

Nervous Centres: Landon Mackenzie's Paintings and Drawings, 1993–2012

Glen Lowry

Kinetic, performative, cybernetic, time based—this is not the vocabulary one usually brings to a discussion about painting. Yet, each of these terms points to a crucial aspect of Landon Mackenzie's engagement with the medium and helps to describe her unique commitment to exploring the formal and conceptual limits of contemporary art. Her paintings and works on paper push against the fixity of materials—oil paint, synthetic polymer (acrylic), ink, watercolour, paper, linen, canvas, and wood—and against a deceptively simple typology of abstract figures—circles, ovoids, squares, polyhedrons, and crisscrossing lines that reference (or seem to reference) nets, ladders, bridges, leaves, stars, and cell matter. As we move through this exhibition, viewing works selected from different periods in her development over the past nineteen years, we witness the range of Mackenzie's creative projects and practices, at the heart of which is an unflinching ability to use painting and drawing to excite both motion and emotion, deep thought and feeling. In particular, Mackenzie's large-scale paintings—we might also think of them as cinematic screens, maps, scores, platforms—possess the power to mobilize viewers. Her use of scale, together with an extraordinary deployment of colour and composition, imbue the work with a kinetic potential that drives our attention towards multiple points of entry into an ongoing flow of ideas, possibilities, places, and times.

Underwritten by the artist's characteristic desire to explore (Thom, 2000) and constantly re-evaluate the permeable boundaries connecting the work of art

and its material context, the so-called “real world,” the paintings collected here draw on five series, or bodies, of work. This work, spanning two decades of creative production, includes several pieces borrowed from the Vancouver Art Gallery, as well as others from the artist and other collectors. Together with a selection of smaller canvases that Mackenzie calls her suitcase paintings, and works on paper in ink and watercolour, this exhibition constitutes an impressive staging of Mackenzie’s critical project.

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The narrative of Mackenzie’s artistic development—her education, research and teaching—invokes many of the key historical events and geographic trajectories that have come to define Canadian art’s emergence over the past forty years. A descendant of a line of practicing painters that reaches back three generations, Mackenzie grew up in Toronto during the 1950s, and 1960s until she left for Halifax in 1972. Through her parents and family, she was exposed to people and ideas that helped define the influential Toronto art scene. Art writer Robin Laurence (2010) states,

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 . . . a large, framed Town collage hung in the front hall alongside a Jock Macdonald watercolour, a wedding gift from the artist to her parents (p. 90).

Her artistic sensibilities were tuned to the burgeoning collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Jack Pollock, Isaacs, and Carman Lamana galleries, which were close to her home. Mackenzie had rare access to the artists and ideas about contemporary

art that were instrumental in framing a nationalist discourse on Canadian art and culture and its relation to an emergent internationalism.

Leaving Toronto at seventeen to study at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), Mackenzie entered a very different space. At NSCAD, she found herself in the centre of an exciting dialogue regarding Conceptual Art. The school's youthful president, Garry Neill Kennedy, had established NSCAD as a hub for visiting luminaries from Europe and the US. Mackenzie and her schoolmates were exposed to the work and ideas of Vito Acconci, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Beuys, and Philip Glass, among others. The American concrete poet Emmett Williams taught Mackenzie's Foundation class and helped to shape her interest in the relationship between visual art and text. Her experience at NSCAD was crucial to her unique approach to art making. It is therefore important to recognize that within the ethos of Conceptual Art and in the context of her NSCAD experience, painting was contested as a critical artistic enterprise and had come to be seen as symptomatic of bourgeois culture. Painting, Mackenzie was told, *was dead*. So Mackenzie began her studio training in life drawing and printmaking, studying the rigorous and meticulous methods of lithography, etching, aquatint, drypoint, and serigraphy in the NSCAD Printshop. Having avoided studying painting during her undergraduate and graduate education, she turned to paint in 1979 in the context of group studios, first on Montréal's Peel Street and then Clark Street. After a decade of working almost entirely in black and white in her prints and drawings, Mackenzie's exploration of painting entered her into a new relationship with colour, one that has stuck. In many ways, her decision to work with painting has continued to position

her work as a counterpoint to larger conceptualist conversations around form and abstraction, especially in a Canadian context.

