

# MODERN PAINTERS

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Sight + Sound

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**America's**  
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# Peripheral visions

TERMINAL CITY, Lotus Land, Smug Harbour, the Sanctimonious Marina, the Crack Capital of Canada. The names don't hurt; even Vancouver's most cosseted and cosmopolitan wear their end-of-the-line, rough-and-tumble fringe status with insular pride. Nor do sticks and stones break their bones; they pay the bills – forest and mineral products are the city's major exports, followed closely by fish, grain, 'BC Bud' marijuana and, from a critically detached distance, conceptual art. Despite its middling size (population: 545,671; metropolitan area: 2,186,965) and modest economy, Vancouver and its dominant school of photo-, video- and Photoshop-based artists have an impressive presence internationally. This is attributable to: a) the world-class networking and conceptual problem-solving curricula of the city's three art institutions (Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and the fine-art departments of the Universities of British Columbia and Simon Fraser); b) a strong, community-based, formerly counter-cultural yet state-funded and somewhat bureaucratized 'alternative' art-venue tradition; c) a newly emerged, still small but ambitious private-gallery scene with robust ties to the critical and curatorial elements of a) and b); and finally, and most importantly, the high-quality products and bar-raising success of the artists and art fabricators fostered and promoted by a), b) and c).

Home to a superabundance of bankable art stars far exceeding any rational quota – blue-chip stock like

Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas (none of whom has local gallery representation), solid market performers like Ken Lum, Roy Arden, Ian Wallace, Graham Gillmore and Attila Richard Lukacs (the last two the only paint-based artists on the list), and an emerging generation of potentially or already eclipsing high-earners like Tim Lee, Steven Shearer, Brian Jungen, Geoffrey Farmer, Ron Terada, Scott McFarland and Isabelle Pauwels – it is perhaps inevitable that some overviews of the Vancouver scene can read like something found in an investment newsletter, not an art magazine. Given the volatile boom-and-bust histories of this frontier city and its art scenes – from First Nation to abstracted landscape to hippy-prankster to minimalist/conceptual to 'farmed-out' poststructuralist smart to re-carbonated Pop to doodle-fuelled, faux-naïve zine – capital here is not just a useful yardstick, but the entire playing field, a levelling denominator for a flattened and fattened city fast becoming more virtual than real.

The scene of no scene, the defeated world, the generic city. The names used to describe Vancouver after Robert Smithson famously dumped on the city (*Glue Pour*, 1969) have been recently overshadowed by a glittering skyline of others: the posterchild of modern urbanism; the Petri dish of multiculturalism; the 'Readers' Choice #1 City in the Americas' (*Condé Nast Traveler*, 2005); and, of course, Hollywood

North. Vancouver is a location-lode, a city that draws production companies to its 'Super, Natural' shore because of a chameleon-like ability to look like somewhere and everywhere and nowhere in particular. Locals proudly cite the stats – billion-dollar industry and second-largest film and television production centre in North America (a ranking hotly disputed by Toronto and New York) – and point out the monuments: the Vancouver Art Gallery lawn where *Scooby Doo II* (2004) was shot, the house where Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell lived and the strip club where Ben Affleck went down on a dancer.

Living in a movie set can be disconcerting. Flying into one even more so. Touching down in Vancouver is like stepping into a full-colour, polymorphous prospectus for the West Coast Experience – a brand-strategized sensory representation of a thoroughly overfeatured world: ozone-rich sea air penetrates the seams of the disembarkation bridge, redolent red cedar timbers line the transit walls, faux totem poles and authentic Musqueam weavings and masks grace the vaulted arrivals terminal, and a roaring waterfall cascades down between the escalators leading to

RIGHT  
BRIAN JUNGEN  
ISOLATED DEPICTION  
OF THE PASSAGE OF  
TIME, 2001. MIXED MEDIA  
COLLECTION OF BOB BINKHE,  
RENAME MANAGEMENT  
CORPORATION, VANCOUVER  
PHOTO: TREVOR MILLS  
COURTESY VANCOUVER ART  
GALLERY



passport control. At the departure level, not far from a stand-alone Starbucks and the world's first airport 7-Eleven, sits *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii – the Jade Canoe* (1991), a massive sculpture by the BC-born, Scots-American/Haida Nation carver Bill Reid. The canoe, Canada's biggest art commission – for which Reid was paid \$3 million in 1994 – is represented on the back of the current Canadian twenty-dollar bill. Six hundred million of these twenties were printed in 2004, making it the most circulated bill in the country, and Reid's canoe the most reproduced artwork in Canadian history.

