NEW SMART GUIDE ART EDUCATION 2.0 • YUKON SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

CANADIAN ART

canadianart.ca WINTER 2010/11

ART SCHOOL SPECIAL

THE TEACHERS
THE ART
THE ISSUES

LANDON MACKENZIE
Painting instructor extraordinaire

JOHN KISSICK
Mentoring by example

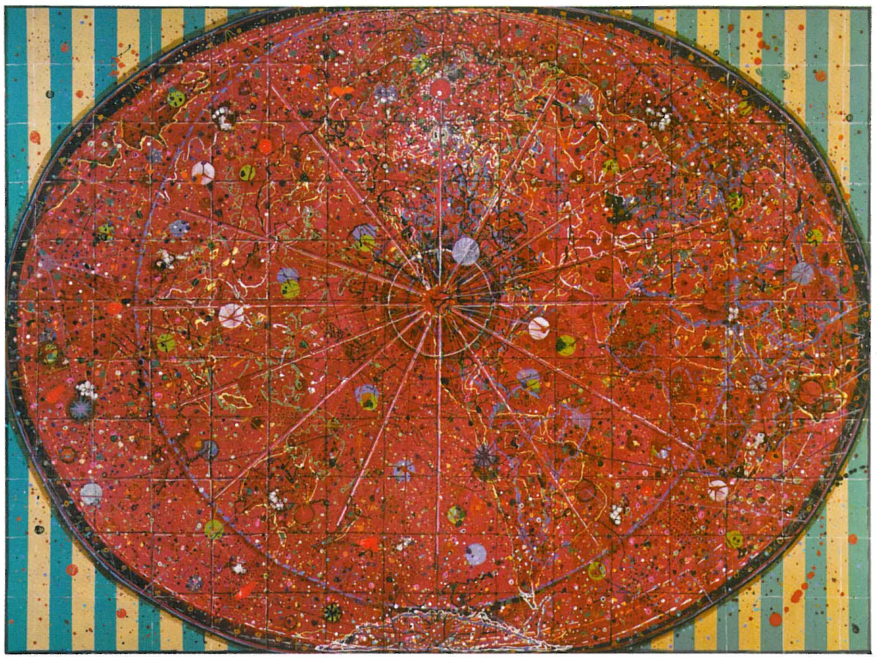
JANET BELLOTTO
A Dubai adventure

Landon Mackenzie in her
Vancouver studio, October, 2010
Photo Hubert Kang

The Centre of the World

LANDON MACKENZIE

in the studio and the classroom



ABOVE: **Vancouver as the Centre of the World** 2009–10 Synthetic polymer on linen 2.2 x 3 m
COURTESY ART45 PHOTO SCOTT MASSEY

BY **ROBIN LAURENCE**

There's a big red painting by one of this country's leading artists, hanging in a hallway of one of this country's leading art schools, and the histories of each—art, artist and school—are fatefully intertwined. The painting, a gorgeous, mural-sized conjunction of pulsing colour, radiating lines, eloquent splatters and multi-layered re-imaginings of the way we map the globe, is titled *Vancouver as the Centre of the World*. It was created by Landon Mackenzie for the city's 2010 Olympic Games, and its vexed subject, together with its temporary, post-Games lodging at Emily Carr University of Art and Design (ECAUD), resonates both personally and politically. It more than resonates: as a complex metaphor of power, place and ethnocentricity, the painting throbs with meaning. Throbs with menace, too. Those wine-red splatters look a lot like blood.

It's become part of our national cultural lore that before Mackenzie moved to Vancouver from Toronto in 1986 to take up a full-time teaching position at Emily Carr, she was a bright new star in the firmament of Canadian art. In 1981, while based in Montreal, she was catapulted to prominence after winning first prize in the Quebec biennale. And her creative credentials—although irrelevant to that honour (the biennale was blind-juried)—were impeccable. The great-granddaughter, granddaughter and niece of accomplished painters, and the daughter of parents who championed the arts, Mackenzie spent her childhood immersed in a world of images, abstraction

and ideas. On occasion, the family's Toronto home was the site of lively parties, whose guest lists included writers, artists, dancers and thinkers who were redefining Canadian culture. Harold Town, Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland were family friends; a large, framed Town collage hung in the front hall alongside a Jock Macdonald watercolour, a wedding gift from the artist to her parents. Mackenzie enthuses about these works now, acknowledging the influence of both artists on her drawing and painting styles. On top of this culturally privileged foundation, she was schooled in cutting-edge conceptual practice at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) and went on to acquire a graduate degree, under the mentorship of Irene F. Whittome and Guido Molinari, at Concordia University, where she also taught. Although she came to painting late and antithetically (painting was "not on" at NSCAD; she had focused on process-based printmaking until 1979), she began widely exhibiting her ambitious, energetic canvases. Curators and gallerists clamoured for her work and reviews were plentiful and adoring; nevertheless, competition for the Emily Carr teaching position was intense. Given the stature of the other candidates, Mackenzie's appointment was a huge achievement. Yet, after she arrived on the West Coast, Mackenzie recalls, "the phone stopped ringing."