While completing the Master of Fine Arts program at Concordia University, Mackenzie spent an entire year working on one 17' x 17' etching plate, unveiling systematized and abstract image after image. This type of methodological drive and respect for creative processes continue to shape Mackenzie's daily practice. Under the supervision of Guido Molinari and Irene Whittome, she found a respect for her ideas and behaviour from these two senior artists, and their challenges were key to her mature work. In 1981, three years after leaving the Bourget Building of the MFA Studios, and two years after she began painting, two of her figurative *Lost River* series works were chosen for the 3rd Biennale of Painting in Québec; Mackenzie won first prize in the blind jury process. This placed Mackenzie's work on a national stage, connecting it with what was being called "New Image Painting." She began exhibiting with Galerie France Morin, who also showed the work of international artists such as Daniel Burin, Hans Hacke, and local legend Betty Goodwin. From her early success with the *Lost River* series, Mackenzie would go on to create a career of national and international significance.

In 1986, following a few years where she worked as a young teacher at Concordia and divided her studio between Montréal and Toronto, with a stint at the University of Alberta, Mackenzie took a position at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design (now Emily Carr University). This gave her a new context and a new city from which to develop her work. It also broadened her geographic focus and sphere of reference, changing her approach to both the country and the spatial dynamic

underlying it. With her Emily Carr colleagues and fellow artists, Mackenzie became part of Vancouver's meteoric rise during the 1990s as a key city in the production of contemporary art. The list of artists who have worked in the Third Avenue building that houses her studio reads like a recent issue of *Canadian Art*. Converted from an art college teaching space twenty-five years ago, Mackenzie, Ian Wallace, and Terrance Johnson helped transform this studio building into a cornerstone of Vancouver production. Along with long-term studio mates Al McWilliams, Lyse Lemieux, Marcia Pitch, and Elspeth Pratt, others have come and gone. Over the years, Ian Wallace, Ben Reeves, Stephen Shearer, Renee Van Halm, Ron Terada, Elizabeth McIntosh, Allyson Clay, Arabella Campbell, Etienne Zack, Damian Moppett, and others have made this an ideal studio for Mackenzie to think about and create paintings. This space continues to be extremely important to Mackenzie; as she suggests, the patterns of work and friendships developed over the years in the Third Avenue warehouse are inseparable from the evolution of her working methods.

While she also keeps a studio in PEI, living in Vancouver and teaching at Emily Carr provides Mackenzie with access to current dialogues about contemporary practices that are vital to her work. Surrounded by other artists, established and emerging, Mackenzie remains tuned to the rare moments of brilliance that emerge through a process of shuttling among the various facets of her busy life—teaching, working in the studio, and balancing the pressures of raising three children (with Donald MacPherson). Taking a cue from her artwork, we might think of the various orbits of existence being dependent on each other. As we consider huge works like *Circle of Willis*, *World of Knots and Troubles*, *Sailscape*, or

Simulator-Neurostar, our eye moves from one point of light/colour/activity to another in a manner reminiscent of movements across different planes of quotidian activity or points of focus: university classroom, studio, gallery.

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Toronto, Halifax, Montréal, Vancouver—these cities are but nodes in Mackenzie’s larger geography. Looking back over her oeuvre, it is apparent that Mackenzie’s paintings and drawings offer a protracted dialogue with geography—rural and urban. Her work carefully considers the problems inherent in representing different types of spaces—physical and psychological, local and global, terrestrial and celestial. From the mythopoeic early dark and layered “Lost River” series to the feminist and nationalist critique of *Canadian Shield and Target* produced in Vancouver, from the archival research of her prairie landscapes to the conceptual drawings of the Paris Metro, Mackenzie draws on a plethora of source materials: imagery and text borrowed from hand-drawn maps, travelogues, letters, and conversational snippets as well as subway diagrams, MRI scans, and satellite imaging. Following the emergent topography of her paintings and drawings, it is clear that Mackenzie has used her interest in landscapes (places and paintings of places) to develop a nuanced study of mapping, map making, or what we might now call way finding. Tending not to paint plein air (except on road trips and during residencies), preferring to work in the studio under artificial light, eschewing the use of photographs, Mackenzie resists the objective conceits of conventional landscape painting. Speaking of her own creative process, Mackenzie emphasizes