From the rainforest to the ATM, from canoe to cargo to cash: here, on the Pacific rim, 'First Nation heritage' becomes both a branding tool and transnational currency – a symbolic yet tangible unit of account and medium of exchange – and art, memory, migration and money blend together into one grande mocha decaf. Admire the green-coloured bronze, read the plaque, marvel at the spirit powers of the universe, and stuff a handful of the bills into your wallet: apart from the Nike trainers reconfigured into Aboriginal ceremonial masks by the BC-born Swiss/Dunneza Nation artist Brian Jungen (showcased at the Tate Modern this summer), this is as close a connection as you'll be afforded with 'indigenous' culture in Vancouver, unless you wander off the tourist path, not into the deep dark woods, but into the open

“Those artists without the forethought and bank balances to have bought are now faced with a classic bohemian dilemma: suburb or island?”

sore of the city's Downtown Eastside (DES).

Also called Low Track, the DES is Canada's Ground-to-Zero – lowest incomes, most petty crime and drug addiction, and highest prostitution and HIV infection rates – a ten-block circle of high-density hell being pounded into an even more concentrated space by encroaching real-estate development. Vancouver is currently going through its third major boom since the Second World War, girding its condo-lined loins for the 2010 Winter Olympics, and carving swathes out of its delta basin and mountain slopes to build homes for the thousands of newly-arrived. Unlike the gold rush Klondikers who colonized this coast 150 years ago, these newcomers are not seeking fortune but something infinitely more precious: lifestyle. Already loaded with gold, they are driven west – or, for Asians, east – not by hope and dreams, but, in brandspeak, aspiration.

The new towers and townhouses that welcome them – with good modernist names like Miro, Avedon and Stella – take the place of skid-row hotels, derelict shops and entire industrial zones, meaning that not only junkies are being forced out of the city, but so are office and warehouse workers. And artists. As housing prices creep hourly closer to a million-dollar average, studio space is at a premium, and those artists without the forethought and bank balances to have bought are now faced with a classic bohemian dilemma: suburb or island?

Traditionally (well, since 1990), the

## IN AROUND VANCOUVER

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www.vanartgallery.bc.ca  
PAINT is at Vancouver Art Gallery from 29 September 2006 to 14 January 2007

Brian Jungen's solo exhibition is on show at Tate Modern, London until 9 July



PHOTO: TREVOR MILLS, VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

FACING PAGE  
SCOTT MCFARLAND  
HUNTINGTON  
BOTANICAL GARDEN,  
SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA,  
2005  
DIGITAL, C-PRINT, 76 X  
264 CM  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
MONTE CLARK GALLERY,  
VANCOUVER/TORONTO

ABOVE  
ETIENNE ZACK  
COLLISION, 2005  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
153 X 168 CM  
PHOTO: TREVOR MILLS  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

romantic contingent; and urban-ers being the 'cold', critically engaged, hyper-articulate, process-focused, crew. Today, the traditional hippy side of the equation, rendered more-or-less mute and irrelevant by the institutional strength of the urban side, has all but disappeared. In its place has emerged a younger group of DES-based zine and mail art-driven drawers inspired by Raymond Pettibon, Marcel Dzama and Mike Kelley. A street-based, seemingly unreflexive, fun-focused yet entrepreneurial subculture, they are represented locally at 'upstart' galleries on the Eastside (just up the hill from the new Catriona Jeffries Gallery, a giant Gagosian-like space that, when coupled with the Vancouver Art Gallery's slated move to a big Bilbao-inspired 'art-hub' downtown, will super-size the local scene) and have as yet not been absorbed critically and socially into the city's more established artworld (with the begrudged exception of Jason McLean and Jeff Ladouceur, who are gaining recognition internationally).

Meanwhile, on the urban elite side of the street, third-generational conceptualists led by Lee, Shearer and

terms 'island' and 'urban' have been used to position artistic production in the city: islanders being the non-critical, hands-on, 'craft'-based, intuitive, tactile, self-expressing, romantic contingent; and urban-ers being the 'cold', critically engaged, hyper-articulate, process-focused, crew.

Farmer, have focused their attentions away from specific regional concerns to pop-culture vernaculars in general, producing less ideological, Conceptual-Lite versions of the work of their more 'engaged' predecessors, with whom they share little beyond the same high-production values, gallerists and postal codes. Drawing inspiration from the playfully smart and multi-directed Rodney Graham, or the equally multi-tasking Mike Kelley, their work is witty and seductive and, while not as 'critical' as earlier Vancouver concept art, just as, if not more, critically astute.

What's left? Well, painting. Studio-based, hands-on, in-your-face painting. Every one here seems to be doing it again, or wanting to, including Rodney Graham, who, when not working on his music (another hands-on 'craft', though less denigrated), is busily producing non-ironic abstract oils relating to the persona he developed for *Picasso, My Master* (his Berlin show last autumn).

And the Vancouver Art Gallery is showing it – in a big retrospective this autumn curated by Vancouver-based painter Neil Campbell. *PAINT* will highlight BC painting from 1965 to the present and showcase, among others, Etienne Zack, Elizabeth McIntosh, Matthew Brown, Charlie Roberts, Jessica Stockholder and Peter Schuyff.

Can Vancouver paint its way out of its island/urban corners? Will painting become a discursive bridge or mere décor? And where is the Asian community in all this? Spark a big bud and stay tuned. ●