

20/20

SPIRIT DOUBLES



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20/20

Spirit Doubles

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20/20: Spirit Doubles at Mira Godard Gallery

by

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Seeing, Objects and the Nature of Memory

Two years ago, as the year 2020 was drawing near, the idea began to take shape of mounting a show in which phrases like “20/20 vision” and “hindsight is 20/20” could come into play. Inevitably such a show would be about seeing—seeing ahead, gazing outward, looking backward and turning inward, the direction in which art ultimately leads the viewer who is actively responding. At the same time the doubling of the number 20 in the year’s notation suggested the idea of “spirit doubles,” a concept which could be interpreted in many ways, ranging from an artist’s mentors or influences to projections of the Second Self, that disturbingly familiar Other who darkly resembles us. And so after the specific parameters of “The Self-Portrait Show” (2012) and “Artist and Model” (2015), the theme of this year’s group exhibition has been deliberately chosen for the freedom and openness to interpretation it offers the artists.

Not surprisingly, the result is a show of lively visual diversity, further distinguished by the candour and even intimacy of the visions the artists have offered to viewers. Most of the works convey deeply personal moments of insight. Often these have been sparked by a particular object or setting which, gathering significance over the years, has profoundly affected the artist’s practice and way of looking at the world. Charged with accumulated personal memories, these objects can be as powerful as talismans or as the taste of Proust’s madeleine dipped into lime-blossom tea; they bring Past and Present together in a surge of simultaneity and remembrance. Proust called this psychic event “involuntary memory” and its eruption into his life sparked the invention of his unfinished masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time*.

Memory, then, is the hidden, tensile thread which connects the works in our exhibition. But that surge of “involuntary memory” which Proust cites cannot be directly communicated to another person. It is necessary

for the writer or artist to “voluntarily” translate the rush of memories and sensations into a form which an audience can apprehend. The literature of memory is vast and often contradictory, but one thing researchers tend to agree on is that what we remember is closely connected to how and what we felt. In other words, memory is subjective and its context is largely emotional.

The viewer does well to remember that even the most detailed work of high realism is a rendering of an artist’s subjective memory and vision, the application, both deliberate and intuitive, of form, colour, composition and all the other elements of artmaking. Art reconstructs rather than reproduces, even when it is so convincing as to make us think that we are looking at an exact replica of an object or scene, recreated in pigments. The most satisfying works of art encompass ambiguities, and it is in those intriguing gaps and spaces that the viewer does the work of completing the picture, through his own act of fully engaged looking. This process, like the artist’s, is only partly objective and deliberate. In part it, too, is about feeling, about what we experience emotionally and physically as we gaze at the work of art. Once we are no longer in its presence, our psyches and bodies remember, and so the memory, inextricably linked to our own emotions, animates and reconstructs both the work and our responses to it.

In a sense, we remake our experiences each time we remember them.

Michael Thompson, “Junction Girl” (page)

Michael Thompson’s paintings cast a deceptively tranquil spell. His colours are subdued, carefully modulated to blend with the endless variations of browns and greys and blacks. His brush strokes are fine and densely layered so as to build up surfaces which look soft and deep. On first acquaintance his images seem to speak to us in simple, direct language of places and situations we ourselves have seen or experienced: a girl waiting for someone in a bistro; a dazzle of morning sun on the arched upper windows of an old brick warehouse; the blurry, dimly lit interior of a downtown cafe on a rainy night.

Yet the real essence of Thompson’s work is not direction but indirection. His pictures are emotionally charged, complex and mysterious, the narratives they teasingly hint at shifting and enigmatic. We are all human, he seems to say, all of us flawed and fearful and hopeful and never quite what we seem. “Junction Girl” draws us into the delicate, sticky web of ambiguities which connects what we yearn for with what the world delivers.

The painting has its origins in the artist’s memories of growing up in East End Montreal. The neighbourhood remains, he recalls,

a traditional blue collar area, characterized
by tenement and triplex housing with the iconic wrought-
iron staircases at the front and the narrow
laneways with corrugated metal sheds at the

back. (See thumbnail, page .) In the 1980s the city of Montreal recognized the shed structures as a fire hazard and ordered their demolition.

Not often, but from time to time while walking the laneways, one would come across an old Cadillac impossibly tucked away in the courtyard... These were working class people and how they could afford such a vehicle is a mystery. Of course...these cars were a symbol of freedom and status.

The equation of the automobile with freedom as well as both physical and social mobility is a myth deeply rooted in North American culture. Manipulative and rarely subtle, car ads of the 1950s routinely featured seductive women posed in or perched on vehicles ranging from sleek sports cars to juiced up “muscle cars,” presumably as acknowledgements of the male owner’s affluence and sex appeal. At the other end of the spectrum, sedans and station wagons were presented as indispensable adjuncts to happy family life and even as proof of patriotism. In 1953 an ecstatic Dinah Shore belted out to her television audience:

See the USA in your Chevrolet,
America is asking you to call.
Drive the USA in your Chevrolet—
America’s the greatest land of all!

And in case the message was not sufficiently clear, this couplet drove it home:

On a highway or a road along the levee...
Life is completer in a Chevy!

It wasn’t long before, in Michael Thompson’s words, “the thin veneer of this fantasy [became] apparent.” By the 1970s Bruce Springsteen was singing of the “runaway American dream” in which young people race desperately through the night in “suicide machines.” Tom Waits struck a more elegiac but equally dystopian note in “The Heart of Saturday Night,” whose persona endures the drudgery of every work week by dreaming of his car, his girl and the freedom of the road:

You've gassed her up and you're behind the wheel
Your arm around your sweet one in your Oldsmobile
And now you're barreling down the boulevard
Looking for the heart of Saturday night...

But week after week the American dream proves murky and hollow. The song ends, "Now you're stumbling, you're stumbling onto the heart of Saturday Night."

"Junction Girl" is a painting constructed around the three basic components of the Car Equals Freedom myth: an attractive woman, an automobile and a "road along the levee." The young woman wears a blouse which in the haste of being put back on has been misbuttoned. She leans against a massive, powerful Cadillac which is parked on a stretch of grass next to moving water. In this case Cherry Beach in East End Toronto stands in for the "pastoral" setting. In what appear to be archetypal imagery and symmetrical composition, the painting at first glance seems to offer a clear projection of the myth: a fast girl posing with a sexy car. Except for the arresting and somewhat ironic detail that the car, a 1970 El Dorado, is decades older than the woman and lacks a license plate.

The upward tilt of the woman's chin and the placement of her and the car in the extreme foreground, dominating the canvas, give the painting an air of confrontation. As you look at the image it looks steadily back at you. Its unblinking gaze emanates not only from the woman's eyes, unreadable behind her dark glasses, but from the headlights of the car, which are leveled right at you and seem to regard you through half-closed lids. Facing directly outward with the woman leaning against it, the car seems anthropomorphic, her ally and her support.

What, we may wonder, has brought about this unlikely scene? What preceded it, and what will follow? Is the car stolen? Does the woman have an unseen confederate and if so, is the car the setting for their romantic tryst? Has she put on her silver bangle and earrings just to go for an illicit joyride? And what role do we as observers play—how does she see us?

There are no single answers to such questions. Thompson adroitly captures our attention by luring us in with potential narrative possibilities only to obscure and ultimately baffle them all. He is too deeply interested in the complexities of human nature to imprison his work within the confines of a single narrative. Moreover a viewer's attempts to assign "meaning" to a work of art are always counterproductive, as they block our access to its aesthetic and emotional power, replacing a fully felt spiritual experience with a lifeless precis.

There is confrontation here, but it projects neither hostility nor danger. Rather it puts viewers on alert, challenging us to pay close and patient attention to the painting's many nuances, the result of Thompson's extraordinary technical skills. With subtle indirection he deflects us from over-thinking by deftly nudging us off

balance. While the car seems to sit dead-centre on the canvas, it is in fact placed about two inches to the right of centre, a move which affects us subliminally by displacing the overall stability of the composition. The quality of feeling “grounded,” which perfect symmetry would have imparted, is also disrupted by a number of details, most of which are evidence of the car’s deterioration. These differ on the right and left hand sides of the vehicle. On the passenger side the sun visor droops and a wiper sticks to the base of the windshield. On the driver’s side the tire is turned in, showing its white wall, and a small gap indicates that the bumper is separating and sagging. Rust and wear have aged the paint in various spots.

Yet the chrome and glass, well-tended, continue to gleam. While it no longer bespeaks patriotism or financial attainment, the car remains a symbol of freedom and a part of the living present. Two bright objects placed in the centre of the picture vibrantly proclaim this status: the woman’s happily disordered blouse and the paper cup and straw. These two “white” elements - actually composed of a prism of pastels delicately highlighted with pinks and blues - visually connect the figure of the woman with the ethereal background of the painting.

This landscape setting is so softly rendered that it has the gossamer lightness of a dream. It seemed to me on first viewing that the car and the woman were “real” but the pastoral idyll was her fantasy, a wish unfulfilled. The pink sky, lightly overpainted with blue, the softly rippling water, the trees seen through a veil of haze—all these belong to a romantic world so remote from the urban one in which Junction Girl lives that I thought they must be projections of her imagination. At times I still see the picture in that light. But most often I see a self-possessed young woman who, enabled by her enduring El Dorado, has escaped the jangling world of the city and found a still moment of ease and pleasure, a moment stretched out to the full, languid length of a perfect summer afternoon.

Jeremy Smith, “Selfie” (page)

We find ourselves standing with the artist in a hushed and strangely proportioned room where time feels suspended. We are observers, our gaze fixed on the nude woman who sits before us, her face hidden and one leg turned awkwardly inward. Her posture is turned inward too; she is as posed and motionless as a goddess in a temple. The curves and shadows of her body look as if they have been sculpted by the sunlight slanting in through a window to our left.

The woman doesn’t acknowledge or even notice our presence. She peers into the iPhone which blocks her face from our view, studying it as intently as if the screen were a mirror confirming that she is indeed “the fairest of them all.” She is lost in her own image, as immersed in herself as if she were Narcissus gazing into a deep pool. A sudden mechanical click, a bright flash of light, and her fleeting expression is captured in a selfie,

to be sent to a host of Facebook “friends” who may glance at it and casually hit “Like” before someone else’s ephemeral likeness claims their attention.

