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With and Without a Plan: Play and the Paintings of Elizabeth McIntosh

For a long time, Elizabeth McIntosh began her paintings without a plan. In fact, she was against plans. To start a canvas, she might paint the whole ground cornflower blue or pewter or flamingo; maybe she would divide the panel in sections or devise some other compositional structure; then she'd make a few marks on top. From there, "it was call and response," she says. A mark, a gesture, a shape might cause her to paint something out or cover something else over, or add something new. Each move was a reply to the last, and in that way, the painting was like a "long conversation," she says, recorded by the canvas.

Around 2011, after working in this way for nearly a decade, the Vancouver-based painter found herself toying with more direct references. She might sample the stripes from the subject's shirt in a Picasso painting, for example, or some detail from a work by Matisse that she found interesting. She could use these excerpts, she found, to propel her painting forward. A few years earlier, around 2007, she had discovered a series of "Modernist art" sticker books, which she purchased for her children from museum shops. The books exploded famous paintings into small fragments to be recombined. The best one, she says, is still the first one she ever bought – the one on Paul Klee. It took her years to realize that this new development in her art practice and the sticker books employed quite similar manoeuvres.

As McIntosh followed this new tack, her references grew more specific and more prominent. In 2014, she presented an exhibition at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto titled *Fairy Bread*. About half the show consisted of these remixed and remodelled quotations from the High Modernists, while the other half was small gestural panels following her usual method. It confused her, she says. "I thought: 'What's going on? Am I going to be a different kind of artist now?'" The new direction required preparation and groundwork – a plan – against the exploratory, free-jazz ethic critical to her art making until then.



Elizabeth McIntosh, *Corsage*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 145 x 3 cm. Purchased 2018. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Elizabeth McIntosh, Copyright Visual Arts CARCC, 2019 Photo: NGC

A residency and show in New York followed, and she flipped between modes. She learned that a process involving both planning and improvisation was not only possible, but also productive. It is how she works today. Compositions begin in Photoshop, where elements – including art-historical passages she has archived, her own drawings and doodles – are collaged. This is where some of the conversation happens now. Even as she translates the flat digital file into paint on the canvas, her surprise doesn't dissipate. There are still a thousand choices to be made: Should she use a ground that is opaque or translucent? Should her brush marks show or be hidden? Maybe she should let this part dry first, or maybe she should scrape back this bit before it dries. There are so many different ways to paint an image, she says.

The National Gallery of Canada owns two paintings by McIntosh. Her 2005 *Untitled (With Round Feet)* is a field of conjoined triangles, like one of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes a bit malformed, rendered in mostly greyish-blues. At the bottom, the illusion is disrupted by a solid black bar on top of four circular knobs. She imagines these round feet as maybe those of furniture, or possibly her own sticking out from beneath a canvas she is carrying (a reading which both complicates the painting's abstract bona fides and emphasizes the sense of humour she sees in her art). It is also a good example of her earlier method.

Corsage (2017), acquired last year and currently on view, is more in line with how she works nowadays. On top of a buttery yellow ground, fingers of red branch across a milky surface like the network of fine veins in a bloodshot eye or a lava flow streaming downhill, things either very small or very large. She herself compares it to the growth of lichen on rock or a landmass seen from an aerial view. The pattern was borrowed from a painting by a well-known French artist in the early to mid-20th century. She prefers not to divulge exact sources because the information tends to mire readings, as viewers become overly concerned what she is trying to communicate invoking such-and-such a painting. "It's not appropriation art," she says; it is just a "weird shape" she found interesting.

The critic Mitch Speed said that for McIntosh, painting is thinking. The writer and curator Monika Szewczyk likened her to a musician improvising (which is a word McIntosh herself uses to explain what she does). Another understanding of McIntosh's art practice might be this: painting is play. "If it's not that, I wouldn't want to bother," the artist says. "There are really nice moments when you get really engaged with the paint and you sort of abandon your thoughts and you're just being carried away, seeing in what ways you can finesse something."

The type of play McIntosh exercises is an exuberant exploration of possibility. She wants to see the different ways all the building blocks fit together – and she is always adding more blocks: geometrics, gestures, art-historical clippings. Over the past few years, figurative elements have featured prominently. It is a sensibility shared by the High Modernists as well as the child busy with their sticker book. "There has to be a surprise," McIntosh says, "a level of the unknown, some discovery involved that just sort of takes me out of the mundane aspects of everyday life."

The play she describes has transformative, almost subversive power. And she has played in that manner going on two decades – with or without the plan.