the importance of keeping her own intuitive/inductive approach separate from her analytical critique. Unlike other painters who work from the photograph or some strong sense of a work's final shape, Mackenzie enters her paintings with only a feeling for potential directions. As the artist returns to the canvas again and again, she paints one day's work into or over the next; various levels of meaning, intention, reference recede into a visual palimpsest—they remain only partially obscured. Painting, repainting, unpainting, moving from acrylic to oil, from one canvas to another, she works her paintings until she “begins to recognize them,” achieving a particular balance, often one that pushes the limits of visual memory or reference but which resists falling over into chaos.

During the 1990s, Mackenzie's research took her to important geographically remote sites such as the Cumberland Delta, near an old inland Hudson's Bay post (Cumberland House) on the Saskatchewan and Manitoba border, as well as to distant map rooms and archives, such as those of the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge, UK. From this research, she produced paintings investigating the geographies and histories of the Canadian West and North. Her “Trilogy,” made up of “Saskatchewan Paintings,” “Tracking Athabasca,” and “Houbart's Hope,” numbers about twenty paintings in all from 1993 to 2005, and all utilizing similar methodologies and dimensions (7'6" x 10'3"), the paintings recall the historic networks of European exploration and trade, pathways that had at one time been instrumental to the colonial project. Mackenzie's engagement with Prairies and North constitutes an effort to reorient or recalibrate our maps towards the watersheds of the Arctic Ocean and Hudson's Bay and to rethink the continued

impact of communication networks that can be traced back hundreds if not thousands of years (trails, river ways, telegraph lines, early satellites, etc.) in new contexts.

In a monograph on Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley, art historian Robert Stacey describes Mackenzie's method of working with "Saskatchewan maps, place names, and lines of communication" as a means of linking "past and present, content and form, place and time, tradition and innovation" (Stacey, 2002, p. 132). Naming Mackenzie's *Snowfall on Telegraph Trail Over the Blue Night of the Runway* (1997, Private Collection) as an important way of thinking about the region, Stacey provides excerpts from an exchange in which Mackenzie describes her creative process and use of historical detail. She writes,

I couldn't resist "re-immersing" a faint trace of the line from the Qu'Appelle so your viewers can—if *they know their geography*—find it, even though the idea of lost organic animal and later human paths (which follow the logic of the natural terrain, water and wood) are hidden by snow and finally (an attempted erasure) with the Dominion Survey (imperial) Grid (132–133; emphasis added).

Working against "an attempted erasure," the colonial past and new nation's "imperial" grid—one form of violence subsumed by another—Mackenzie's prairie landscapes present different "beaten paths"—narratives of movement and mobility—that have been imperfectly erased from the popular memory of our industrial nation. The river systems of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (as well as those of northern Ontario, Québec, Newfoundland, and the territories) provide

access to the continent's most valued resources (furs, minerals, and fossil fuels) from the north. Shifting focus away from Canada's east-west expansion, the paintings comprising the "Saskatchewan Paintings," "Tracking Athabasca," and "Houbart's Hope" series recall a relation to Canadian geography that contests the Laurentian theory and confounds the primacy of east-west expansion. Presenting images of interrupted development, the waves of exploration and settlement that predate Confederation, these works remind us that the St. Lawrence is but one point of entry. Examining other trajectories and other historical networks, Mackenzie's paintings of the 1990s and early 2000s perform an important *decentring* of a national imaginary, which both *recentres* so-called hinterlands and challenges a dominant paradigm. Four important examples from this period are on generous loan from the Vancouver Art Gallery in this exhibition. Typical of Mackenzie's elaborate titles, *Interior Lowlands; Still the Restless Whispers Never Leave Me* and *Gabriel's Crossing to Humboldt* are from "Saskatchewan Paintings." *Space Station; Falls Thought to be the Longest in the Known World So Far* and *Short Lines; Network of Stoppages* are from "Tracking Athabasca."