In “Selfie” Jeremy Smith has created a startling and disturbing work of art in response to the disjunction and self-obsession he finds in contemporary life:

How well do we see ourselves? I would argue that when it comes to understanding ourselves, 20/20 vision is impossible...

I am not prone to social commentary in my work, but this painting does reflect society’s current preoccupation with the self and how we want to be noticed. ... All the various methods by which people make a statement about themselves, whether through Facebook, Twitter or, in this case, the Selfie, reflect our culture’s obsession with the self.

What I experience when I look at Smith’s unsettling image is a sense of loneliness and exclusion, even rejection. It is a mood so pervasive that the model’s indifference to the artist’s presence has the effect of including me, the viewer, as well. As in much of his work, Smith here combines strategies from historic approaches to picture making with his own virtuosity and existential concerns. The result is a painting that is both subtle in its technique and visually surprising, a profound vision all his own.

The references to Vermeer offer us a point of entry. In “Selfie” we find a number of compositional strategies which recur in the Dutch Master’s paintings: a woman seated in a domestic interior, often the corner of a room; the scene illuminated by daylight from an unseen window on the left side of the painting; a picture or map on the wall above and behind her, its imagery a symbolic gloss on what the woman is doing (reading a letter, making a list, weighing her jewelry). Vermeer’s “A Lady Writing a Letter,” for example, contains all these elements (See thumbnail, page).

The floor of black and white tiles is another element many viewers associate with Vermeer. In “Selfie” the checkerboard pattern seems to stretch back into the room according to the rules of single-point perspective, which in Western art allow the artist to create the illusion that his two-dimensional canvas is in fact a three-dimensional space. However, here Smith relaxes these rules and deliberately makes the perspective “imperfect,” so that our eyes travel not to a distant vanishing point but to the painting’s true centre of interest: the iPhone which casts its halo of light on the edge, and only the edge, of the model’s face. Our focus on this object is further sharpened by a technique Smith adapts from Japanese prints and brush paintings, in which compression and cropping of space are favoured over the illusion of depth. The aim is not to convince the viewer that he is “entering” a space but to remind him that he is looking at a created object, a deliberate artistic construct with both aesthetic and philosophical properties.

Smith’s deliberate flattening of the interior of the room places him—and us—uncomfortably close to

the oblivious model and intensifies our feelings of exclusion and discomfort. The curtailed space he creates here reminds me to some extent of his “Elevator” images of the 1980s, in which a man and sometimes a woman stand in a steel cubicle emblematic of their concentrated anxiety. While “Selfie” does not project the extreme degree of urgency and potential threat of these earlier works, it does emit a sense of uneasiness and isolation similar to that which we experience in looking at Alex Colville’s work, a feeling that something is amiss and we don’t quite know what may happen or what to do.

It is the seeming indifference of the woman in the painting which roils our own troubling emotions. In his choice of model we may recognize Smith’s wife Meg, who appears frequently in his work. As with his painting “Artist and Model” (2012-13), viewers may be tempted to regard such detailed depictions of Meg as portraits, which they are decidedly not. The relationship between artist and portrait-sitter is entirely different from that between artist and model: the woman in “Selfie” is presented not as a specific individual but as representative of a type, a member of a group or population with which the artist is concerned, in this case, selfie-takers entirely preoccupied with their own images. Here the situation has a special poignancy because the woman is both an intimate--she sits in the room unselfconsciously nude--and a stranger, owing to the emotional gulf that separates her from the observer. The position of her right hand, while assumed unconsciously, signals in pictorial terms her further indifference to or refusal of intimacy.

Glowing softly amid the shadows in the uppermost quarter of the painting are two inconspicuous objects which are easy to overlook or underestimate upon first viewing the work: the picture on the wall, in its gold-coloured frame, and the woman’s gold wedding ring. Despite their modest scale, each carries a substantial symbolic weight, and together they function as miniature displacements of the overall theme of self-obsession. Their colour connects them visually to the model, a woman with “golden” hair.

The picture which hangs behind her is of one of Smith’s own screenprints, “Moon, Mars and Dock” (2005), which depicts a placid lake and wooden dock, both silvered by a perfectly round full moon. To the right, a soft orange glow warms the horizon. It is an image of complete and effortless serenity: the moon and mars—mythological symbols of Woman and Man--in perfect harmony. Yet in the context of “Selfie” its atmosphere of contentment is ironic, a melancholy counterpoint to the emotional gulf separating the model from the observer. Moreover the print is made to look so dark in the painting that it is difficult to discern.

Similarly the wedding ring, traditionally symbolizing a “perfect circle” of endless commitment, highlights the woman’s present preoccupation with herself. Smith deliberately added the ring to his completed version of the work; in the pencil study for the painting the ring does not appear. (See thumbnail, page .)

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Smith’s work, it seems to me, has always been about seeking connection. This striving subtly colours the

atmosphere of many of his paintings. Despite the title, what he shows us in this work is not a selfie but a woman in the act of taking a selfie of only her face, twisting and arranging herself so as to look just the way she wishes to be seen by others whom she cannot see and who cannot see her in any meaningful sense. The painting strongly conveys the sterile, hermetic quality of all this posturing and its denial of personal contact. Selfies project heat without light, surface without substance. The antitheses of self-portraits, they reveal nothing of their subjects' inner lives and offer instead mere masks of perfection.

Tom Forrestall, "The Bindings" (page)

Tom Forrestall is a witness, inclined by nature to stand back and, in his words, "take it all in." What he sees in the world around him is a kind of Grace: the wondrous inherent in the commonplace, the extraordinary in the everyday:

I seem to have developed an ability to astonish myself. I look at my hands—usually my left hand because I'm drawing with the other one--and I'm astonished by

this strange apparatus we all have... It's so common, but
who looks at it that closely?

What I find interesting in Forrestall's observation is that by looking closely, he perceives even his own hand as if he were seeing it from a distance, as a part of himself and at the same time something Other. Distance, which for most of us creates separateness, has the opposite effect on Forrestall: it frees his imagination to see the essential mystery in even the smallest aspects of the created world, and to communicate this universal mystery through his art. It is hardly surprising, then, that his paintings often include prominent representations of his own eye or hand, an artist's primary instruments.

The hand we see on the left side of "The Bindings" holds a small glass bottle which contains the message: "To Alex Colville.... Esteem for the man.... Astonishment for his art.... Gratitude for his teaching.... Tom Forrestall... forever student." Even a viewer who does not recognize the image on the right-hand side of the painting as a rendering of Colville's print "Cat on Fence" immediately understands that Forrestall's painting is a homage to his teacher and mentor. But the painting is more than a statement of admiration and gratitude. It is also a demonstration of Forrestall's independence as an artist, with his own vision of the world, presented in his own way.

"I keep the ties that bind loose and relaxed," he declares in his signature block letters on the back of his painting. "They must not be chains that hold me down." Colville's stature and influence on Canadian art are enormous,

and they cast an especially long shadow on the artists who are sometimes grouped together as Canada's Atlantic Realism painters, among them Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt and Tom Forrestall. Each studied under Colville at Mount Allison University, and each went on to develop a distinctive individual mastery and style. "The Bindings" is as much a manifesto of Forrestall's own artmaking as it is a celebration of the important role Colville played in that evolution.

Writing on the back of his painting Forrestall, who is a spirited and colourful storyteller, shares an anecdote which explains the presence in this work of "Cat on Fence." In 1956, as a "kid," an impoverished second-year student, he had wanted to own a copy of the serigraph, of which there were twenty in the edition. But the price was \$25 (framed!) and he had managed to save up only \$15. "Colville looked at me, looked at the print and passed it over to me," whereupon Forrestall tacitly suffered a brief pang of buyer's remorse: "My God, what did I do with my \$15!" He has had the print for well over six decades.

"Cat on Fence" is pure Colville in its imagery and meticulous geometry of composition. Once asked by a family member if she knew where her husband was, Rhoda Colville replied, "I'm not sure, but a few minutes ago I saw him measuring the dog." The artist often used animals as subjects, admiring their innocence and "goodness," qualities which he felt were often lacking in humans. Moving in a natural and unpremeditated way, the cat in his image is caught in mid-stroll, perfectly balanced on the lattice-work fence. The contrast between the regular, tiered diamond spaces in the fence and the spots and patches of white, orange and brown in the cat's soft coat convey complementary ideas of order, natural and manmade.

The image is strongly reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion photographs of animals in motion, made in the late nineteenth century. (About 20,000 of these were gathered in 1887 in a massive portfolio entitled *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Connective Phases of Animal Movement*.) In Muybridge's images, the animals were photographed in front of a measured grid, which in Colville's print is transmuted into the strictly patterned lattice-work of a domestic wooden back yard fence. (See thumbnail, page .)

The left, larger side of Forrestall's homage is literally "on the other hand." The feeling it conveys is quite the opposite of scientific: there is a sense of spontaneity in the composition and directness of the image. The artist's own hand shows signs of his age; it is no longer the hand of a twenty-year old student. Together the two images, on the right- and left-hand sides, form a single painting, a diptych of two shaped panels joined by the "bindings" or threads of time, memory and acknowledgment. The threads are loose and meandering, delicate but intact. As our eyes move from one panel to the other and back again, we are made to consider the intricacies of relationship, specifically of that between Forrestall and his mentor but also of all human relationships including our own, especially those which have endured growth and change and the vicissitudes of time.

Forrestall has deliberately made a V-shaped gap to separate the two parts of his diptych. In part, this gap is a

spatial representation of time, the decades between 1956 and today; after graduation he rarely saw Colville and the two men never wrote to each other. But the gap also stands as a visual insistence on his own separateness from Colville as an artist, his own “moving on.” His images face inward toward each other on panels which have sloping sides. In choosing to shape each panel as he has, Forrestall brings form and content together, both introducing distance and at the same time spanning it with his delicate threads, the “bindings.” He and Colville stand side by side, separate and connected.

Forrestall seems to have known from an early age that he was born to be an artist. He likes to tell the story of how he and his siblings would watch spellbound as their father, a carpenter, drew pictures for them:

He'd draw for us and while undeveloped it was a marvel

for a child to see that line trail out from his carpenter's pencil

and form a boat, a rabbit, a train or anything my brothers and sisters would call for. The experience never left me. Indeed it's

fed a passion. I draw every day and remember my father.

Bindings and threads take many forms. Perhaps the first and strongest thread in Forrestall's life as an artist is that simple line from his father's pencil, the line which in memory trails out still.

