapes being at once voids and shapes themselves, like the space between magnetic objects being empty but also electric. But that title failed to track her work's recent migration into borderlands of reference and contingency. As much as her paintings generate primary experience, they are also ways to get inside experience. The best Modern paintings, the ones that flash in our head when we think of the form, seem to have been made for forever. McIntosh uses her memory and her eyes as a kind of technology, panning across the history of Modern painting, before zooming in during moments of epiphany, and cropping. By way of weird alchemical splicings, she then re-charges old energies locked in old shapes and old colours, making a fading version of forever as strange as it used to be, right now.



Warp - Mitch Speed
2013
Oil on paper
58.5 x 91.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Elizabeth McIntosh - Why I Paint

Exploring the creative processes of tomorrow's artists today - as featured in Vitamin P3



Elizabeth McIntosh

Using repetition of basic forms and pure saturated colour, Elizabeth McIntosh has been exploring abstraction for over twenty years. Moving beyond the conventions established by modernist abstract painting, she is seemingly unconcerned with trying to 'resolve' the image. Instead, she provides an open-ended response to traditional hard-edged abstraction. Teetering between finished and unfinished, figurative and abstract, raw and refined, there is something tangible about McIntosh's paintings despite the fact that shapes linger without resolution.

For McIntosh, painting is a deliberately undefined journey. She works in a spirit of play where aesthetic development is not

contingent on beginnings or ends, but is continually renewing itself. The decisions she makes are formed through an instinctive process that varies from painting to painting. McIntosh often begins by priming the canvas with either white base coat or occasionally black gesso, progressively filling the surface with coloured shapes until it is enveloped in pigment. From this starting point, she goes on to apply numerous subsequent layers and over-painted forms. Here, the Vitamin P3-featured painter tells us what interests, inspires and spurs her on.



Elizabeth Macintosh - Stars and Leopards, 2016 courtesy the artist

Who are you? I am an artist, mom, teacher living and working in Vancouver.

What's on your mind right now? Black Lives Matter.

How do you get this stuff out? I am having a dilemma thinking about my work in relation to the rest of the world. Painting is a solitary activity; it requires hours alone and a lot of reflection. That's what I like about it. It's a way to live my life but the distance between what I am thinking about politically and what I am doing in the studio is difficult to navigate. The world is very loud right now. Painting is a coded language but evidence of the human touch in painting is a big communicator – maybe that's how it can redeem itself.



Elizabeth McIntosh - Goldfish, 2016 courtesy the artist

How does it fit together? The body of work that I just finished comes from a collage process and it employs many different vocabularies and approaches to painting. I am quoting from an archive of historical painting that I have been building over the last several years, but now I am also taking and reiterating parts of my own past work as well as incorporating drawings of my family based on photos of the minutiae of everyday life. Some of the paintings read as ambiguous or disjointed narratives while others are a play on traditional abstraction – push and pull, positive and negative space. The inclusion of figurative elements confuses the reading.

The paintings were difficult and challenging to make – each one a puzzle that had to be worked out in its own particular way. I am very excited about the new autobiographical content – I have been known as an abstract painter for so long, but it feels right to include something from my life in a more direct way – even though ultimately those parts still read as very abstract. In the process of making this work I have developed a whole new system that combines all of my longtime interests like pattern, geometry, collage, biography, and discovering new things in older painting. This allows for intuition, which gets stronger with experience. It's new and at this point feels limitless.

What brought you to this point? Years of working it out in the studio. Failure.



Elizabeth Macintosh - Black Dress, 2016 courtesy the artist

Can you control it? That's a great question. Control and counterpoint are both very important to my process. I gain control and then loosen it. I want to control it but I also want to approach it with total abandonment – it is a tug of war between the two. I find that when I exert too much control over the work my next move is to let go and make a body of work that is less proscribed. It's a compression and release that seems to alternate between bodies of work. If I am working with restraint I feel an actual physical build up of energy in my body that has to come out somehow – and in those moments very loose gestural painting is satisfying.

Have you ever destroyed one of your paintings? I have destroyed many paintings. I used to work on each painting until it resolved itself, which lead to many layers and a lot of reworking. Those paintings were formed by building a history of decisions within each separate painting starting with a blank canvas. Sometimes the paintings did not resolve themselves or the surface just became too overworked and dead at which point I would have to destroy it. For my show Bricks are Heavy at CANADA in New York in September – my motto was 'fresh' I wanted the paint to look like it landed on the canvas all by itself, so anything that looked belaboured just had to go.