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In Mackenzie's paintings and drawings from this period, form and concept converge in a manner that foregrounds the politics of representation. When Mackenzie suggests that she works from an "interest in the intersecting territories of history, maps, waterways, and dark and light space as *nervous systems*" (as cited in Wylie, 2011, 51; emphasis added), she gestures towards the fraught social processes

involved in representing space. Her concept of “nervous systems” provides a useful way into thinking about our entanglement with other systems of exchange, knowledge, belief, or culture. Invoking this interest in the land or particular landscape, Mackenzie allows her formal strategies, the interplay between dark and light colours, to be read through the history of land-based struggles: colonialism, settlement, and environmental globalization. Her work is “not only concerned with making visible what has been obscured and unrecognized, but also in exploring the processes through which erasure takes place” (McCallum & Radtke, 2002, p. 9). As Katherine Harmon (2009) argues in *The Map as Art*, Mackenzie’s “frequent use of obscured, painted-over text in these paintings emphasizes how records and maps both reveal and conceal history” (69). And as McCallum and Radtke suggest, when Mackenzie “situate[s] herself within the generally masculine tradition of large oil paintings” (9), she challenges male privilege and dominance. Her reference through titles to figures such as Josiah Houbart in her *Houbart’s Hope; Tracing One Warm Line* (2001–2004, Musee d’Art Contemporain,) or Gabriel Dumont in *Gabriel’s Crossing to Humboldt* undoes historical narratives by placing these men within the flow of time. Houbart, an obscure seventeenth-century naval pilot, surveyed Hudson’s Bay with Captain Thomas Button in the hope of locating a Northwest Passage to the Orient. Despite the expedition’s failure, the marker of a river inlet on the Bay as “Houbart’s Hope” remained on maps for almost a century. Mackenzie’s allusion to Gabriel Dumont in *Gabriel’s crossing to Humboldt* comes from an old survey map she found in the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan and focuses on Dumont the ferryman, a link that predates his controversial association with Louis

Riel and the 1869–70 Red River Rebellion or the 1885 North West Conflict. The figure also alludes to the mythical angel Gabriel, a reference that is reinforced by Mackenzie's placement of the dark crop circles in the form of quatrefoil windows. Her slightly irreverent references to these men suggest something of the hubris of individual agency. Faced with temporality of the map and the ebb and flow of historical enterprise, the question of geography as cultural memory is seen as fleeting or whimsical—possibly tragic, depending on one's point of view.

The duality of landscape as signified and signifier, as place and painting, provides an important hinge in Mackenzie's work. Together, her paintings and drawings help to transform the meaning of "'landscape' from noun to verb" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 1). Centering human agency in the production of object knowledge or fact, Mackenzie's artworks enter into an important dialogue with science and technology. As one curator suggests, the map provides a key concept in Mackenzie's artworks because "it is with this confluence of ideas and imagery that the combination of abstraction and representation in her work begins and resides" (Wylie, 2011, 21). In the context of hyper-digitization and the miniaturization or flattening of images to fit the palm-held device or desk screen, Mackenzie's large-scale paintings function as a reminder of serious limitations of new media. Through computers and mobile devices, we have unprecedented access to visual databanks and information about almost anything. However, Mackenzie's work reminds us that we are missing other types of knowledge/information that are not available on screen; even when we view her works in high-quality reproductions (as in this catalogue), we miss crucial elements of the work.

