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What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in September

In the 1970s, the painter and teacher Gerald Ferguson helped make the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, into a hotbed of conceptual art. But since painting wasn't exactly beloved of the conceptualists, he replaced a painter's classically expressive, intuitive brushwork with a strictly predetermined "process": Typically, Ferguson placed everyday objects — coils of rope; metal drain covers — under his canvas, then rubbed black enamel paint overtop to grab their images.

In 2008, the year before he died, fate compelled Ferguson to adopt one last process. A broken arm made his rubbings too hard to manage, so he decided to adopt the simplest of techniques: He would paint one-handed with a hardware-store roller, happily foregoing any hopes of fine detail in his pictures. He coupled that with a new and radical subject, at least for where he taught: He used his crude rolling to capture the great Canadian landscape — a rocky promontory; a forested hillside; the seashore — such as no self-respecting avant-gardist would normally depict.

The result of the final Fergusonian process, as seen in this show at Canada, were a series of ultra low-resolution, black-on-black views of nature that seem surprisingly full of emotion. That's because they are so much in keeping with the mourning we now feel for our warming world.

Ferguson's black landscapes seem more charred than painted, as though he'd somehow managed to take rubbings straight from Nova Scotia's forests after this summer's all-consuming fires.



Gerald Ferguson, "Trees and Rock," 2008, enamel on canvas.
Credit... via Gerald Ferguson and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo