

FRAGMENTING THE LANDSCAPE

An Exhibition of paintings

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

My paintings are done from my memory of nature experienced at different moments in time and place in Canada and Europe, discovered during my frequent travels. Colour, light, movement, smell and sound recalled in memory, lead to abstract formulations in which an expressive softness is mixed with harsh reality.

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Landscape in art, as conventionally conceived and executed, is a framed representation of a section of the natural world, a cropped view, selected and reduced so that it can be a portable memento of an arresting or pleasing visual experience of rural scenery.¹

The swoosh of the oceanic surf, the smell of seaweed, and the old immense trees covered with moss-man feels like a helpless nutshell surrounded by the flourishing nature. The colours ranging from emerald and turquoise to azure and cyan are fascinating. The beaches give the impression of endless space. The post-volcanic rocks are engaged in a helpless rivalry for ground with plastic rubbish left behind by the low tide of the ocean.²

In order to find nature in my landscape one must look at civilization as part of the landscape. Humans have become the dominant factor in the process of developing the natural environment. People are not only able to control the natural resources of our planet, but are also able to change those resource structures and adjust them to their own needs. During my frequent travels my memory registers fragmentary and ephemeral impressions of the natural world, which can be seen in different parts of Canada and Europe. These landscapes include very diverse geographic forms that often invoke contrasting emotional states. I perceive not only nature's beauty, but also nature's frailty and helplessness in the face of human intervention. In my artistic practice nature is a starting point for abstract formulations in which an expressive softness is mixed with harsh reality. My present work uses fragmented landscape images, photography and collage to influence the way geometry and paint application are spatially manipulated on the planes of my paintings. I create a dialogue between the outer world and my inner world based not only on assonance but also on the diversity of reception and interpretation.

¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford History of Art: Oxford University Press, 1999.

² Joanna Asha Roznowski, from my notebook, Vancouver Island, 2007.

The first landscape fragments I preserved in my memory date back to the period of my childhood. Together with my parents we would go on trips to the areas of what they called "wild" nature. Forests, lakes, and mountains that had not been touched by human activity provided images full of colours and fragrance. Those trips were strictly connected with the need to commune with the beauty of wilderness, but, what is more important, it was an obvious escape from the noise of the city. The atmosphere of relaxation in the open space, in silence, far away from the city, was a strong stimulus to make such trips. Over time, it was more and more difficult to find unspoiled nature because of expanding urban and industrial developments. The places which were once available and wild then moved further away into the primeval forest. The areas nearer to the city became commercialized. At the same time, new nature centres like parks started to appear and they were even more available and adapted to the needs of an average city inhabitant.

The dynamic development of North-American cities gave rise to hunger for outdoor experiences.³ The increasing pollution of the cities and consequent unhealthy life style encouraged people to look for recreation in open spaces filled with fresh air. Out-of-town trips became a popular way of spending leisure time. As a result, the idea of a romantic way of experiencing nature created "nostalgia for nature" and at the same time it became subject to the requirements of progressive civilization.⁴ Alexander Willson calls this phenomenon "a shift from a pastoral approach to nature to a consumer approach."

³ Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Between the Lines Toronto: Published in Canada by Between the Lines, 1998.

⁴ Ibid.

North American consumer culture floods nature like an enormous wave in order to reconstruct it later as a park for recreation, provided with lanes, parking lots, shops and tourist brochures.⁵ This Disneyland-style park combines the heritage of the Greek idealized communion with nature with simulation, leisure, and entertainment.⁶ The creation of this new landscape reflects our esthetic and psychological perception of the world at the same time as it impacts on the health of the planet due to human interference with the natural environment. Three-quarters of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is produced by the tourist industry which includes growing road and air traffic as well as the developing hotel system.⁷ The mass production of carbon dioxide causes considerable alterations in the climate on earth. Those changes are increasingly more visible in the extreme heat, floods and droughts, and the rise of oceans and rough waters.

My current paintings make a reference to the natural environment that I am able experience directly as well as acknowledging the contradictory, romanticized notions that surround the idea of “landscape.”

My engagement with a specific landscape starts with a trip. Through the window of a bus, train, car or just walking, I experience lowlands, flatlands and coastal areas that are in transition from a non-human to human-made environment. My perception is photographic. I create a frame or a shot in my imagination which interacts with and actively involves the landscape. Prior to registering images in my mind, I try different positions so as to find those

⁵ Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Between the Lines Toronto: Published in Canada by Between the Lines, 1998.