Lindee Climo, “20/20 Spirit Doubles Numbers 1 and 2: After Pieter Aertsen” (page,)

For over forty years, Lindee Climo has kept a small, mysterious object tacked to the wall over her workspace. It is a postcard bearing an image by the sixteenth-century Dutch painter Pieter Aertsen, and what makes it mysterious is the fact that it shows only a fragment of a work he painted around 1559, entitled “Adoration of the Shepherds.”

The extant fragment was once part of a much larger painting or possibly a diptych commissioned by the Church for display as an altarpiece. (The British Museum holds a drawing for a diptych also entitled “Adoration of the Shepherds,” by Aertsen's nephew and student, Joachim Beuckelaer.) It is likely that the greater part of the work was destroyed during the “Iconoclast Fury” of the Protestant Reformation, a time when Calvinists reacting against the opulence of Roman Catholicism were smashing such religious icons, which they considered idolatrous.

The title does provide a clue, telling us that the fragment was once part of a scene in which shepherds attend the Holy Family immediately following the birth of Christ. But what remains of Aertsen's painting is somewhat difficult to decipher. (See thumbnail, page .) Near the top we see a man's arm and hand and a small

portion of the lower part of his face. Below him are the head and shoulders of another man who is bending forward over the head of an ox or a cow. Climo explains how the postcard affected her when she first received it from a friend, and how she continued to see it until recently:

I was looking at books of Renaissance reproductions and beginning to paint from them... I had recently lost a favourite elderly cow almost identical to Pieter Aertsen's animal.

...When I received the card, all I saw was my cow. I identified with the man looking at my cow with all his heart. My unconscious also decided that the man looking at the cow was the painter of the cow. I have almost worshipped the postcard for all of these years for the feeling of communication with this man and his animal that it gives me.

Reading Climo's account, one senses that the Aertsen postcard entered her life at precisely the moment when she needed it most, when her artmaking was taking her in a new direction at the same time as she was keenly feeling the loss of her beloved animal. All art seeks to communicate, but what it communicates lies as much with the observer as with the artist, whose conscious intention (if we can even guess at it) often has little to do with what an observer perceives or desires to perceive. Climo's longing to meld her identity and her world with Aertsen's widely disparate ones has facilitated decades of her own work as a painter who brings together the rich past of the Dutch Golden Age and her own rural Canadian present. Artists create out of what they find, both within themselves and in the world around and beyond them. Coincidences such as the timing of the gift of a simple postcard can transform the base metal of everyday life into artist's gold.

In approaching her contributions to this exhibition, Climo began with a series of experimental sketches she called "Deconstructing Pieter Aertsen." Using the figures of his "Adoration," she created variations on his composition and intruded negative space silhouettes of herself and her cow into the pictures. By turning the profiles to the right or the left, shading in the Aertsen figures and leaving hers white, she produced different mirror images, moving the elements around and fitting them into place much as one would the pieces of a puzzle.

The results of her experiments are two paintings, one horizontal ("20/20 Spirit Doubles #1") and the other vertical ("20/20 Spirit Doubles #2"). The horizontal work, completed first, "was painted very seriously" as a response to the challenge of "multiplying parts of the image... and seeing how to tuck in and end certain elements of the composition." The second, vertical work "was done to deal with the humour" that emerged from the first. But as the vertical painting proceeded, a profound personal discovery emerged as well, one which I'll reveal later in this discussion.

Climo creates an almost decorative border along the top of the horizontal painting by reiterating Aertsen's image of the man with the outstretched arm and raised hand. The partial face is repeated four times and the arm and hand five times. Owing to the predictability resulting from this repetition, there is a quality of flatness and patterning to the upper edge of the painting, despite the shading and perspective which Climo borrows from Aertsen. Two full renderings of the other shepherd and his animal appear below this pattern. And then something extraordinary happens.

In the space between the viewer and the plane containing Aertsen's figures, Climo has interposed two more planes or levels of figures. The level closer to Aertsen's shepherds is occupied by a negative-space self-portrait rendered in off-white: Climo hard at work with her paint brush. The level closer to us contains a three-quarter profile in negative space of Climo's cow, turned so as to look "into" Aertsen's painting at its Dutch "double." Everything is made to dovetail perfectly into its corresponding puzzle part. We observers stand outside the three levels of the puzzle, gazing in.

The vertical painting, #2, addresses new compositional challenges. Because of the vertical format, the figures are stacked one atop another and the repetitious border of #1 is dispensed with. Again Climo's self-portrait and the watchful head of her cherished cow appear. It was during the creation of this work that Climo experienced something of an epiphany:

I acknowledged to myself that the animal was not a cow [but the ox common to Adoration paintings]. And I saw that the man is not looking at the animal at all, but is a shepherd looking past the ox at the unseen Holy Family. ...I saw what I wanted to see all of these years. It could be said that participating in this exhibition has given me 20/20 vision in this matter.

Once seen, a revelation cannot be unseen. Climo made the necessary adjustments to her vertical painting, correcting her previous, long-held vision of it. She re-directed the shepherd's glance "as it should be," over the head of the ox and toward the Holy Family, who are not present in the fragment. And she adapted the position of the hand of the uppermost shepherd into a gesture of guidance or benediction for herself, placing a hand gently over the head of each of her self-portraits.

The process of deconstructing Aertsen's fragment had brought about a shift in Climo's perception of not only the painting but also of herself. As her vision cleared she discovered that she no longer needed to misread the work as she once had, and could now see the fragment "face to face." While her relationship to Aertsen's painting has changed, her communion and sense of fellowship with the artist abide: "I feel that I have worked with the painter, that he was around me as I painted my animals."

Phil Richard, “Sitting in an Ideal Place” (page)

For this exhibition Phil Richards has provided a rich and luminous hybrid, a painting which combines elements of landscape, portraiture, still life and his depiction of a celebrated architectural interior. Having seen some of the artist’s preparatory drawings for other works, I am well aware of the complexity and precision of the geometry which forms the foundation of all his compositions: the harmonious spatial relationships, the meticulous lines of perspective leading inexorably to their vanishing points. His drawings seem to distill everything through the purifying filter of mathematics.

But after spending hours in the company of this painting, I still find that what primarily holds me is what the poet Mark Doty calls “the orbit of the painting... the energy and life of [its] will... [its] brimming surface.” For me what radiates from Richards’s canvas is its celebration of the past alive in the present and its robust appeal to the senses, igniting almost physical responses to warmth, light and shadow, and colour. I will comment on these three entities separately, although each is visually and metaphorically inseparable from the others and all are intimately connected to Richards’s three chosen “towering figures of the past,” Piero della Francesca, Frank Lloyd Wright and George Frideric Handel.

To begin, then, with the sensation of warmth. Bright sunlight glances off the fair hair of a little girl whose portrait is one of four in the painting. (I will return to her later in this discussion.) She looks out over the hills of Tuscany, which shimmer in a haze of heat. The orange roofs and spires and the grey stone building to their right identify the town as Borgo Sansepolcro, the birthplace of the early Renaissance painter and mathematician Piero della Francesca (1420-1492), whose self-portrait appears on the cover of the large book to the left of the foreground. His treatise *On Perspective for Painting* demonstrated how artists were to compose their works according to the principles of geometry and establishes the use of linear perspective as one of his most enduring legacies.

He is best known today for his fresco cycle “The Legend of the True Cross,” derived from *The Golden Legend*, an early medieval compilation of stories, expanded over centuries, surrounding the lives of venerated saints. Piero’s frescoes decorate the Great Chapel in the Basilica di San Francesco in Arezzo. Completed in 1466 and extensively restored between 1991 and 2000, they are astonishing in their treatment of light and perspective.

But it is another, much smaller work, “Flagellation of Christ” (ca. 1468-70), which to my eye has influenced the composition of Richards’s painting. In organizing this diminutive masterpiece, Piero divides his

rectangular panel into two parts, using the strong vertical line of a marble column (See thumbnail, page .) The right-hand side of the painting depicts three figures who seem to occupy a space close to us, while the left-hand side draws our eye across an expanse of terra cotta tiles into the deep interior space of the work, to the figure of Christ. Although this figure is placed at the very “back” of the scene and as a result of the perspective appears much smaller than the three figures in the foreground, it is in fact the most important narrative element of the painting.

In its general organization, “Sitting in an Ideal Place” seems to me to echo the perspectival composition of Piero’s painting. In Richards’s image the foreground is occupied by a still life arrangement of flowers, fruit and a violin, with the three foreshortened portraits lying flat (and therefore less obtrusively) on the table around them. Verticals and horizontals dominate the architecture. Upright wooden fins carry the weight of the roof (in Piero’s painting the column supports an architrave) and separate the windows, while horizontal beams rest atop them. An expanse of terracotta coloured tiles pulls our vision deep “into” the architectural space toward the small but significant figure of the child at the far left. The painting is divided into two zones by an oblique line of demarcation between areas of sunlight and those of shadow.

With the speed of light, Richards transports us from Piero’s quattrocento Tuscany to mid-twentieth century America. Instead of classical architecture as his setting, he provides a detailed depiction of classic architecture, specifically the interior of one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s famed Usonian houses, the Bachman-Wilson House, completed in 1956.

The term Usonian appeared early in the twentieth century and is derived from an acronym denoting the “United States of North America.” During the Depression of the 1930s Wright evolved the idea of creating houses which would be “simple” to build, minimally ornamented and within the financial reach of middle-class Americans. His vision of the Usonian house was of “a thing loving the ground with its new sense of space, light and freedom—to which our U.S.A. is entitled.”

Set on a concrete platform and raised no more than three or four steps up from ground level, the houses would seem to rise naturally from the landscape and would be constructed of natural materials, no more than three in number. The Bachman-Wilson House uses mahogany—then plentiful--glass and concrete. (What appear to be terracotta floor tiles are in fact coloured concrete panels.) Clerestories and expansive windows with deep overhangs serve the dual function of admitting light and creating shade, with the result that inhabitants would feel as if they were living outdoors while enjoying the shelter of their well-built homes. Most Usonian houses had only a single level, though the one Richards depicts has two.

Architectural decoration is carefully restrained. Richards’s painting shows the perforated wooden screen of the clerestory, its pierced design inspired by the Navajo pottery which Wright had first seen in Arizona, where he had built one of his own homes, Taliesin West, in 1937. The fruit bowl in the foreground bears a similar

pattern and the vase, too, combines function, clarity and simplicity of design.

