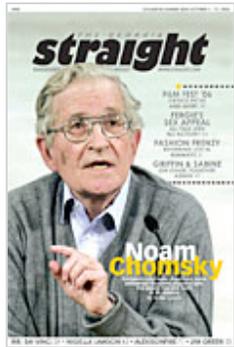




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Arts

The rebirth of painting

By Robin Laurence

Publish Date: 14-Sep-2006

How is it that, in a digital age, so many young Vancouver artists are rediscovering the brush and canvas—and finding so much success?

The façade of Etienne Zack’s storefront studio exudes a tidy, private air. The exterior walls are neatly painted, a metal security gate secures the door, and the windows are obscured on the inside by Japanese-style paper screens. On a weekday morning, pedestrians pass by without a glance. A few doors down, an elderly woman sits on her walker, blowing cigarette smoke into the still air. At the produce market on the corner, workers unload crates of bitter melon, long beans, and chayote squash. “Texture is culture,” Zack says. It’s the stuff of many a photographer’s career, but he has chosen a different medium.

One of our city’s most successful young painters, Zack is preparing for upcoming exhibitions in London, New York—and Vancouver. Inside his studio, leaning against a back wall, is a large canvas he’s just completed for the Vancouver Art Gallery’s first fall show, PAINT (opening September 30 and running to February 25). “It’s about the photographic medium,” Zack says of his expressive new work. Awkward objects—camera equipment, multihued canvases—confront each other in a state of tension and tumult. “But it is also very much about painting.”

His work could hardly be more germane. Five months ago, Neil Campbell, a painter and instructor at the Emily Carr Institute, was invited by the VAG to guest-curate PAINT. “The art gallery had a sense something was happening with painting in Vancouver,” he says. It’s the

show’s contemporary component, 7 New Painters, that supports his contention and promises to arouse the most interest. It spotlights Zack along with Matthew Brown, Arabella Campbell, Tim Gardner, Holger Kalberg, Elizabeth McIntosh, and Charlie Roberts. These artists, in their 20s and 30s, don’t represent a single style, movement, or school: their art swings from photorealism to gestural figuration to idea-based abstraction. What unites them is a desire to make pictures in what Campbell calls “a fluid medium”. He points to increased enrollment in painting courses at ECI as an indication

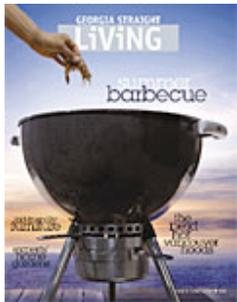
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Arabella Campbell (left), Elizabeth McIntosh, and Etienne Zack are three of the local artists in the Vancouver Art Gallery’s upcoming Art PAINT. Mark Mushet photo.



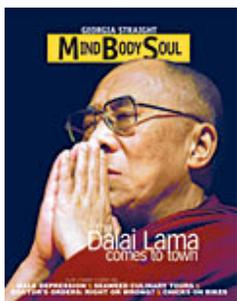
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of an expanding appetite for that medium. "Someone who elects to paint right now is making a romantic choice...at a time when most visuals are being generated by digital media," he says.

"The renewed interest in painting locally is in line with its heightened profile internationally," he continues. Some of the well-travelled artists in the show agree that, in Europe especially, painting has recently reasserted its presence, wresting some attention away from photo-based media. It's taken longer for the trend to be recognized here. "In Canada, we're a little bit slow to step up to the plate," remarks Elizabeth McIntosh, who spent three years in London, England, in the mid-1990s and counts esteemed and award-winning painters among her friends and colleagues there.

Back at his studio, Zack discusses his works in progress—he calls them "portraits of ideas"—and reflects on what it means to be a painter in Vancouver. Not being able to see much historic or contemporary painting locally is an obvious drag. As for the dominance of photo-based art here, he says it has given him a kind of freedom. "You're left alone to invent yourself." Still, he regrets the lack of critical and curatorial attention to his medium. "It's frustrating....You don't see painting in the main discourse."

Zack moved into his studio this past June. The previous tenant was Attila Richard Lukacs, who, in the 1980s, was also one of Vancouver's most successful young painters. Lukacs's career was launched at the VAG in 1985, in a group exhibition of neo-expressionist art famously titled The Young Romantics. That show inspired a flurry of local and national interest and is still alluded to today. It was the last time that the VAG made a really big splash with a group of emerging local painters. Not long after, the institution stepped, with other significant critical, curatorial, and educational groups/organizations, onto the train of concept-driven, photo-based art.

Powering that train was Vancouver's Jeff Wall, famous for his large-format, backlit, Cibachrome transparencies of socially and politically charged scenes. Wall's 1990 retrospective at the VAG was not so much a groundbreaking show as a hometown recognition of his already-enormous international status. With respect to solo exhibitions around the world, high-end sales, and reverential books and reviews abounding, well, his career hasn't exactly fizzled in the 16 years since. (In a recent monograph published by Phaidon, Wall's chronology and "select" bibliography cover 11 small-print pages.)