⁶Ibid., 24.

⁷Staff Writers Davos, Switzerland (AFP). *Tourism set to suffer from the climate change it generates: UN*. Terra Daily News About Planet Earth (Oct 1, 2007).

which show the scene from an appropriate perspective. I often focus on wide shots to capture the whole scene. I also resort to foreshortened views to take a closer look at various details. Some of these images arouse strong, conflicting emotions in me of despair, inspiration, shock, joyfulness, and sadness. This is exactly the moment when the perfection and imperfection of nature and its greatness in space is so overwhelming that it can be perceived only in terms of the abstract. Barnett Newman spoke of the abstract as ““a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of awesome feelings... and therefore real'.”⁸

Zooming in and out and sharpening individual elements as needed, my eyesight resembles a camera lens. It often lingers on certain details such as a solitary tree on a precipice, or possibly a road meandering across a field or even boughs of trees floating inertly in a lake. I notice that when I shift my eyes from one part of the landscape to another, I involuntarily focus on the disparity in nature. I perceive the light and contrast as well as countless numbers of shapes and unique compositions. Afterwards, I record the experience on the ‘plate’ of my memory.

As I travel driving a car, the speed changes and the spatial representations often fluctuate, creating a multicoloured ribbon, a tangle of lines, and forms. These varieties of lines and marks in motion appear in most of my paintings from 2007 to 2008. The length of the lines and their shape and colour depend on a momentary impulse of an image. On the other hand the light intensity and angle depends on the fluctuations of those changes. At sunset or sunrise the scenery appears deep orange and red therefore lines on my paintings are often depicted as a blend of warm colours. As I create my work I often try to combine lines in the shades of blue that refer to the ocean with the strong emotions of a warm palette representing the extreme heat and droughts.

⁸ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

In *Stains* 2007, which I call ‘the blue paintings’, these lines go through whole plains crosswise (Fig. 1). In 2008 paintings, their continuity is disturbed; lines are segmented (Fig. 2). The painter Monica Tap is similarly concerned with perceiving images in movement. As she drove across the country, she saw the prairies as “a blurred screen of trees... fixed on the distant horizon.” According to her, “different layers of focus and detail described the space (and traced our movement through that space).”⁹ The way I view space is similar to Tap. However in my work, I choose a less descriptive representation of space and form.

In my paintings the space is filled with layers of horizontal strips of paint placed dynamically one upon another with a palette knife. Very often, I scrape off part of the strips in order to change the concentration of paint, haze it over or even blur it. While doing that, I often recall all kinds of pieces of information provided by shifting images of nature seen from the windows of the vehicles I travel on. This is a conscious, although in many cases spontaneous exchange of sentences between myself, the outer world and a gestural work of the hand. In my paintings many lines extend across the whole surface, like freeways expanding across the globe.¹⁰

Travelling has become an important part of modern life. Unique places in nature have become accessible for anyone who has the means. In a relatively short time, we are able to move between different geographic zones of the world. Our gazing into the natural world has assumed the form of a comfortable seat and a window and the kind of direct communion with landscape has become commercialized. When I am admiring landscape through the window of a vehicle or even when I am on holiday at a resort located in the very centre of a primeval forest, I see

⁹ Cliff Eyland, “Monica Tap.” *Arts Atlantic* issue. 68 (Summer 2001).

¹⁰ Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Between the Lines Toronto: Published in Canada by Between the Lines, 1998.

everything as an artificialy created landscape. It is artificial because it is designed by man and not by nature. The space shaped by nature is slowly replaced by human intervention. During my trips, my attention is very often arrested by rows of matching trees characterized by unnatural shapes resulting from frequent pruning. Trees are planted in even rows at municipal parks, along tourist trails, roadside parking lots, homesteads and tourist centres. The land on which the trees are planted is provided with artificially green looking lawns and flower beds, which have often nothing in common with the genuine plants of the region.

While recording landscapes through the window I get the impression that I am taking part in the screening of a film. Scenes, like film frames, engage me on many emotional and intellectual levels. Individual vistas are full of symbols from the borderline of cinema. They make me sink into meditation, enrapture me, make me angry and urge me to reflect deeply upon the experience. However, the quickly changing pictures are not able to provide me with the experience of direct communion with nature. Such sensations are only felt through physical contact with the environment.