Wright insisted on designing the furniture and lighting fixtures of the house as well. The two “Origami” chairs, originally made for Taliesin West, were inspired by the art of Japanese paper folding and were intended to be made by manipulating a single large sheet of plywood. Solid-coloured, unpatterned upholstery fabrics ensured that nothing would deflect attention from the form. Tables were spare and linear and seating was mostly built in; a continuous cushioned bench we cannot see runs the length of the concrete wall beyond the right-hand edge of Richards’s image. Wright’s vertical light fixture is visible on the right, faintly glowing in a shadowed recess.

Richards depicts an interior gloriously responsive to light and its muted twin, shadow. We feel the dramatic tension between heat and coolness, brilliant and subdued light, in the alternating horizontal bands of colour which fall across the floor. Although it is nature which produces this tension within the Bachman-Wilson House, it is Richards’s elaborate linear perspective, here with two vanishing points, which gives tension and coherence to the painting. To the right of the oblique shadow which divides the picture into two parts (loosely, “near” and “far” in relation to the viewer), Richards gives us a jubilant symphony of colour in the form of a still life.

The elements of his still life appeal to every one of our five senses: the perfume of the flowers, the arrangements of colours in the bouquet, the tastes of different fruits, the tactile surfaces of smooth apples and porous citrus skins against cool terracotta vessels. The sense of sound is evoked by the presence of the violin and bow, and the small postcard sketch of a portrait of the Baroque composer George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). In a note Richards explains that he chose the violin to be “symbolic of Handel’s early violinist post in 1703 with the Hamburg Opera under Johann Mattheson” before his permanent move to London in 1712. The artist further elaborates on what appeals to him about the studio-based genre of still life painting:

The opportunity to intensely examine the minutia[e] of life is one of the greatest attractions of the still life genre. It enables the artist to comfortably work directly from life and keenly examine the way things look. Unlike human models, objects do not move, and unlike the continuously changing light of the outdoor landscape, the studio lighting of a still life is consistent. The still life embodies a small-scale symbolic world that allows the artist to focus on and experiment with the three basic components of visual art: shape, tone and colour.

Like all the other elements in Richards’s still life, the violin is part of the harmonious whole of the composition but at the same time retains its own identity of shape, texture and weight. Each of the items in the still life stands

as a separate entity, casting the shadow of its own particular form. We are made acutely aware of these individual objects, see “the way things look” with a heightened attention and awareness surpassing the perception of our everyday lives. And so the books, the postcard, each sharply defined petal and piece of fruit appear familiar but far from mundane. The whole projects a presence greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally, if we were to draw an oblique line from the neck of the violin out to the far left-hand edge of the canvas, it would lead our eye straight to the all-important little girl who sits quietly in her “ideal place.” Richards has explained that she is his granddaughter, Juliet, and it is clear that she is the apple of his eye. But what she embodies in his “small-scale symbolic world” goes far beyond the particular, to the universal. Juliet gathers in her small frame the past, the present and the future. Heiress to the cultural bounties represented by the landscape, the house and all that it contains, she is the embodiment of our hopes and creative possibilities.

Holly Farrell, “Untitled” (page)

Contrary to folk wisdom, you can tell a lot about a book by its cover. Holly Farrell renders the individuality of each one of her books as faithfully as if she were painting a portrait of an old friend. Standing, lying or leaning together in close companionship, the assembled books of her still life painting convey the energy of a group portrait. While she has assigned no title to the work, I would suggest “Untitled” as an apt and playfully ironic designation, since each book she depicts is clearly named.

“Books and doors are the same thing,” writes the novelist Jeannette Winterson, herself a happily obsessed book collector. “You open them and you go through to another world.” Farrell here depicts sixty-six of the books she owns and cherishes, and judging by the seemingly endless way in which they stretch off both sides of the painting, she could have included many more. Their titles identify them as popular works of fiction, and they contain between their weathered boards the many worlds Farrell entered and explored while she was growing up in a remote part of northern Ontario. They comprise the enchanted ground of her adolescence, a time when she herself was still “untitled,” struggling to realize an identity for herself and to expand her field of vision, to imagine a life which might someday open to her.

Geographically the authors took her to every region of North America (Twain, Steinbeck, Lucy Maud Montgomery), to England and Scotland (Dickens, the Brontes, Swift, Stevenson), to Europe and Africa and Russia (Spyri [Heidi], C. S. Forester, Dostoyevsky). Their narratives span over three centuries and extend into imagined futures and societies. Nearly a third of the books contain stories which are gothic, ghostly or speculative in nature. There are titles by Poe, Bram Stoker, Stephen King, Mary Shelley, Tolkien and more. These are narratives about dark journeys and disturbing discoveries, and their inclusion here may reflect the anxieties

which attend adolescence. Or possibly their escapist narratives provided a kind of haven, a safe place in which to vicariously experience a fictional protagonist's dire adventures.

One of the most interesting aspects of the painting is that what Farrell read during those years is not the real subject of the work. All the books are shown closed, with only their spines turned outward so as to be visible. The painting is concerned not with the books' printed contents but with their physicality and the fact of their survival, their continued tangible presence in the world. What matters here are their histories, their passage from hand to hand over the years and decades, conveyed in a code of cracked or faded covers and torn dust jackets, scars accumulated over the course of their lives.

The idea that every object has its own "life" is a compelling notion for collectors because it inspires and reinforces our feelings of personal connection. Things that carry the evidence of their pasts are bridges to our fleeting younger selves and to the community of previous readers who turned the selfsame pages we turn, felt the texture and heft of the book in their hands, just as we do. In the persistence of the object, past and present come together and we are there, witnesses and active participants in the continuum. Some of a book's time-travel "magic" arises from its period design (the rubbed gold-stamping of the bedraggled copy of *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, or the elaborate curlicues decorating the jacket of *Gone with the Wind*), but for the most part it is our tantalizing sense of the presence of others which beguiles us.

As in her other works, Farrell here shows us what she calls "common things," the kind of dated, humble and ubiquitous objects which today's fastidious "de-clutterers" urge us to rid ourselves of. But their ordinariness is precisely what the artist values about her vintage books. These titles were printed in large quantities for the mass market and it was in mass quantities that, once read, they were given or thrown away, sold or otherwise abandoned. None ever resided in pristine condition amid the orderly shelves of an antiquarian bookshop. Farrell prefers fingerprints to reverence and does not hesitate to dog-ear pages as she reads, leaving traces of the fact that she, too, has passed this way. The books she celebrates are treasures that came to hand—treasured because they came to hand—passed down from a sibling or rescued from a jumble sale or a second-hand store, the kind of books Farrell regularly encountered in school and at the public library.

"I have multiple copies of some books," she writes, "same year of publication, same binding, but different wear. I like that each book has its own past. I like the dedications written inside, the pressed flowers that are hidden between the pages, bookmarks, *ex libris*." Her enthusiasm nudged a distant memory in me, and sure enough I found this passage in my nearly fifty-year-old edition of *Helene Hanff's 84 Charing Cross Road*: "I love inscriptions on flyleaves and notes in the margins. I like the comradely sense of...reading passages someone long ago has called my attention to."

Farrell's paintings evolve through a long, meticulous process. She begins by arranging her objects in natural light, positioning and re-positioning them for balance, angle, visual interest. Her "large" decisions

undergo a painstaking process of fine-tuning as she makes minute adjustments which will have important repercussions once she begins to paint. In “Untitled” she steps some of the books forward on the shelf and pushes others back, creating subtle shadows. A slim, fragile copy of a childhood classic, Peter Rabbit, leans all alone, sheltering in a darkened gulf created by walls of stacked, more substantial and “adult” books, including Lolita. A set-up, she says, can take several days to “settle”: “It all has to come together to express something of a history, my history, our collective history.” She paints directly from the objects and seldom refers to photographs unless she runs out of natural light.

For paintings of books, she uses a grid to block in the spines and then renders the subject and background in layers of acrylic with applications of varnish between the layers. When she is satisfied with this “base” she applies several coats of varnish before working the painting in oil, a process which changes the look of the acrylic painting underneath, “softening... leaving shadows, warming the colours.” Unlike acrylic, oil requires time to dry and must then be protected by coats of varnish from any material laid over top of it. Only then does Farrell resume the process of alternating layers of acrylic paints and glazes, building up the depth. Many layers of colour are needed, she writes, “to allow for shifts that come with age, shifts in the dye from years of handling, or exposure to light, to dampness, to other unknown factors. More than the title, these layers put down a book’s history... reflecting the book’s life.” As the work nears completion, Farrell paints in the titles, correcting faded lettering only when she feels the omissions would be distracting to viewers.

So patient and detailed a process is inevitably a meditative one as well. Farrell confides that as she works she reflects on her own history, on the young girl she was before and after she read each book, on who she is now. In a sense the layers of her paintings reflect the layers of her evolving selfhood. Looking at this still life, I am reminded that whatever our ages, we are all of us, always, Works in Progress.

David Milne, “Evening Sky” (page)

A Time Traveller’s Day Trip: From 2020 to 1909 and Back Again

It’s Sunday morning. Last night’s heavy rain has scrubbed the city clean. Through his small window the young man sees a blue sky filled with light and as clear as a country stream. If he were back home in Ontario he would be getting ready for church, but here in New York his life is different. He is twenty-seven years old and Sunday is a day for painting.

He takes the train from his cramped lodgings in Manhattan to Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, on the

outskirts of the City. He carries with him the tools of his trade: brushes, illustration boards, colours he will thin with water. Though he makes such excursions as often as he can, the escape they provide seems never to last long enough. Life in this crowded city is a constant struggle. He feels split in two, supporting his body by producing show cards for shop windows, nurturing his soul by making his true art.

He takes up his position on high ground and looks out across expanses of green. As he sets to work he is under many spells: the spell of Monet and the French Impressionists, the spell of the American landscape painters Hassam and Twachtman and Metcalf, the Transcendentalist spell of Emerson and Thoreau, even the faint spell of the nascent abstraction he has seen in the paintings of John Marin. But hours later, by the time he has finished painting, all these have been subsumed under the supreme spell of his own vocation. Just as the sunset is at its most brilliant against the approaching dark of the sky, David Milne makes his great decision. He will dedicate his life to the making of art and leave the world of commerce far behind. “Evening Sky,” the last of four watercolour “sketches” he makes that day, is the visual embodiment of his promise and vow, a spiritual resolve in the form of a mystical landscape.