Not that she had stopped painting. Quite the opposite: Mackenzie produced work prolifically, pursuing series upon series of big, bold canvases. Early on, many of these series invoked an idea of place, deconstructing the tropes and strategies of Canadian landscape art and underlining the haunting myths of wilderness with a sense of sorrow for what has been lost. Still, as far as Toronto and Montreal were concerned, and in cruel contrast to her recent poetic conceit of *Vancouver as the Centre of the World*, Mackenzie had journeyed to the end of the Earth—and fallen off.

"Canada is really good to young starts," she observes philosophically. "I had the best young start you can get. And it's really good to its old. But it doesn't have the venue structure for the middle. The middle part is really tough." Of course, the reasons for Mackenzie's ten-year stretch of middleness (it was 1995 before the exhibition tour of her *Saskatchewan Paintings* ushered her back into the theatre of curatorial interest, critical acclaim and, well, marketability) had to do with more than venue structure. "I think it was a combination of sexism and region," Mackenzie says plainly. "Canada was very regional in how it organized a lot of its exhibitions." Even now, she observes, exhibition mandates in this country's major art museums tend to be local and international—rather than national—in scope. Also deflating was the art world's trendy postmodernism, its smug repudiation of the work of the hand. In Vancouver, while she was reinvigorating and reshaping ECUAD's painting department—introducing a note of NSCAD rigour to an aging and conservative faculty, establishing a tough system of critiques within a resistant, "this-is-how-we've-always-done-it" culture—photo-based art was in the ascendancy.

And this photo-based art was sort of a boy's-club, as videographer Sara Diamond observed early on. Although Mackenzie isn't keen on the boy's-club metaphor, she speculates that motherhood—she had two small children when she arrived in Vancouver with partner Donald MacPherson, and gave birth to a third child in 1989—probably undermined her reputation as a serious painter. "Women artists weren't really expected to have children," she recalls. "I didn't know at the time that Nancy Spero had three kids—that would have helped me a lot. I didn't know that Louise Bourgeois had kids." Whittome was her model of a smart and successful woman artist who also taught, but Whittome wasn't a mother.

Mackenzie pressed on, painting and parenting, teaching and travelling, researching, writing, leading workshops in far-flung places, sitting on awards juries and advocating for the arts, all with the dedicated support of her partner and her extended family. Not to mention the engine of her own versatility. "I had to build fractures into my working methods," she says. "Often, when I was teaching, if I had a long lunch break, I'd zip over here"—the studio in the False Creek Flats warehouse whose other esteemed tenants include Ian Wallace, Elspeth Pratt, Al McWilliams and Renée Van Halm—"and add something to a painting." At the end of the teaching day, she'd stop in again and add something else. "The fact that this studio was seven-and-a-half minutes from the school, driving, and seven-and-a-half minutes more to my house...was a key reason why it worked."

Another "crisis" in her Vancouver-based painting career was proscriptive feminist theory—a paradox for a committed feminist like Mackenzie. "Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly had a strong impact on the art community here," she recalls of Vancouver in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While attending a seminar given by these two visitors, she was alarmed to hear all the reasons she shouldn't be painting, and especially shouldn't be representing women in her art. "Griselda and Mary issued a big challenge against what they called *essentialism*, where, as a female artist, you couldn't possibly use a female figure and get away with it. It was going to be contaminated by its history," Mackenzie says. "I was sitting in the seminar and I was about eight months pregnant, with my swollen ankles up on a chair, listening to all this and thinking, 'I feel quite essential right now, actually.'" At NSCAD, that hotbed of conceptualism, men had told her she couldn't paint; in Vancouver, women were telling her the same thing, although for different reasons. But these prohibitions were like red flags to a bull. "If it's so dangerous, there's energy there," Mackenzie says. She immediately went to her studio and inserted two small nudes—a woman giving birth and an adolescent girl—into the big, semi-abstract painting that was standing there. Thus was launched a new series of works, *Canadian Shield and Target*: landscapes that addressed "maternal space" and women's sexuality, along with loaded stereotypes of Canadian identity like canoes and sleds.