During my walks along the oceanside on Vancouver Island, which I did last summer, I used all my senses. I memorised the ionic smell, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. I could taste the salty drops of water floating in the air. Moving across the space, stepping on the sand, rocks, and seaweed I reacted to various stimuli such as the sunrays glittering on the waves and the constantly changing ground. First they were lines almost like cuts on the surface of dry sand, which later changed into flat and soft layers of soil slashed by the water floating into the ocean.

According to Andrews,

You cannot paint or photograph light and fresh air, but you can represent the forms spontaneously brightened and invigorated by those essential things: the gleam of sunlight on a river or the bright reticulations of shadow and light on river or the bright reticulations of shadow and light through leaves and branches, trees bending in the breeze that stirs the lake surface into ripples.¹¹

In all my paintings the kind of sensations described above are represented in an array of overlapping and liquefying marks like lines, spots, stains, and small shapes (Fig. 3,4). These are traces of nature that focus on displaying the tension of energy in space. In Pat Steir's paintings of waterfalls, hundreds of larger and smaller droplets, lines and patches painted with liquid matter by spilling and splashing, tell us about water and its energy. Steir manipulates layers of splashed paint, like falling water that looks like a waterfall from the distance. In my paintings, all the draws of a palette knife are abstract in nature. At a closer look, these are marks vigorously scattered in space, whose structure and shape resemble the surface of water, water drops, sand, stones or the bark of a tree. Seen from a distance, they form a specific dynamic whole that refers to the sea, a beach, roads or trees interweaving in space.

Waterfalls by Pat Steir, combined the two functions of "paint's liquidity and its capacity to yield an image."¹² In this way, Steir created a new perception of painting based on action directed towards interior expression. In spite of the fact that Steir created the images of water through pouring paint, she did not completely exclude control over the composition. In the end, the effect of extracting energy from the painting resulted in the discovery of another world and other possibilities of interpreting reality.

¹¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford History of Art: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹² John Yau, *Dazzling Water, Dazzling Light*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2000.

In order to collect as much information about a given place as possible, I take hundreds of photographs. In my early works from 2007 *Lowlands and Flatlands*, which are primarily red, painted sections are constructed from overlapping, contrasting, enclosed spaces of land and sky. These spaces, in the form of squares and rectangles refer to individual photographs and my memory (Fig. 5). By using colours arbitrarily, or in a contrary manner, such as using red for the sky and clouds in *Lowlands and Flatlands*, I intended to complicate the perception of my paintings. In such a way I try to reflect on the changes in the weather patterns due to global warming. In my current paintings, the geometric sections have become small fragments of squares and rectangles placed freely in space. What was explicit has become more ambiguous (Fig. 6).

The tendency to demonstrate contrasts in shapes, colour and surface, appears in all my works. In *Stains 2007* a whole group of forms conduct the play between straight edges, represented by squares and between biomorphic shapes depicted as curvy lines (Fig. 1). The form of a square against the background of biomorphic forms appeared consistently in my work for several months. Then I moved to 'wet on wet painting' replacing squares and rectangles with a whole range of varied, unrefined shapes created by mixing and pouring liquid paint. I focused on displaying the tension of energy in space without applying a hard edge. My style of painting moved away from a more defined representation of a square to a synthesis of a number of uneven shapes. Currently I am using an impasto technique, consisting in overlapping layers of textured paint, which enrich some areas of the surface with a tangible relief.

Overlapping fragmented seascapes, forests, lakes, are based on views of places I have seen but they are at the same time devoid of identity. These generic references became concrete

in the painting. In this way, I invite the audience to take an active part in the process of reading in, searching, combining and interpreting puzzle fragments, to arrive at their own associations with landscape. The recent paintings by Gordon Smith divide the landscape into contrasting shapes in space. Semitransparent, bright stripes of paint of various thicknesses cover unspecified forest and sea landscapes and penetrate one another. Shifting our eyes from one end to the other end of Smith's painting, we combine the stripes into groups. For example, the blue group at the bottom looks like a river, the group above looks like golden ribbons interlaced around the limb of a tree, the two groups in the middle look like part of an old bridge, while the group at the top looks like a fence and trees. This is a dynamic way of creating information, which consists not only of the analysis of what is under, in the distance and next to something but also of searching out and combining the missing fragments of part of a lake, a branch or a log. I am constantly interested in the paintings by Smith due to the unlimited richness of his painting vocabulary of space, form, shape and line.