Two years later he will tell his fiancée Patsy Hegarty, “I’d rather be dead than not paint.”

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By 1909 Milne has been living in New York for six years. His time at the Art Students League—two years, and a third taking evening classes—has not been satisfying, but at least he has made a start on a commercial career as an illustrator. He and Amos Engel, a fellow student from the League, have set up a studio together, where they eke out meager livings by making show cards. Red-haired Amos is gregarious and talkative, somewhat eccentric and too easily drawn in by spiritualism and Theosophy, but he makes a good foil to Milne’s inward, contemplative turn of mind. The business hardly pays and competition is fierce. Milne hates chasing after jobs for store advertisements and magazine covers, work he finds mechanical and superficial. He is also frustrated by editors who repeatedly demand changes to his submissions without paying for his extra time and effort.

Yet there are compensations. He manages to spend half-days painting and this year the New York Watercolor Club and the American Watercolor Society have begun to exhibit his works. He enjoys the immediacy and “instantaneous” quality of the medium, its demand that the painter be decisive. His work is well received and is supported by artists whom he respects.

Among them is Ernest Lawson, a founding member along with Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast and others of the avant-garde group who call themselves “The Eight,” and who will come to be known as the Ashcan School for their interest in painting scenes of urban social realism. Lawson, however, remains committed to landscape painting. He regales his younger colleagues with stories of his time in Paris, when he shared an apartment with the English writer Somerset Maugham and met the Impressionist painter Alfred Sisley, who continues to influence his work.

Like Sisley's, Lawson's paintings are resplendent with light. They employ vivid horizontal bands of colour to distinguish areas of land, sky and water. "Colour," he intones, "should be used to depict the three major emotions in a man's life—anticipation, realization and retrospection." Milne listens avidly. He believes in the importance of feeling in the creation of art. Years later he will call it by other names: "aesthetic emotion, quickening, bringing to life."

New York, despite the economic hardships it imposes, offers artists a world brimming with treasures. There is the impressive Metropolitan Museum of Art on Central Park, recently expanded and housing historical collections from all over the world. And there are private establishments like the Montross Gallery, receptive to new approaches and welcoming to young practising artists, even those who want only to look and talk and look some more. At the Durand-Ruel Gallery in 1903, Milne had stood for the first time in front of a small group of Haystack paintings by Claude Monet and felt the thrill of "revolutionary" art coursing through him like electricity. Nearly forty years later he will recall the "amazing unity of the pictures... a unity gained by compression, by forcing all detail to work to only one end. In all other pictures I was conscious of parts, in these I felt only the whole." In years to come it will be Monet's "singleness of heart" that will remain with Milne as he pursues his own individual vision, in which Colour will come to act in the service of Form.

Then there are the "thrilling little shows" which the irascible visionary Alfred Stieglitz puts on in his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. These Milne never fails to attend, for not only are the pictures this gallerist shows a revelation, but the discussions and debates they inspire are impassioned and often continue long into the night. When Milne first arrived in the City, the tiny gallery space was called, somewhat grandiosely, The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession. Stieglitz had been exhibiting the photographs of Edward Steichen and Ansel Adams, determined to convince the American public to accept photography as a fine art. Then, in 1907, he had suddenly changed direction. Without relocating he had renamed his gallery simply 291, ensuring that his address would be easily remembered and passed along by word of mouth, and he had opened an exhibition of Rodin's drawings of nudes. The American public, Milne recalls, had been outraged.

Now, only two years later, Stieglitz is pursuing his agenda of exposing American viewers to modern European art by showing works by Matisse, Rodin, Toulouse-Lautrec. He also believes fiercely in the establishment of a distinctly American Modernism born out of a spiritual connection with Nature. Marsden Hartley's richly pigmented paintings are followed by an exhibition of the semi-abstract windblown landscapes of John Marin, whom Steichen has met in Paris and introduced to Stieglitz. Milne listens as Stieglitz adamantly proclaims that artistic integrity is not to be sacrificed on the altar of commerce. This directive resonates, as does Robert Henri's exhortation to young artists: "Find out what is really important to you. Then sing your song. You will have something to sing about and your whole heart will be in the singing."

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In 1910 Milne turned his back on commercial work and permanently embraced the life of a full-time artist. He and Patsy married in 1912 and four years later moved to the tiny village of Boston Corners, a world away from the art milieus and urban complexities of New York City. Milne made pictures that were a world away from “Evening Sky.” So what can we see now, as we look at this work by a young artist at the tipping point of his early career?

For me the most striking feature of the painting is its unity, that quality Milne so admired in Monet’s work--the direction of all details toward “one end,” that is, the achievement of an integrated whole. I see this landscape as largely metaphorical—the depiction of a spiritual event, an interior geography of the artist’s soul at the moment when he is making his transformative decision. And so to my eye everything in the painting seems to rise, all the elements pulling upward in a harmony of ascension. This is so despite the way in which Milne, perhaps recalling Lawson’s compositions, has structured the picture using horizontal bands of colour. A dark green, opaque band of gouache denotes the ragged trees of the foreground, a hazy blue-green band defines the hillside of distant woods opposite, and bands and tiers of brilliant light greens and blues, yellows, pinks and reds convey the luminous sunset in a palette reminiscent of the French Impressionists. Here, too, the brushwork pulls upward in feathery strokes, drawing the eye up and even past the upper edge of the picture.

Three-quarters of the image is devoted to the sky. Milne leaves the illustration board raw and open between the central expanses of watercolour, at the sides and especially toward the top of this area. By keeping these spaces vacant he allows both the gray colour and the texture of the paper to communicate the darkness which will soon blanket both sky and earth. But even more interesting is his decision to leave the bottom of the image vacant below the band of dark trees. This space represents the artist’s vantage point, the supposedly solid ground on which he is standing as he paints. But in the absence of anything suggesting solidity, the entire landscape appears buoyant, floating toward the uppermost reaches of the sky.

“Evening Sky” is a picture which begins in a known landscape but quickly enters a territory of drama and devotion. It becomes, as Milne said of art, “a journey in an unknown land without an objective.” Its power is the emotional power of a religious vision, an uplifting of the spirit on the part of both artist and viewer.

“Or call it love,” Milne will write decades in the future, “Not the love of man or woman or home or country or any material thing but love without an object—intransitive love.”

Richard York, “Sketching” and “Totem” (page)

Richard York is a man for all seasons. A prolific printmaker, painter and writer, he is also a collector of books and etchings and all manner of ephemera, from a full set of Orson Welles’s scripts for his abbreviated Shakespeare radio plays, broadcast in the 1930s and ‘40s, to vintage posters advertising long-defunct circuses in the American Midwest. His studio on Salt Spring Island is part workspace, part library and part Wunderkammer—a cabinet of curiosities whose arcane elements are connected in ways only the artist can explain.

His practice is informed by a deep expertise in the history and aesthetics as well as the technical aspects of woodblock printing in Japan, Europe and North America. While most of the works he has shown at Mira Godard Gallery are vibrantly coloured, he also makes bold images in black and white in which we can see the influence of such masters as William Nicholson, Felix Vallotton and Edvard Munch, transplanted to the sylvan surroundings of rural British Columbia.

For this exhibition York has made two reduction woodcuts on themes which have long been close to his heart: the connection between human beings and Nature, and the relationship between ourselves as individuals and our ancestral histories. As an expression of his ongoing commitment to these two sets of ideas, he includes in each print a self-portrait: Portrait of the Artist as a Man in Black.

“Sketching” presents a scene in which the artist and Nature are so closely attuned that the resulting atmosphere yields an uncanny moment of creative collaboration. As the York figure sits intently sketching near his studio in early morning, the fog begins to lift and disperse, revealing fragments of mountain and sky. The air is cool, the sea quiet, the distant woods dense with the fragrance of cedar. To the artist this setting, this still moment, so strongly suggest the mountains, sea and sky of Norway that as he continues to work it seems quite natural that Edvard Munch should materialize out of the morning mist. As the fog burns away, the York figure is bringing a new picture into being, one in which both he and Munch are present and the sky glows with the Expressionist colours—and without the Angst—of Munch’s most famous image, “The Scream.”

I am, of course, imagining in narrative terms the kind of creative process which may have produced York’s picture. In truth, I believe that such a complex and ultimately mysterious process cannot be translated into the discursive, deliberate language of an essay. Only the language of poetry can provide a counterpart, because like poetry, picture-making requires free interplay between an artist’s conscious and unconscious mind. In his oeuvre, York turns again and again to his connection with Nature in order to release unconscious images, memories and associations.

It is precisely this release of the Unconscious into art-making which Munch and the Expressionists with whom he is commonly associated championed. In his essay “The New Arts, or the Role of Chance in Artistic

Creation”, August Strindberg wrote:

Now freed from the trouble of finding the right colours,
the soul of the painter enjoys the freedom to elicit shapes
...still retaining nature’s model in mind without seeking to
copy it. [The] result reveals itself as a...combination of the
conscious and the unconscious.

In his now famous statement, “I paint not what I see but what I saw,” Munch further introduces the idea of Memory which, by virtue of its being always subjective and infused with emotion, removes all necessity to depict landscapes, people and interiors “accurately” and realistically. In Munch’s words, “a chair can be just as interesting as a man. In one way or another [the artist] must have had an emotional reaction to it and [he] must cause the viewer to react in the same way.”

It is no accident that, physically and emotionally connected as he is to the forested island on which he lives, York has a strong affinity for the woodblock print. He deliberately draws attention to the materiality of the medium, especially the grain of the wood and the texture of the paper. In mixing and applying his many colours (there are a dozen in “Sketching”), he is careful to allow the woodgrain to show through, providing movement to guide the viewer’s eye, adding complexity to linear definition and modulating the colour values.

The most animated area of this print is the sky, which is alive with creative energy. There is no attempt on York’s part to convey deep perspective, and while the York figure is much smaller in scale than Munch, the space between them has the flattened, compressed quality of Japanese ukiyo-e prints. In addition the many interacting colours impart to the image the “push-pull” dynamic Hans Hofmann recommended for creating a sense of movement in flat, non-representational paintings.

These colours are reflected onto Munch’s face as he looks directly at us through world-weary eyes. The brim of his dark fedora casts onto his face a blue shadow which the lines of the woodgrain seem to deepen. Against the bright, kinetic sky Munch in his dark woolen jacket and vest looks particularly static, his melancholy face fragile and almost transparent in contrast to his thickly textured clothing. The overall effect is to make us aware of the woodblock print as a physical object, the product of an artist’s hand and his subjective vision and sensibility. It is interesting that the face of the York figure has the same transparent appearance as Munch’s, created by the woodgrain and the blue pigment—a visual cue to Munch’s status as York’s “spirit double.”