The artist's choice of materials and subject matter are strongly linked to her interest in the liminal space between abstraction and representation, which we might rephrase in terms of a tension between the painted surface and illusions of visual depth. For example, what does it mean to read that Mackenzie paints her large Saskatchewan works on linen? Intellectually, we might make something of the fact that linen is manufactured from flax, and as such, the material form provides a direct reference to the social and economic history of the Prairies. But how do we understand the aesthetic differences at play in the work? More to the point, what do we miss when we lose access to the texture of the gesso and the layers of oil paint or synthetic polymers? Her works also resist the purity of abstraction and surface—her titles and chosen imagery suggest an important external reference. The material object is of primary importance to the way Mackenzie works, but the painted object exists always in relation to other material objects, spaces, and time. For her, the painting is itself a site, a platform, a stage, and a screen—a landscape or a cosmos in its own right.

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Early in her career, Mackenzie sets the terms of her creative project by wondering, “How could anyone make a landscape painting again?” This question led her into a long engagement with historical and contemporary landscape art and contradictory complexities inherent in visual representation. Her paintings continue to find new ways to trouble the visual technologies neutralized or naturalized by the dominant visual traditions: map making, landscape painting, medical diagrams, MRI scans, or

images from space. Faced with the spectacular visual and intellectual energy unleashed in her large canvases, there is a desire to turn her initial question back on itself. We are encouraged to ask, “How can one paint anything but landscapes?” Taken at scale, the surface imagery and brush strokes and dribbles of the painted canvas form an immediate topography that reflects and refracts the larger social practices organizing or delimiting space. Mackenzie’s virtuosic layering of pigment and different sources of artistic inspiration/intension accrues a geography of its own. The physical terrain of her paintings seems to orchestrate a perpetual movement between modes of detailed analysis and pleasurable contemplation—they draw us in and push us back. Direct approach gives way to oblique circumspection. As we shuffle between different vantage points and the various modes of appreciation they facilitate, it is as if Mackenzie’s paintings choreograph the space around their installation. The gallery, studio, or wherever it is that we are lucky enough to experience the work, is activated through a kind of dance between viewer and canvas. Physically, we are drawn into a kinetic process that begins with the artist’s tracking of ideas (research, travels, drawings, suitcase paintings), extends through her obsessive reworking of the canvas on the floor of her studio, and includes ongoing dialogue (with family, colleagues, and the finished and unfinished works). The spatial-temporal dynamic set in motion in Mackenzie’s work is sprung by our embodied presence.

The power of her work to affect embodied viewing grows from Mackenzie’s tendency to approach painting *in medias res*. Rather than acting as points of origin or absolute representations of an idea or object, her paintings mediate the flow of

ideas. The stories reverberating through her work often begin before our arrival and carry on through the work after we leave it. By mixing text and image, Mackenzie has learned to infuse her painting with a highly discursive aspect. Although her recent works have moved away from the use of words, which were present in her early prints and “Trilogy,” they continue to track movements of people and ideas through the repetition of “readable” gestures. Setting out a visual iconography of squares as pixels, ladders, sails, nets, lines of static, subway maps, fencing, and other recognizable tropes, she invites us to contemplate new types of visual relationships and data drawn from a range of social contexts that reach beyond the conventional purview of landscape paintings—a language of signs that nevertheless remains crucial to our conception of the natural world and the boundaries of human experience or existence.

Historically, European landscape painting and map making share a mutual reliance on Euclidian geometry, which tends to cast space as inert or external to human life. Through a drive for objective representations of places or landscapes, each has helped to perpetuate an idea of nature as the opposite to the social world, as that which remains outside culture. Mackenzie, to the contrary, works to foreground the subjective experience involved in landscape painting and to return to the human stories and experiences elided from the official maps. In her most recent paintings and drawings, she shifts this focus to urban sites and international networks (Paris, Berlin, the ash clouds of the Icelandic volcano that disrupted European air travel). No longer bound by a national imaginary, these recent works highlight Mackenzie’s movement through and across interconnected urban spaces,

collapsing distances between cities and countries. Works such as *Neurocity (Aqua Blue)* or *Pink Dot* look at spaces that are nodes in larger networks of mobility. *Pink Dot*, for example, centres on Calgary's original fort and the Atlantic Block and features references to the train tracks, tram lines, and river ways that pass through and around the Inglewood neighbourhood and link the space to other places and other times. Shifting attention onto these non-metropolitan sites, Mackenzie centres on local interests and tilts "the world" off axis. Figuratively, she invites viewers to ask what it means to begin mapping here, to describe a place without orienting to an outside grid or system of coordinates.