The process of memorizing while travelling is just one of the aspects influencing the creation of my paintings. When each trip ends, a new stage in my work begins, which I call 'sketching.' The process does not lose the identity of the memorised scenes, rather, it diversifies and transforms them by mixing memory, fiction, and reality. I create small collages and collect images which are a helpful source of information for me while making a decision on the choice of colour, in the intensity of light and contrast and the arrangement of individual parts of composition. As a source I exploit the pages from tourist publications, paying particular attention to the technical quality and documentary value of the photography. These magazines address people who want to find the ideal place of their dreams with harmonious nature scenes and

breathtaking views. Ironically I am utilizing the travel publications that are an important part of the tourism industry which “has vastly reorganized not only the geography of North America but also our perception of nature and our place in it as humans.”¹³

While browsing pages of magazines, I order photographs thematically – prairies, oceans, forests, mountains, rivers and lakes. Then, I cut the pages into a number of fragmented stripes of paper. The stripes from magazines are then mixed together and are assembled intuitively into compositions that fit with my memories. The process of linking together these fragments to construct new landscapes follows. These ‘sketches’ are a continuation of my travels, a certain kind of retrospection of my earlier experiences, such as a morning walk in thin mist along the coast. In the painting *The falling water, the light, and the wind* (2007) my memories of a stay over a waterfall and in British Columbia interweave with the information provided by the collage. I created a medley of sea landscape, falling water and artificial light from behind the falls (Fig. 7). In my newest paintings (2008) many fragments from the collages are changed and simplified in favor of indistinct experience (Fig. 8).

In my studio, once the initial choices have been made by ‘sketching’ as described, I then begin my painting process. The choice of the surface and its size as well as the type of paint and manner of its application is determined by the needs of my work. I start by thinking about how I will unify all these impressions into one solid form. I use various sizes of rectangular canvases because to me they more accurately represent a true landscape. It seems to me that the shape of a square is a less appropriate choice because its form does not naturally reflect the conventional shape of a landscape. Even though my images are increasingly abstract,

¹³ Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Between the Lines Toronto: Published in Canada by Between the Lines, 1998.

by using the common landscape shape I reference tradition. I use canvas for its flexibility to support unending possibilities of acrylic paint applications. For example, I create texture on canvas to depict great cascades, rocks, brunches, mud and dust (Fig. 9, 10). I manipulate multi-layered abstract shapes in order to render varying concentrations of colour of dissolved molecules in nature to form a landscape which gives the illusion of a never-ending space (Fig. 11).

My process of painting leads from the conscious to subconscious and from subconscious to the conscious.¹⁴ At first, I consciously register the surrounding world in order to re-create the scenes I remembered in my studio. In the first stage of sketching from memory, I intentionally control the process of the selection of proper images from magazines. Then, I start to move away from the conscious and controlled process towards the implementation of images with the use of subconscious. The first layers of paint are laid automatically in a very fast way. The layers of paint are laid down in a horizontal manner and in all directions. The process continues until I decide to go away from the painting to have a look at it from a distance. The next layers of paint are in a way controlled. I divide the plane into separate fragments to emphasize contrasts of colour and shape. The final result is a surprise to me. The viewer may see landscapes, valleys or lakes perhaps, but the layers of paint have formed their own identity, going beyond the features of a traditionally understood concept of representational landscape. Francois-Marc Gagnon presented this interesting concept in his narration based on a review by Robert Elie from Paul-Émile Borduas' exhibition of 1942.

It is therefore at the very moment when the painter no longer tries to depict nature that the latter comes back to him, not as a subject to paint, but as shapes, colours and rhythms - that is, as a

¹⁴ Francois-Marc Gagnon, *Paul – Emile Borduas*. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1988.

distillation of form, empty of all iconographic content. To arrive at this point, all he has to do is “to let his inner self take over” and to rely on his gifts and on his earlier training.¹⁵