“Totem” uses colour and the grain of the wooden block in much the same way as “Sketching” does and so I will not rehearse the technical similarities here. This print contains four portraits of York’s ancestors on his

mother's side, culminating in his self-portrait with an "empty" expanse of black at the extreme right side of the sheet. The image arises from York's conviction that "you can't know who you are if you don't know where you come from." He believes that we all inherit talents and qualities and even memories from the DNA of our forebears, and that these received characteristics combine with what we learn over the course of our own lives to produce the individuals we become.

Once again, the environment of British Columbia has inspired the artist. In this case he adapts the totem poles of the B.C. First Nations, substituting a horizontal format for the traditional vertical one. In place of the animal imagery of the carved and painted poles, he provides carved and inked images of five generations of his family, creating a visual history which can be read from left to right or right to left, depending on whether you prefer to travel backward or forward in time.

The generations represented here stretch back to 1862, when the artist's great-great-grandfather (on our far left) was photographed at the Chicago World's Fair. Together the portraits represent only a small fraction of York's maternal ancestry, which in North America dates back about four hundred years to the landing of the Mayflower. So assiduous have been the artist's researches into his family history that he has managed to locate and purchase online a Bible dating from 1623 and originally belonging to his ninth great-great-grandfather, who was a founding member of the Guilford Colony in Connecticut, one of the original Thirteen Colonies. Another ancestor fought in the Revolutionary War and yet another was a ten-year-old drummer boy in the Civil War.

The artist's mother appears as a ghostly presence at York's shoulder. She is, of course, the most proximate to him in time, and the colours in which he presents her also bring her image physically forward. Though she looks spectral, she "feels" emotionally present. It is significant that the lenses through which York views the world are white, their paleness carried over from his mother's image. She encouraged him in his art and was herself a painter. In celebration of the richness of his psychic inheritance, he presents himself as a man who sees with the accumulated vision of all his ancestors. And so the colours, too—fourteen or fifteen in this print—are rich and complex, and the woodgrain we see through them defines clear and continuous horizontal lines connecting generation to generation.

The sum of all colours, the most inclusive, is black, which absorbs all the other colours of the spectrum. It seems odd, then, that in Western culture black has historically been associated not with accumulation but with absence and loss: death, depression, mourning, the darkness of the underworld into which Persephone disappears each year. But for many artists including York, black implies not endings but beginnings, the tenebrous depths from which their creations come into being.

"All art," writes Paul Klee, "is a memory of our dark origins whose fragments live in the artist forever." The black panel on the right-hand side of "Totem," the space into which York's self-portrait blends, represents the possibilities as yet unknown awaiting future generations of his family. It is at once a space for remembering

and a space for becoming.

Colin Fraser, “Green Light” (page)

What I always feel when I look at one of Colin Fraser’s pictures is his sheer joy in the experience of painting light. Whether the image shows an arrangement of objects on a table, a landscape seen through a window or a sleeping model in a sunlit room, it is the quality and fall of the light upon different shapes and textures which is the true subject of the painting. Egg tempera is a medium ideally suited to communicating this subject, as it combines a matte surface with built-up layers of translucent colour. Fraser’s paintings glow with their own inner luminescence.

It should come as no surprise that an artist so adept at painting natural light in pastoral settings should rise to the antithetical challenges of rendering artificial light in the downtown core of a big city after dark. Suspended between night and day, the hours between midnight and dawn have an atmosphere of wakeful ambiguity which has long inspired poets, painters and film makers. Fraser’s Nocturne paintings include some of the qualities—though not the defining one--present in film noir depictions of the “mean streets” down which the detective-heroes of hard-boiled fiction must go. Audiences of these films experience the protagonist’s feeling of isolation, the elongated glare of headlights on slick asphalt roads, the eerie vacancy of partially lit office buildings and shops which during the day are hives of commerce. Lights seem to deepen rather than illuminate the gloom of deserted city streets, confusing the eye and exacerbating the sense of danger.

The overriding subject of film noir is darkness, including moral and existential darkness. Fraser’s subject is quite the opposite. In “Green Light” he deliberately excludes the sinister and threatening, as his optimistic-sounding title suggests. What we do sense is the artist’s feeling of suspension between the familiar and the unfamiliar in a city where he is not a complete stranger but also not at home. The place he shows us has the generic features of most North American cities, a uniformity which can give travellers the impression that a city they are seeing for the first time is both alien and known. However the street signs--Gould Street and Dundas Square--and other details identify it specifically as Toronto, a city which Fraser has often visited for the happy purpose of attending the openings of his exhibitions at Mira Godard Gallery. Jet-lagged by the time difference between Toronto and his home in Sweden, he takes long walks at odd hours in the hope of tempting sleep.

Given the many hard surfaces he depicts here—the steel and plate-glass buildings and the concrete sidewalk, for example—“Green Light” has a surprisingly soft look about it. The young traveller on our right, wrapped in her padded jacket and carrying her canvas backpack, is a kind of study in soft, tactile surfaces, an

impression which the wash of pink colour on her clothing reinforces. (She is also, perhaps, a stand-in or “double” for the artist.) Even the road and sidewalk show more interest on the artist’s part in revealing their many layers of colour and the complexity of their brushstrokes, their varying lengths and directions, than in convincing us of the rigidity of their industrial materials.

The palette here is extremely complex. In reality asphalt roads are black, concrete sidewalks are gray; here, it is largely pastel colours which Fraser builds up in countless layers until he produces a surface which dances with reflected light from many different sources. The road especially seems organic and almost fluid, able to respond to changes in the proximity and intensity of the lights. The area directly beneath the green traffic light, for example, is awash in shades of that colour, but we understand that when the light changes to red, so too, will this section of road. Similarly were the cars to move from the middle distance closer to the foreground, the yellow reflections of their bright headlights would transform the road surface accordingly. And so what we usually perceive as a hard, static surface appears in Fraser’s painting as a soft, active one.

Every kind of illumination of the city at night is represented here, each with its own characteristic “heat,” colour and intensity. The aggressive red neon of the “Skyteam” sign, the pulsing green of the traffic light, the piercing yellow of the headlights, grouped within close proximity to set one another off, have the most direct impact on the eye. Softer, cooler lights emanate from the shop windows and fall in attenuated bands onto the street. Further back are lights left on overnight in office towers. There are even a few lonely lamps still burning behind insomniacs’ curtains in the distant windows of a high-rise. If we follow the lights along the road lane divisions in accordance with Fraser’s lines of perspective, our eyes take us from the relatively open space of the foreground into the deeper interior spaces of the picture. It is here that we discover something that may surprise us.

The further we move “into” the picture, the more abstract it becomes. The foreground, for example, contains rectangular signs bearing legible lettering which spells out names or brands familiar to us: Dundas Square, Banksy, 7-Eleven. These are sufficiently accurate to pass for realistic depictions. Yet the position of the all-important green light establishes another plane within the picture, and it is behind this plane that the realistic signs break up into a lively display of brightly coloured, rectilinear forms—an abstract composition. We can still make out the shapes of cars, a bus and hanging traffic lights, but for the most part the picture in its deep central space is less concerned with specific detail than with kaleidoscopic squares and rectangles of colour and bursts of light. The longer you look, the more abstract this section appears.

An earlier example of Fraser’s interest in strategies of abstraction is his still life painting “Red Sky” (see thumbnail, page), in which meticulously placed studio lighting falls from above directly onto the assembled vessels and flowers and a narrow strip of white linen tablecloth. “Red sky at night, sailors’ delight/Red sky at morning, sailors take warning,” goes the old adage, but the association in this case is misleading. There is no

sky in this painting and no source of natural light. The red wall which occupies half the surface area of the picture recalls Matisse's "Red Studio," in which the artist used the colour red to begin dismantling the idea of a painting's deep interior space. I am not suggesting that Fraser is an abstract painter, but rather that he is concerned in some of his pictures with the illusion of interior space and the relationship of background to foreground. "Red Sky" eliminates deep space in favour of bringing everything forward, close to the picture plane. Even the red wall, normally the background to the objects represented, assumes the importance and interest of foreground.

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Fraser has said that his Nocturne paintings "are not so much portraits of the city [as about] how it feels as an outsider to walk around it." Certainly he has captured that mood of displacement in "Green Light." It may even seem at first glance a straightforward kind of picture, a cityscape in which the inclusion of familiar names and landmarks may give viewers the idea that we instantly understand what we are seeing. Yet as always when looking at works of art, we need to slow down and give Fraser's painting our fully engaged attention, to look both at and beyond its sumptuous surface.

Takao Tanabe, "Untitled (Diamond)" and "Forest 5" (page)

Here by his own account are some of Tak Tanabe's favourite things: absolute silence, heavy fog, dark clouds, tidal beaches, early winter.

No wonder so many of us see him as the quintessential landscape and seascape painter of British Columbia, capturing its nuances of light and wind and weather. Even better, in his paintings we have the place all to ourselves. Tanabe gives us B.C. in the off-season, B.C. depicted without any trace of human presence. Even the artist himself obligingly moves out of the way. The paint seems to have settled magically onto his canvases like mist, like spindrift.

Yet it was not until 1980, when he bought his acreage on Vancouver Island and built his house and studio there, that Tanabe finally came home to stay. For most of the years that he travelled, studied and worked in Winnipeg, Vancouver, New York, London, continental Europe and Tokyo, and later as Head of Visual Arts and Artist-in-Residence at the Banff School, Tanabe was an abstract painter, printmaker and at times sculptor. The two works in this exhibition, one a monumental painting on canvas, the other a mixed-media work on paper, show two different approaches to abstraction by a restless artist with a revolutionary's spirit, a man who, when it comes to making art, has yet to encounter a rule he will not break.

“Untitled (Diamond)” is a hard-edged, geometric painting made more than twenty years after the centre of the art world had shifted from Paris and London to New York, where Abstract Expressionism had come to hold sway. Artists who wanted to be taken seriously more or less had to make abstract work. Tanabe had taken drawing classes from Hans Hofmann and had lived in New York while attending the Brooklyn Museum of Art School from 1950 to ‘51. By 1968, when he made “Diamond,” he had moved from abstractions which sometimes suggested elements of landscape to non-representational works which featured sharply defined expanses of bold, flat colour in which the brushwork or “hand” of the artist was undetectable. Masking ensured that the edges were unerringly precise. Moreover the “rules” prohibited any suggestion of depth or interior space behind the picture plane and any suggestion of movement which was not achieved exclusively through the adjustment and placement of colours.