The incident illuminates how ideas encountered by Mackenzie-the-ever-inquisitive-student inform the practice of Mackenzie-the-shifting-and-shimmering-painter, and how both personae in turn shape the epistemological strategies of Mackenzie-the-teacher. "The image of a woman's body is treacherous right now," she told the *Toronto Star*'s Christopher Hume in 1989. "I'm trying to take it back and give it a different language...." Hume observed that "as a painting teacher...Mackenzie is in a good position to see how young artists, male and female, are gently

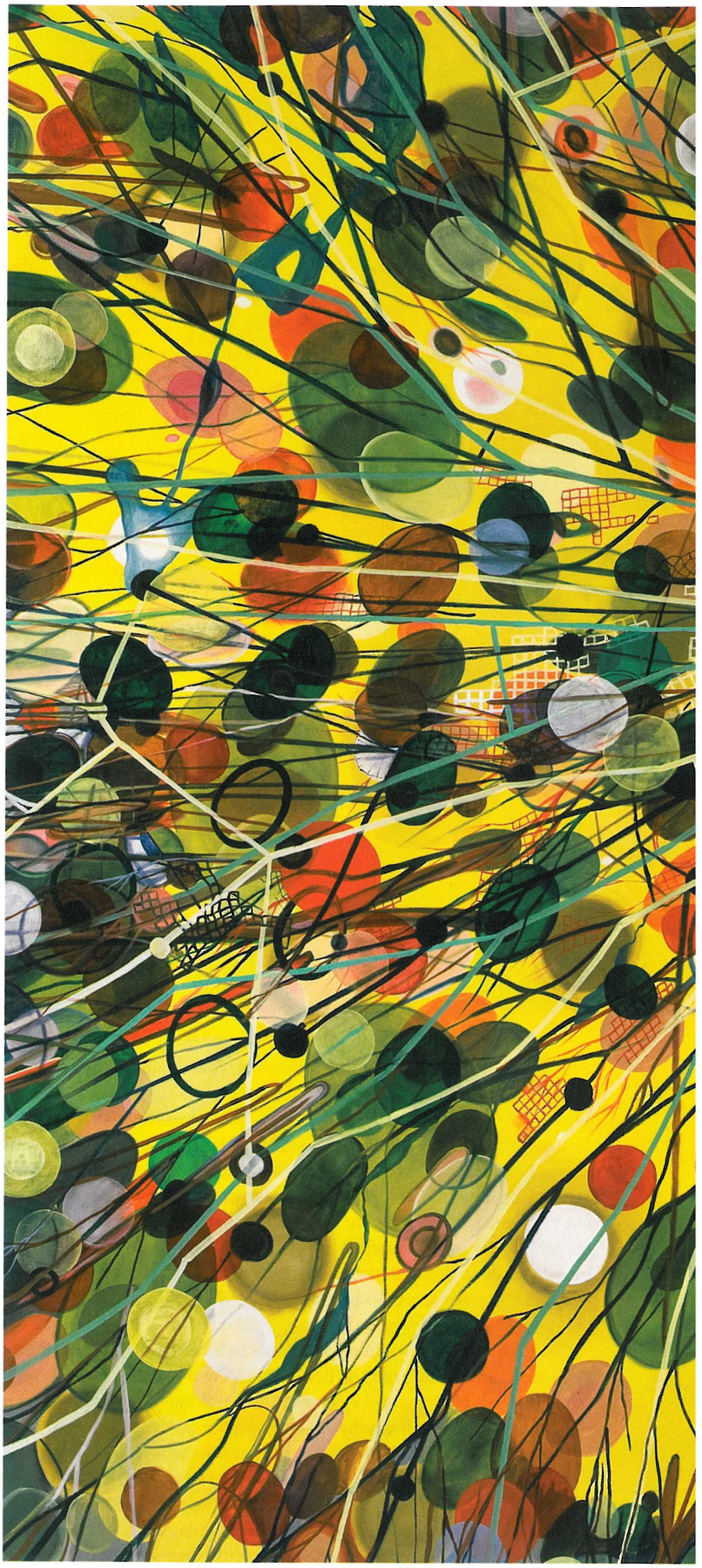
Landon Mackenzie's studio with (left) **Untitled (Neurotree)** (in progress) and (right) **(Spin) Otis and Ash** (2010) COURTESY ART45 PHOTO SCOTT MASSEY

pressured into adopting received notions of what art-making should be."