Elizabeth Macintosh - Beach Blanket, 2016 courtesy the artist

What's next for you, and what's next for painting? I will be working on a mural that will be a 450 feet high by 30 feet wide. It will run up the side of a building in downtown Vancouver. I am also working on a set for a ballet next year. I am very optimistic about painting - there is so much interesting painting being made right now. Painting is a survivor so even if the attention of the art world turns away for a while it will fortify and develop interesting tangents during hibernation.

Vitamin P3 *New Perspectives In Painting* is the third in an ongoing series that began with *Vitamin P* in 2002 and *Vitamin P2* in 2011. For each book, distinguished critics, curators, museum directors and other contemporary art experts are invited to nominate artists who have made significant and innovative contributions to painting. The series in general, and *Vitamin P3* in particular, is probably the best way to become an instant expert on tomorrow's painting stars today.

Find out more about *Vitamin P3 New Perspectives In Painting* [here](#). Check back for another *Why I Paint* interview with a *Vitamin P3*-featured artist tomorrow. Finally, be sure to check out more of Elizabeth McIntosh's work [here](#).

BLOUINARTINFO

'Sticky Fingers' at Arsenal Contemporary New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | AUGUST 01, 2017



Installation view, Sticky Fingers, Arsenal Contemporary NY, 2017.
(Courtesy: Arsenal Contemporary)

Arsenal Contemporary is hosting an exhibition “Sticky Fingers” at the gallery’s New York location.

Curated by Martha Kirszenbaum, the exhibition brings together works by eight international artists- Meriem Bennani, Elizabeth Jaeger, Wanda Koop, Piotr Łakomy, An Te Liu, Elizabeth McIntosh, Caroline Mesquita, and Louise Sartor. Through their various artistic practices including sculpture, painting, film, and installation, these artists evoke the fragile tangibility of the human body, intertwining materiality with theatrical playfulness.

On view in the show are a series of three oxidized brass characters by Caroline Mesquita, presented off square with one another and the viewer, blurring the line between fiction and reality, humans and mannequins. Also on view is her video “The Ballad” where the artist appears alongside her sculptures, pushing and reinventing ways of living together through a deliciously perverse carnival.

Through a similarly mischievous sculptural approach, An Te Liu’s bronze and ceramic pieces, carved and casted from Styrofoam packaging and domestic artifacts, activate a theater for the inanimate, replacing actors and the stage for objects and an archeological museum.

Inspired by disjointed parts of the human body or their armature, such as boots and coats made of aluminum honeycomb, insulation foam, and clothing, Piotr Łakomy’s works on view elaborates his practice around architectural, landscape-oriented installations and human-sized sculptural arrangements; while Elizabeth Jaeger’s series of blonde pots, made with raw cream clay pieces covered with imprints of the artist’s hand, provoke the effect of an overly touched subject, hints of human presence.

On view is Wanda Koop’s “View from Here,” which points to a landscape transformed over time, depicting a view of Winnipeg from the banks of the Assiniboine River, evoking an interaction between the viewer and the depicted skylines, triggered through the scale of the painting.

Elizabeth McIntosh's recent paintings exhibited in the show reveals the artist's concerns with collage works and her involvement with feminine colors; while tropes a similar tropes of femininity infuses with an impression of solitude in the work of Louise Sartor, whose portraits of young women, loosely inspired by Instagram snapshots, conceal the faces of their subjects so that their identification becomes relegated to their clothes or gestures; and Meriem Bennani's shape-shifting practice of films captured on her iPhone interlaces references to globalized popular culture with the vernacular and traditional representation of her native Morocco. Collectively, these works on view challenge the viewers to analyze the relationship with their own physicality, unfolding the vast disconnectedness and loneliness of modern existence.

The exhibition is on view through September 6, 2017 at Arsenal Contemporary, 214 Bowery, storefront, New York, NY 10012, United States.

For details, visit: <http://www.arsenalmontreal.com/en/> (<http://www.arsenalmontreal.com/en/>)



Elizabeth McIntosh, *Thirteen*, 2016, flashe and oil on canvas
(Courtesy: Arsenal Contemporary)

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, aryllic 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