Stretched across the floor of her studio, Mackenzie's paintings come into being as spaces that the artist visits and traverses as she works. About halfway through the process, often after weeks, she stretches the linens on their frames and continues on the wall "to figure them out like puzzles" (Mackenzie interview, 2012). With time, they function as stages for creative performance and dialogue. Not simply the representation of places or things, these works are in and of themselves things; they are not about objective facts as much as they are social acts that become facts. Her large-scale works invite viewers to contemplate the intricate layering of entangled differences. As we move to consider the legible and the not-quite legible, the apparently flat surface of the painting gives way to a complex topography of its own. The here and now of our contemplation or viewing brings to light the considerable time and care that has gone into each work; in the process, the artist's layering of paint and stains reemerges as a temporality that engulfs and elongates the present.

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Drawn from three series, “Neurocity,” “The Structures,” and “Neurostar,” her most recent works examine Mackenzie’s continued artistic development and the currency of contemporary art in a world obsessed with the ephemeral flow of low-resolution imagery and information overload. A testament to an artist’s virtuosic command of scale, composition, drawing and colour, these works—and the space they animate—function as a platform for conversations about the structures of twenty-first century urban life. Building on her earlier bodies of work, these new works extend Mackenzie’s considerable thinking about the social function of painting and conceptual art into the realm of cognitive science. Where the works from the 1990s and early 2000s come out of her interest in the colonial archive, the intricate and rhizomatic patterns that seem to characterize much of her most recent works, as in *Point of Entry* or *Simulator-Neurostar*, reflect Mackenzie’s neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and human biology research. Overlaying the microscopic with the telescopic, or vice versa, these works find visual or conceptual corollaries for vast (global/celestial) networks in the human brain and body.

If, historically, Mackenzie works to challenge the representational strictures of empire or nation, the problem of imagining “the country,” her most recent paintings and drawings might be seen as extending her practice by shifting focus onto the city and to movements between cities. Works such as *Neurocity* (2009–2010 in Montreal) or *(Spin) Otis and Ash*, which reference urban travel (subway maps and the ash cloud over Iceland), point to what urban geographers term a

rescaling of the work across the global-local, as opposed to the national-regional of early nationalist paradigms. Inasmuch as her early work is informed by a desire to seek out distant contexts in which she might work with others and come up with alternative maps capable of speaking back to the colonial archive, this recent work is influenced by her travels between Vancouver and Paris, Berlin, Madrid, and Beijing and dialogues with an increasingly international art world.

This melding of the global and urban that is integral to Mackenzie's recent paintings and drawings has its basis in the blending of the micro systems (computer and communication technologies) and macro contexts (global positioning systems, world trade). Mackenzie talks about her large canvases being designed to counterbalance a proliferation of smaller screens. Her intention is that the larger paintings might decouple us from the fleeting, largely inconsequential stream of messages, the by-products of our so-called "advanced communication" age, by presenting an opportunity to slow down and reflect. Mackenzie's recurrent webs, ladders, balloons, filters, neural pathways, branches, leaves, and subway maps encourage viewers to look again, to focus and refocus, to make the leap to other works as well as other places and times. As we enter the push-pull vortex of Mackenzie's dynamic compositions, we the viewers move through an abstract topography that stretches beyond the edges of individual works, quantum leaping from one work to another at the limits of cognition, or proprioception. The bands of white lines covering the surface of *World of Knots and Troubles* is visually reminiscent of television static or interference; its pallet recalls the early days of television and the birth of the mass media age. Yet the shock of bright blue, yellow,

pink, and red leap off the painting to connect with other works—*Rose Square, Wild Red, or Signal (Birthday Party)*.