Good position or not, teaching exerted its own black-hole pull on the early-middle years of her painting career—at least in the minds of others. "It turns into a position of curators saying, 'Maybe you won't take things as seriously anymore, now that you have a permanent teaching position,'" Mackenzie recalls. Not that she expresses any regret at the time and professionalism she has dedicated to educating others. "To be invited to take a role with some of the smartest art students in the world, and to look at their work and to talk with them—what an incredible way to have to spend your day," she enthuses. To brilliant effect, she has engaged in "endless discussions" about why art matters.

"To be honest as a teacher, you have to spend time at the studio," Mackenzie insists. She's not the first artist to observe that teaching can be a catalyst to creativity—and vice-versa. "It's not like you've already been working on your art all day by looking at your students' art, but you're tuned up. You've been talking to them about how to look at colour or how to look at space, how to look at a mark, how to sharpen their tools." Still, she says, "by the time you get to your own studio, you want to retreat into the self. If you have a job that uses your social energy, you crave that solo space." Butted up against each other, her studio practice and her teaching

"To be honest as a teacher, you have to spend time at the studio." She's not the first artist to observe that teaching can be a catalyst to creativity.



Neurocity 2007–08 Oil on linen 2.2 x 2.9 m COLLECTION McCARTHY TÉTRAULT PHOTO SCOTT MASSEY

are "the perfect match for someone with my temperament," she says. It's a temperament she describes as "gregarious introvert," a phrase that will make anybody who knows Mackenzie smile.

At the same time that her big, luminous and extremely knowing paintings were again commanding attention across Canada and in Europe, Emily Carr's painting department was emerging as one of the strongest in the country. It's almost comical how many Emily Carr grads have won major painting awards in recent years, the most notable being the RBC Canadian Painting Competition: from 2005 forward, all but one of its national winners have been ECUAD alumni. Mackenzie, who won the inaugural Ian Wallace Excellence in Teaching Award in 2009, credits her gifted colleagues and the cross-disciplinary fertilization available to students in the program. "You have access to so many faculties," she says. "It's a big enough school that you can have many different instructors and, in fourth-year, you can study with instructors who are not in your field." Some years ago, she and artists Liz Magor and Renée Van Halm worked together to diversify the undergraduate experience. "We started unhooking fourth-year from being discipline-specific. That was really important in building the school, so that you were making art but you still got a really good run at the work from a number of people who thought about it and talked about it in other ways."

On first viewing, *Vancouver as the Centre of the World* looks abstract—an enormous red oval floating on a ground of blue-green and sandy-ochre stripes. In fact, the work is highly representational, its variously translucent and opaque washes of colour inter-layered with subtle forms and ambiguous lines. Alluding to the formal problems posed by creating a two-dimensional map of our three-dimensional planet, and the weirdly distorting cultural biases of cartographers past and present, the painting folds references to moons, satellites, time zones, Internet cables, shipping lanes and airline traffic into its teeming surface. It also focuses us on the geopolitical forces that shape our vision of the world.

"It's about the creation of a complex fiction," Mackenzie says, pointing to the midden-like heap of maps that went into the painting's making. Oceans and landforms shift and merge, national boundaries are erased, and cities like Buenos Aires, Hong Kong and Timbuktu rotate around the place that was once the end of the Earth. In early 2010, reproductions of *Vancouver as the Centre of the World* were displayed in a station on the city's new subway line, and on ceiling panels in some of its train cars. Mackenzie also published various versions of the painting in the form of giclée prints and offset posters. "I used this as a way to signify a centrality for us," Mackenzie says, "a looming-in." All these months later, the Olympic Games long decamped and the centrality shifted to some looming elsewhere, the painting still thrums with life. As does its irrepressible maker. ■

EPILOGUE: A few weeks after our studio interviews, Mackenzie leaves a message on my voice mail. She's been travelling—Montreal, Toronto, New York—and is about to leave town again, for a painting retreat on Prince Edward Island. She's called to tell me she was talking to a graduate student, new to the Master's program, who was feeling devastated after one week because everyone had been giving her a tough time about her paintings. "I said, 'That's what makes really strong painters here.'" Mackenzie's voice is emphatic, even defiant. "'You either fight for it or you give it up.'"

For a career survey of Landon Mackenzie's work, go to canadianart.ca/mackenzie