It was essential in these kinds of pictures that no narrative or outside information, nothing of what Frank Stella later called “the old, humanistic values [people] always find on the canvas,” blur viewers’ experience of seeing what was directly in front of them. Stella declared:

My painting is based on the fact that only what you can see there is there. It [the painting] really is an object...a thing.
...All I want anyone to get out of my paintings is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any conclusion... What you see is what you see.

Part of this pure experience had to do with the size of the picture. Large-scale paintings command not only the viewer’s direct but also his peripheral vision, “meeting” him face to face. Viewer and object stand before each other without external distractions to interfere with the dialogue which takes place in the space between them.

“What you see is what you see.” Except that in Tanabe’s “Diamond,” what you see is not what you think you see, and that is precisely Tanabe’s subversive intention. The title should immediately alert us. That bold red form might have been a diamond if its topmost acute angle had been included in the painting. But as it stands, what we see is not a four-sided but a five-sided form, a pentagon. Once alerted, we begin to look at the other geometric shapes more cautiously, especially those which pull off the edges of the canvas, giving every indication that in theory they have the power to extend infinitely out in all directions.

The triangles are especially intriguing, particularly those dominating the lower portion of the painting. At first we see two large white triangles, with most of a multi-coloured one inverted between them. (In fact, this latter form is missing its lower acute angle and so is not a triangle but a quadrilateral, a ruse played on our eyes,

like its “diamond” cousin, above.) But look more closely and you find that the large triangular forms seem not only to absorb smaller triangles but to deconstruct themselves. There is even a hint of prismatic activity; flat shafts of blues and greens appear to break up as they pass “through” the white areas. And the “diamond” appears to have two faces or facets, produced by making the bottom half a slightly darker shade of red, a red that seems to pull away from us.

Reason tells us that “faceting” and “passing through a prism” are both ideas that presuppose depth, but there is no depth in this picture. Tanabe has played with our perceptions, providing false directions so that our minds and eyes convey mutually exclusive information. This so intrigued me that I asked some friends to take part in a survey. The results demonstrated how admirably Tanabe had succeeded in baffling observers’ senses. One group of viewers insisted that the lower part of the painting “juttied outward to the right,” while an equally adamant group argued that the same area “pulled to the left and seemed to fold inward.” Both groups pointed to the white shapes as the zone where “all the activity was taking place.”

Recently I’ve seen a small Tanabe painting from 1965 in which the same “prism” and “folding” dynamics are present. Similar flat stripes of bright colour appear, but here the artist also shows his “hand” by filling in two triangles and a pentagon with watery, transparent green acrylic applied in soft gestural sweeps. The title of the painting is “Jul Box” (a pun on July/jewel?). It is at once hard-edged and lyrical and thanks to its small scale, an object you can hold in your hands.

If ever an artist were consistently Out of the Box, it is Tak Tanabe.

Painted in 2005, “Forest 5” is a semi-representational work on paper made with acrylic paint and sumi ink. From 1959 to ‘61 Tanabe lived in Japan and studied calligraphy and sumi painting with two masters at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts. In the years and exhibitions that followed critics would occasionally point to aspects of his work which to them indicated the influence of his Japanese “roots.”

Tanabe himself has always deflected such interpretations. His interest in calligraphy-inspired brush strokes had begun years earlier in New York, where Abstract Expressionist painters like Franz Kline had been exploring the use of calligraphic marks to achieve a new, emotive language for art. Moreover Tanabe’s direct exposure to Japanese sensibilities and rituals showed him that he was thoroughly Western in his approach to artmaking and to life in general. In Japan he felt himself to be a foreigner. “Forest 5” is a Nature painting which combines the Japanese tradition of sumi-e with Hans Hofmann’s strategies for bringing light into abstract works through the use of colour. This synthesis is more complex than it sounds and the painting is more complicated than it looks, especially since, as we have come to expect, there is an additional twist in the methods Tanabe uses to achieve his picture.

Sumi-e (literally “black ink painting”) is a tradition brought from China to Japan by Zen Buddhist monks

in the mid-thirteenth century. It is as much a way of life as it is a way of applying brush to painting surface. The artist opens and clears his mind and heart in meditative preparation for the moment which will allow the Life force (Chi) to move his brush in perfect harmony with the animating spirit of the universe, reflected in Nature. The contemporary Zen sumi master Mokuza describes the philosophical dimension of the art practice in this way:

The harmony of a work of art reflects the universal harmony of the Tao [literally “The Way”], which is the supreme principle that has generated the world and rules the secret rhythm of Nature...The dominant feature of great Chinese painting is landscape [images which are] subtly realistic and metaphorical at the same time. Their focal points are mountain, waterfall, tree.

Zen discipline rules the painting process. The sumi painter loads his brush with black ink and stands poised over the paper. When he feels his “heart and hand to be in perfect harmony” he makes a single stroke and then lifts the brush away from the surface. Each stroke must stand without adjustment or embellishment; there must be no effort to “improve” it. The artist may apply the ink in any consistency he wishes, from undiluted black to a thin, grey wash, but no other colour is to be used. As subsequent single strokes accumulate on the paper their positions establish “a climate of symbolic correspondences” which reveal in microcosm “the balance established by the Tao between Heaven and Earth, man and Nature, gravity and lightness, fullness and emptiness.”

The brush strokes of sumi-e traditionally have a fluid quality which reflects the life force endlessly flowing through the universe. However, in “Forest 5” Tanabe uses the black ink in an entirely different way. Rather than a pliant, saturated brush, he employs the end of its wooden handle or some similar implement to make abrupt, dry and scratchy marks which suggest the sharpness of pine needles. More densely layered in some parts of the image than in others, the marks produce the darkening effect of cross-hatching, building not only shadows but a scrim of spikey pine trees on a mountain slope seemingly inhospitable to human intruders.

All this would keep us at a distance were it not for the inspired way Tanabe introduces light, with six broad, fluid, azure blue brush strokes. The gesture comes from sumi-e but the bold use of colour is Abstract Expressionist. “In nature, light creates colour,” instructed Hofmann, “in the picture, colour creates light.” Tanabe’s masterful blue strokes convey not only light but also a waterfall or the bright, clear sky reflected in a stream.

“Forest 5” is finally a microcosm of the balance between darkness and light and between the rough way and the smooth. It is at once a physical landscape and a metaphor for life.

~

Envoi: 20/20 Vision and Just Looking

Everyone looks at pictures differently. My own belief is that you can't hear what a person has to say unless you yourself are quiet, and you can't truly see a work of art unless you literally take yourself out of the picture.

I look at art not because I want it to confirm my identity or ideas but because I want to be amazed, and not just for the time I am with the picture but afterwards too. I want to see things in the world in a way I didn't see them before. I want the artist's vision to expand my own.

Expertise is not a prerequisite to looking. I am neither an art critic nor a historian. My only method is to be still, take my time and allow myself the luxury of taking in every detail, down to the smallest and most subtle. For me details are not clues to any message or "meaning" craftily hidden in the picture. Looking at an image in this way is more about acting clever than about experiencing art. I look at details because you can't rush details. They slow down the process of your looking both mentally and physically. They demand your full attention and in the process enable the expansion of your ability to feel.

After fifty years of looking I am more than ever open to astonishment.

Eva Seidner is a writer, lecturer, and collector with a doctorate in English Literature and a wide range of collecting interests spanning the late nineteenth century to the present. Areas of special interest include contemporary painting, Symbolist objects and design of the early twentieth century, and sculptures of the International Studio Glass movement. For Mira Godard Gallery she has written the catalogue essays for *The Self-Portrait Show* (2012), *Artist and Model* (2015) and *Tom Forrestall, Recent Work* (2016).

Dr. Seidner is currently writing a book about an early twentieth century European artist. She and her family live in Toronto and Salt Spring Island, B.C.

Colour Plates



JEREMY SMITH

Study for Selfie
2016
pencil on paper
10 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches



JEREMY SMITH

Moon, Mars and Dock
2005
original signed screenprint
18 x 14 1/2 inches
edition 26



JOHANNES VERMEER A Lady Writing a Letter 1665
Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



JEREMY SMITH Selfie 2016-17 egg tempera on masonite 34 1/2 x 23 3/4 inches



PIETER AERTSEN
The Adoration of the Shepherds (Fragment) c1559
Collection: Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam

LINDEE CLIMO

20/20 Spirit Doubles #2, after Pieter Aertsen
2018
oil on canvas
53 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches





LINDEE CLIMO

20/20 Spirit Doubles #1, after Pieter Aertsen
2018
oil on canvas
18 x 36 inches



TAKAO TANABE

Untitled (Diamond)
1968
acrylic on canvas
61 x 40 1/4 inches



TAKAO TANABE

Forest 5

2005

sumi ink and acrylic on paper

24 1/4 x 35 3/4 inches



Piero della Francesca The Flagellation of Christ c. 1445
Collection: Galleria Nazionale della Marche, Urbino

PHIL RICHARDS

Sitting in an Ideal Place
2017
acrylic on canvas on board
48 x 36 inches





MICHAEL THOMPSON

Junction Girl (detail)

2014

pencil on paper

22 1/2 x 30 inches



Laneway in East Montreal c. 1978

silver print

(photo: Michael Thompson)



MICHAEL THOMPSON

Junction Girl
2018
acrylic on linen
36 x 48 inches

DAVID MILNE (1882-1953)

Evening Sky

c 1909-10

watercolour and gouache on gray illustration board

15 1/8 x 10 5/8 inches

CR#102.45

Provenance: Directly from the Estate of David Milne





RICHARD YORK

Sketching

2017

original signed reduction woodcut

9 x 14 1/4 inches

edition 10

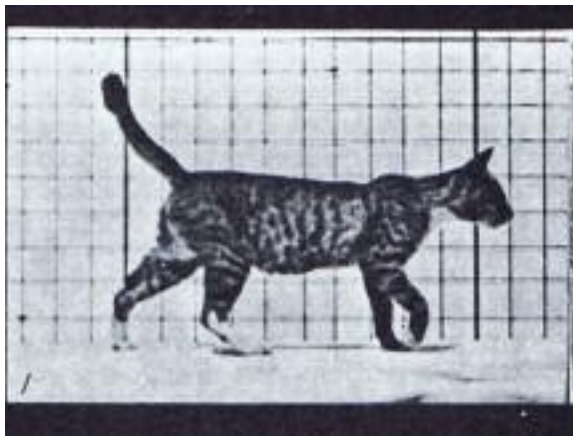


RICHARD YORK

Totem
2017
original signed reduction woodcut
9 x 22 inches
edition 7



TOM FORRESTALL The Bindings 2018 egg tempera on board 7 x 23 1/2 inches



Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904)
Cat Walking (Cell #1) 1877-78