My use of the subconscious in order to automatically render surrounding reality connects my artistic practice with Les Automatistes. Recently I became familiar with the work of Paul-Émile Borduas because I have noticed some similarity between the automatic way Borduas laid paint on a canvas and my way of doing it. Borduas used loosely overlapping layers of paint to create abstract compositions from his subconscious with visible texture and the effect of three-dimensionality. He gave up using gouache, where colours do not show through, in favour of oil paint which can be characterized by their luminous colours. The layers of paint in Borduas’ paintings participate in a peculiar dance. In pairs, they shift in all directions and then join in groups. Part of the marks lean forward and part of them straighten up to turn away from one another in a moment. They are placed on a plane in such a way that the viewer gets the impression that they will quickly break away from the painting and just hang there in space. Some parts of the abstract compositions seem heavy and make the impression that they dim the bottom layers. Borduas emphasized shapes and multiple edges of strips, stains and folds adding small amounts of colour to the dominant white, thus emphasizes the depth of the painting. In my practice I use acrylic paint to which I add acrylic gel medium. In this way, I am able to eliminate the flatness and the weak colour saturation of acrylic paint and create glazes. Transparent layers of paint change the colour and tone of the bottom layers of the painting. When I work with white I try, as Borduas, to emphasize the edges of the colour only. I cover the dimmer base of the colour placing carelessly a layer of white paint on it.

¹⁵ Francois-Marc Gagnon, *Paul – Emile Borduas*. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1988.

My choice of colours and shapes is a constant search for new solutions and interrelations on the painting surfaces. In this way I do not try to reduce the interpretation of my works, but I rather strive to create an apocalyptic beauty. In the works of Dil Hildebrand, I can see a similar compositional play where natural components (mountains, sky, and trees) are separated and rejoined in new ways. These are images that are moving towards an “apocalyptic transfiguration” of the future.¹⁶ This transfiguration suggests changes in nature under the influence of civilization and technology. Dil Hildebrand approaches his paintings like a stage set, different shapes are positioned to perform for a play. The audience gets the impression that there are two different worlds combined into one entity. One world suggests forests, rivers, the sky and mountains; the other world consists of flat cut-outs of board and walls. Hildebrand’s work is able to bring an interesting aspect into the landscape that the viewer will notice due to its deliberate contrast to the natural environment. In my work, I am able to expand on this by adding a sense of movement and colour. Movement in my paintings, represented by lines and horizontal strips of colour, refers to the speed of the shifting images and the speed of the changes in nature caused by the advancing civilization and colonization of nature. By juxtaposing subtle pastel colours and misty white with dark vigorous colours I try to reflect on the changes in nature throughout our world and how our culture is slowly noticing its affects on our delicate surroundings.

During my travels around Canada and Europe I collected pictures of complete cloudiness and lack of light interweaving with fabulously colorful visions of luminous water surfaces and emerald forests. In my present paintings, these images are demonstrated as dark and light windows imposed on sections of the surrounding environment (Fig. 8, 12). As one gazes further into these windows one feels as if they are moving more quickly in space giving the passing

¹⁶ Pierre-François Ouellette, *Dil Hildebrand*. Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain. (09.20.2006).

impression of something understated. Very often these windows look like torn-out scraps of photographs. Some parts can be interpreted as small moments in the past or the present, like phrases in a book or bits of conversation.

Painting is like writing for me. When I express some thoughts in informal speech, I try to emphasize those words in the sentence which I regard as important and those words which are supposed to draw attention of the listener. I use stress for that purpose. My choice of the stressed words depends on the kind of information I want to convey to the listener. By using such aspects of intonation as loudness and tone of the voice, I model the length of the stress expecting a better understanding of the sentence and my thoughts. I also use stress to emphasize opposite content, specifically contrast and similarity. In my paintings, there is an emotional tone in the way in which I present individual images or a way in which I combine colours with one another. I emphasize the dark combinations of colour and sharp shapes of part of a factory chimney, a piece of asphalt or dried and cracked soil. This emphasis is also placed on the elements suggesting blue sky, the water of an ocean, fields of corn and green meadows. If the emphasis is not placed properly, the stress deforms the sentence and changes the essential meaning. In my paintings a variety of juxtapositions reflect global environmental change caused by human activities.

A group of paintings created for an exhibition, *Fragmenting the Landscape*, became a starting point for my journey into abstraction. With colour, contrast, texture and shape I bring out vivid and dynamic compositions that echo my emotions about the environment. I want to convey the fragments and passing memories which refer to the reality of this world filled with mountains, forests, rivers, fields, waterfalls and even buildings. I want the viewer to experience

my paintings as an interesting discovery, during which non-referential images are transformed into fragmented landscapes with a sense of a deep, longing mystery.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.

Endnotes

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