"Success on the scale of Jeff Wall is unique in Canadian art history," says Scott Watson, director-curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and instructor in the department of visual art and art history at the University of British Columbia. "Naturally people gravitate towards it." Wall and his colleagues, notably Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham, and Ian Wallace, working not only in still photography but also in film, video, text, and interdisciplinary art, put Vancouver on the international art map—and inspired herds of acolytes. "Vancouver has an image of itself, and others have an image of us, as a place where photography is produced and discussed," Watson observes. "It's not a place where painting occupies pride of place."

Vancouver wasn't the only centre where painting receded from view after neo-expressionism. As idea-based, machine-made, hands-off art came to the fore, painters struggled against postmodern proscriptions and prejudices, including the lingering dictates of conceptualism and feminism of the 1960s and '70s. The former condemned painting because of its relationship to the art market and its status as a "fetishized" commodity, while the latter deplored painting's entrenched patriarchal history. These were beliefs that McIntosh collided against in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when she was a fine-arts undergraduate at York University. "There was a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary work rather than studio-based work," she says. "If you wanted



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to be considered a feminist and serious about that, then painting was not the medium to work in."

McIntosh, who is an assistant professor and coordinator of the painting and drawing department at ECI, produces big, bold, geometric abstractions. Filled with vibrant hues and lively spatial relationships, they shout energy and confidence. It wasn't always so. Under pressure at York, McIntosh took up performance art, but practised painting (with feelings of guilt) on the side. After her 1992 graduation, she acquired a studio and slowly let her performance career lapse. "I'm someone who actually likes being in the studio and spending hours there by myself," she says. "I don't like depending on other people and also depending on having an event to work towards."

Despite her pleasure in the daily routine of painting, the occupation was still—theoretically—uncomfortable for her. She experimented with decorative and pattern work as a way of opposing some of the principles of midcentury modern art. "I desperately had to find a way to justify making paintings," she says, adding that she was developing increasingly complex and confrontational works. "They were aggressive and hard to look at, and that also became part of my strategy." Following graduate studies in London, however, she found her way out of the maze. "I slowly let go of some of my concerns because I realized that they weren't really that interesting. I was resting my practice on justifications rather than actually coming from what my real interests were." Her real interests were—and are—colour and form. "I'm a lot happier with what I'm doing now," she says. She also revels in the enthusiasm of her students. "Painting is very popular at Emily Carr. I'm in touch with students on a regular basis who are very optimistic."

If no single overarching style emerges in *7 New Painters*, a preoccupation with making paintings about the history and act of painting does. Both Zack and Roberts directly allude to historic and contemporary predecessors in their work. Others of the group make more understated references to the who, what, and how of their craft. "The first time people said painting was dead was in 1839 when the daguerreotype came out," Watson says. "So when these other media came to the fore that could reproduce reality better than a painting could, painting took up other things. And the main thing it took up was itself."

"The struggle to figure out something new to say or do with painting is quite interesting to me," says Arabella Campbell. She is sitting in the tiny, immaculate studio she occupies in a warehouse building in False Creek Flats. (Kalberg and McIntosh also have their studios here, and until his move in June, Zack did too.) Campbell produces idea-based works that look like minimalist abstractions and that make explicit reference to the forms and colours of the materials of her practice. These include the canvas and linen on which she paints, the painter's tape she uses, and the gallery walls on which her works are hung.

Campbell is as fastidious about building her stretchers and stretching her canvas as she is about her paint application. "It's all about this object that I'm making," she says. "It's not just the surface, it's the side and the back and the edges. And the wall, too." Still, the surface that it's not all about absorbs weeks and even months of Campbell's time. Each one of her paintings has at least 70 layers of slightly thinned acrylic on it, each meticulously applied with a small brush. Ultimately, and perhaps perversely, any evidence of the brush is eliminated, as is the texture of the fabric beneath the paint. The result is a surface so satiny smooth, it scarcely looks handmade. "It's a visual trick," Campbell explains, adding that she wants viewers to question whether or not the work is mechanically produced. "I want you to not quite know. Hopefully, by not knowing, you'll look a little closer and try to understand what it is."



Elizabeth McIntosh's Untitled (Red, Blue and Purple) shows her interest in colour and form; for minimalist abstractions like this untitled work, Arabella Campbell layers and layers her acrylics into a satiny sheen; and Etienne Zack positions objects into awkward states of tumult in paintings like Upright. All will be on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery show starting September 30.

Neil Campbell is quick to assert that what it is—contemporary painting—is neither a refutation of photo-based art nor its antithesis. “Painting is not a repudiation of photo-conceptualism; it’s a positive response to an appetite,” he says. Then he adds that he deplores hierarchies and exclusions in art. One medium should not relegate any other to the basement.

Zack agrees. “I’ve always thought that painting is just another medium,” he says. Just another way to make sense of the world. Still, it is the medium of his choice. “There’s a kind of poetic that is very much a part of painting,” he says—and no critic or curator is going to persuade him otherwise.

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