ALEX COLVILLE (1920-2013)
Cat on Fence 1956
original signed screenprint
21 x 28 inches edition 20



COLIN FRASER

Red Sky 2015

egg temora on board

46 3/4 x 70 3/4 inches

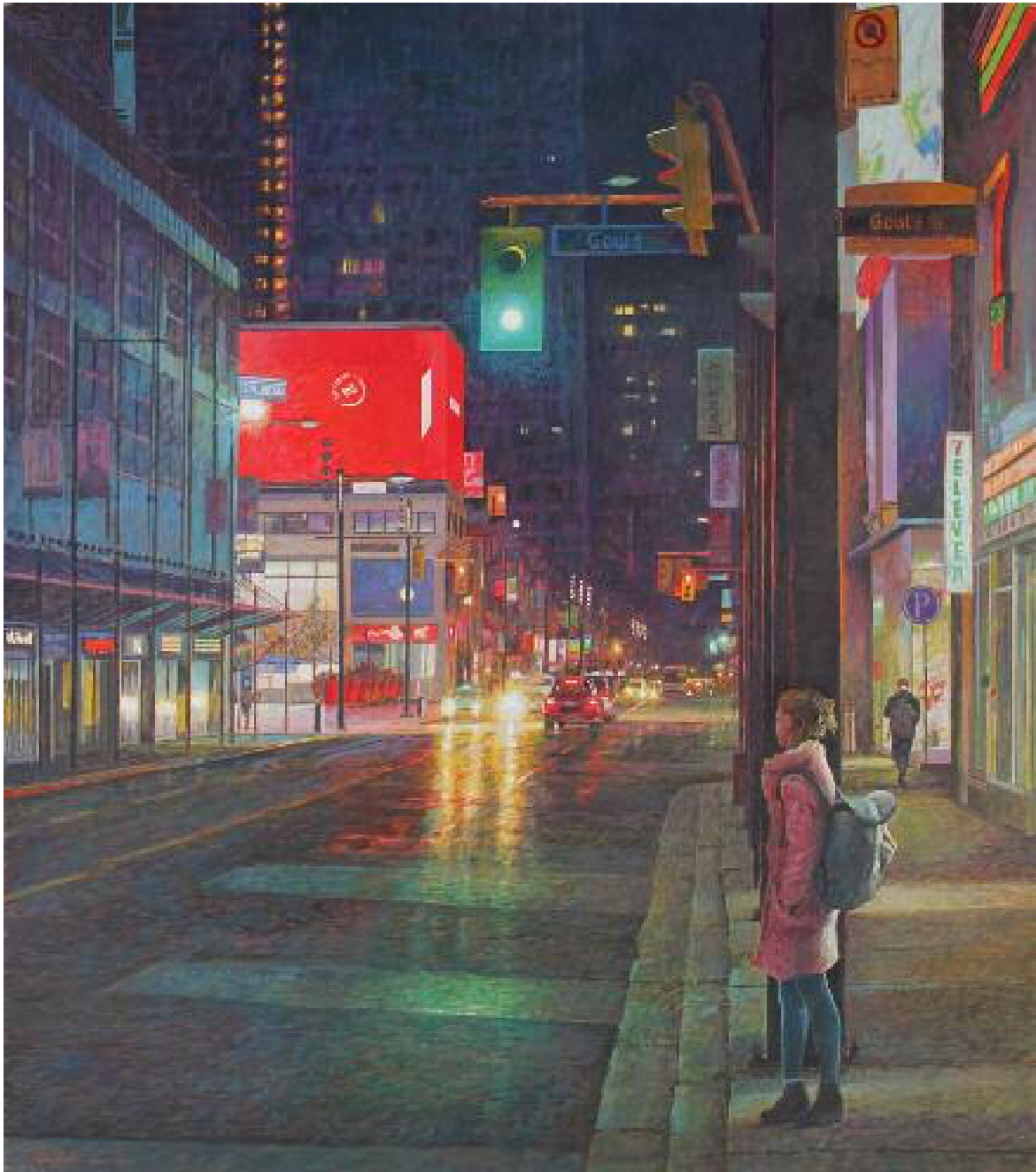
COLIN FRASER

Green Light

2019

egg tempera on board

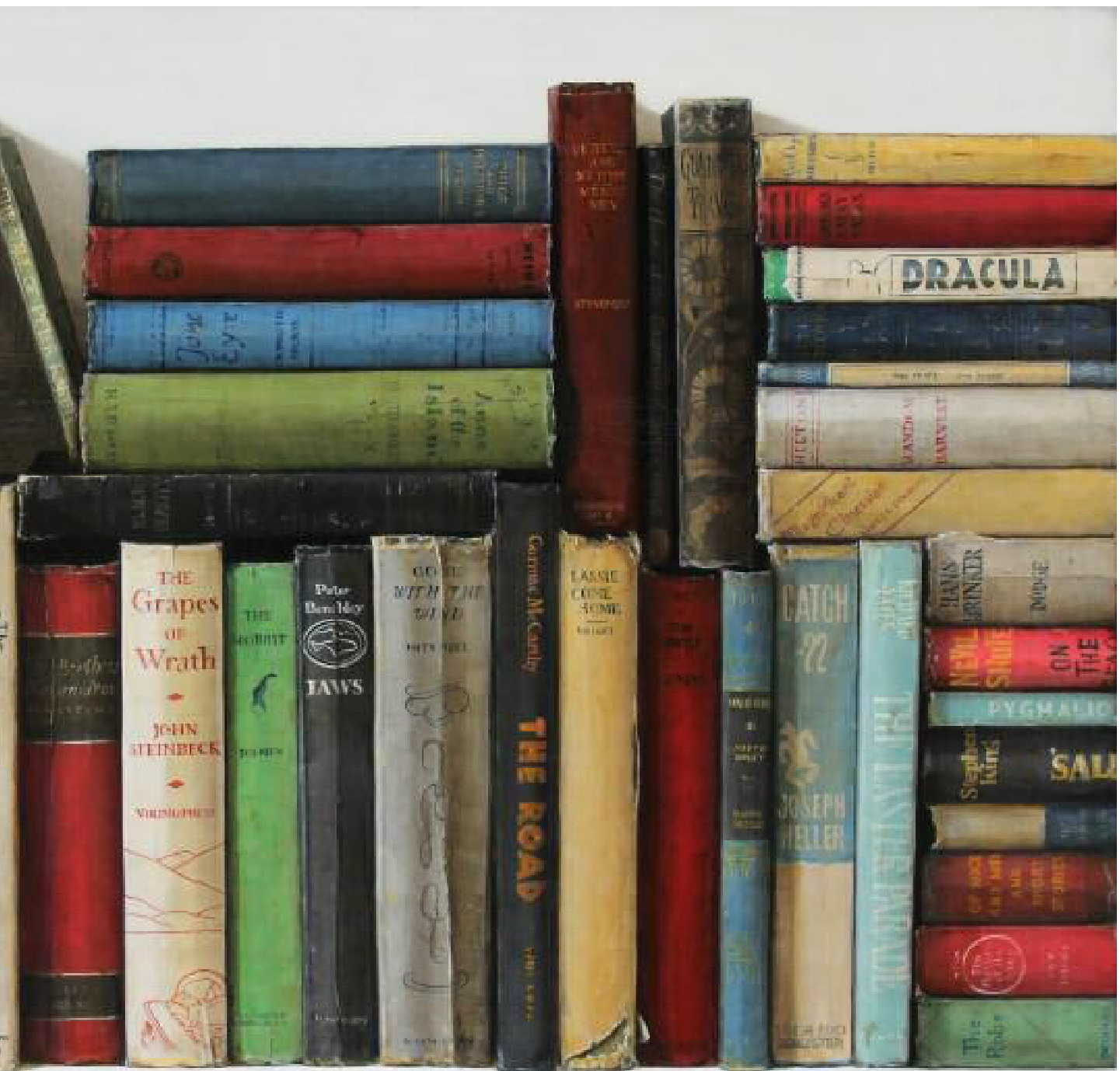
35 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches



HOLLY FARRELL

Untitled
2019
acrylic and oil on board
20 x 28 inches





List of works

LINDEE CLIMO

20/20 Spirit Doubles #1 2018
oil on canvas 18 x 36 inches

page 59

LINDEE CLIMO

20/20 Spirit Doubles #2 2018
oil on canvas 53 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches

page

HOLLY FARRELL

Untitled 2019
acrylic and oil on board 20 x 28 inches

page 65

TOM FORRESTALL

The Bindings 2018
acrylic on board 7 x 23 1/2

page 73

COLIN FRASER

Green Light 2019
egg tempera on board 35 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches

page 75

DAVID MILNE

Evening Sky C.R.# 102.45 c. 1909-10
watercolour and gouache on gray illustration board 15 1/8 x 10 5/8 inches

page 77

PHIL RICHARDS

Sitting in an Ideal Place 2017
acrylic on canvas on board 48 x 36 inches

page

JEREMY SMITH

Selfie 2016-17

egg tempera on board 34 1/2 x 23 3/4 inches

page

JEREMY SMITH

Study for Selfie 2016

pencil on paper 10 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches

page 69

TAKAO TANABE

Forest 5 2005

acrylic on paper 24 1/2 x 35 3/4 inches

page 63

TAKAO TANABE

Untitled (Diamond) 1968

acrylic on canvas 61 x 40 1/4 inches

page 14

MICHAEL THOMPSON

Junction Girl 2018

acrylic on linen 36 x 48 inches

page 57

RICHARD YORK

Sketching 2017

Original signed reduction woodcut 9 x 14 1/4 inches edition 10

page 63

RICHARD YORK

Totem 2017

Original signed reduction woodcut 9 x 22 inches edition 7

page 57

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