Coda

To better contextualize this exhibition and to provide some insight into Landon Mackenzie's thinking about her own work in relation to great traditions of Western Art, I'd like to conclude by offering an anecdote. Last summer, when she learned I would be travelling to Madrid, Landon encouraged me to go see the "light Goyas, upstairs in the Prado," suggesting that I might find these works useful when thinking about the canvas I had seen in her studio recently. When I arrived at Madrid's renowned Prado, my first concern was finding my way through the throngs of tourists to the rooms she suggested. Making my way to the second floor, I wondered how Goya's paintings might be related to *(Spin) Otis and Ash* or *Neurocity (Aqua Blue)* or *Signal (Birthday Party)*—all recent works I had seen in the studio a few weeks earlier. What could Francisco de Goya's pictorialism have to do with Landon's large, supercharged abstracts and the unique cosmos each seemed to want to call into being?

I had seen Goya's work before and was aware of his ground-breaking "Los Desastres de la Guerra" (Disasters of War) and *The Third of May 1808*, and his "Pinturas Negra" (Black Paintings), which include *Saturn Devouring His Son*. But what could Goya have to offer as a way into the series of paintings I was writing about? Surely the social commentary explicit in the "Pentre Negra" prefigures the work of the battle photographs and arguably underwrites the social contract of

twentieth-century photojournalism and its struggle with social realism, the other side of Mackenzie's project. Goya's ability to frame compelling social realism no doubt adds another layer to the complex debate around the efficacy of abstract painting. But this all seemed a bit farfetched or a bit highfalutin. Besides, the "lighter" works Landon wanted me to look at were cartoons for a series of commissioned tapestries. At first blush, they were hardly the stuff one would bring into a discussion of non-representational painting. I struggled to see what these soft-edged, bucolic scenes had to do with conversations she and I had been having.

Trusting Landon, I spent time with what she calls the "light Goyas" allowing myself to enjoy them on their own terms. Moving slowly and freely through this relatively empty corner of the Prado, examining the details, noticing how the works related to each other and to the rural imagery, it occurred to me that what was important had little to do with technical brilliance (of course these works are brilliant) or the unique perspective they bring to bear. Instead, I came to see that their power had to do with the way Goya was able to transform the room around the works. Allowing my attention to drift from the centre of the frame, away from the revelry and debauchery of the human actors, I became transfixed by the different elements of Goya's compositions that seemed to reach out into or across. As we see in Mackenzie's paintings, Goya's artworks do more than create the illusion of another external world. They blend other places and times with the here and now of the viewing—external and internal worlds collide. Following this uncanny power, I became mesmerized by Goya's dogs, the way their gaze reaches out of the frame and actively engages the viewer by flouting the boundaries between the figurative ideal

and built environments. For example, in the lower right corner of Goya's *La Cometa*, a brown and white spaniel gazes directly out of the painting; oblivious to the actions of the other figures in the painting, he seems to be attuned to the viewer. He gazes past the illusionistic space of the painting, reminding us that none of it would be possible without the viewers—without our suspension of disbelief, without our engagement with the painting.

Linking back to Landon's interest in cities—the way her focus seems to have shifted from the remote valleys of the Mackenzie and Athabasca rivers to the glass and steel towers of Vancouver and Calgary, the undergrounds of Berlin and Paris, the lines across and between the proliferation of urban space—I began to see Goya's tapestry cartoons as blueprints for a contemporary art capable of transforming the viewer and the space of the viewing. As Goya's were blueprints for the flourishing nineteenth-century Madrid, which would become one of the great cities of Europe, so Mackenzie's paintings invite us to think about new cities, or better, new spaces resonant with the light and energy her works channel. I began to think of the way her paintings imagine urban interiors capable of reflecting social possibilities different than the relatively austere options passed down to us by history or the government. As time-based medium, which is another way Mackenzie describes them, her paintings are imbued with cinematic qualities—screen-sized canvas, theatrical performance, propensity for dialogue, dependence on artificial light, and commitment to live action—that record visual memories of a city not yet built, the cities we might hope to live in.

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