

Divided Pathways: Painting's Choice

An interview with Elizabeth McIntosh

Interview by Robert Enright

In the following interview, Elizabeth McIntosh expresses her admiration for the ingenuity of Paul Klee. Her assessment is that “the quantity of his exploration made a lot of pretty weird paintings.”

She, too, is ingenious and has made some pretty weird paintings of her own. The Vancouver-based artist has a work from 2007 called *Untitled (odd shapes with green borders)* which looks exactly like its name, and another from the following year, *Warm and Cold*, in which the irregular lines and awkwardly placed rectangles on a bright yellow ground make you think that BC Binning took a trip on the Psychedelic Ferry. These are deliberate moves. McIntosh is a highly intelligent painter whose predisposition is to be on the lookout for new ways of using colour and form. “I never want to fully know what I am going to have at the end because then I wouldn't need to make the painting.” She is especially interested in a wilfully induced pictorial alienation in which what she sees is what she hasn't seen before.

The other side of the perceptual coin is that like all serious painters, she is also heavily invested in the history of the medium. She has always looked to other painters for something that could play a

catalytic role in her own practice, something as insignificant as a gesture, a colour or a line taken from a sticker book on modern artists. One example I had in mind in connection with McIntosh's *Warm and Cold* was a painting by BC Binning called *Device for Aesthetic Response*, 1954. This is precisely the way she uses paintings by other artists; they are devices that provoke an aesthetic response.

More recently her looking has led her into the studios of a number of modernist giants, particularly Picasso and Matisse. She indicates a conscious engagement with their subjects, palette and sensuality. She is attracted to what she calls “the breadth of experimentation” in the period of high Modernism, a weight and range she has found wanting in the generations that followed.

McIntosh first referenced Picasso in *Beginner's Luck*, 2011, and she picks him up again in *Picasso's Dream*, 2012, and in *Picasso Nude*, 2014, although before she makes this painting her own she filters the Spaniard's gaze through George Condo, with a pink wink at de Kooning.

But it is Matisse who more thoroughly occupies her painterly imagination. A painting like *Girl*, 2014, has the awkward delicacy of one of his Cambodian dancers and *Big Lady*, 2014, suggests an attenuated

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Elizabeth McIntosh, *Sit and Spin*, 2014, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Scott Massey.

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line that the French painter would admire. He would be equally approving of the unusual way that she fragments the composition. Her lady retains a fleshy languor, the full appreciation of which is impeded by the red shape outlined in black that sits uncomfortably where the woman's armpit would be. Her anatomy is thoroughly skewed; the indentation under her breast assumes the character of a pubic cleft, and suddenly Matisse's odalisque morphs into Duchamp's *Étant donnés*. *Ballsy*, the title of an oil on canvas from 2013, sums up her process and her attitude; it both recognizes a painting with many tributaries as well as articulates an admirably abusive understanding of the uses of art history. In *Conversation*, 2013, McIntosh lifts some patterns and motifs from Matisse but her title more directly references *The Conversation*, a painting begun in 1908, finished four years later, and now in the collection of The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The painting shows Matisse and his wife in morning dress on either side of a window that looks onto a garden with flower-covered ponds. In an earlier painting called *From a Fauve Landscape*, 2011, McIntosh's marks and ground resemble Matisse's garden. The conversation she is having with art, then, is a polyphonic one, as likely to talk through the fabric designs of Sonia Delaunay as the dreams of Picasso.

Not surprisingly, McIntosh rejects any sense of regret in the notion of the road not taken. For her, painting offers a limitless number of possibilities. "There are so many routes you could take," she says. "It is like a path that keeps dividing and each new path is a new canvas."

The following interview was conducted by phone to the artist's home in Vancouver on June 23, 2014.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I'm intrigued by the idea that you start a painting with a quotation from a painter you admire.

ELIZABETH MCINTOSH: That is something that developed more in the last few years. It started with the discovery of these sticker books and then morphed into different processes and ways of using other material. Before that my process was more straightforward. When I was initially making the geometric paintings there was a base vocabulary that was repeated in all the paintings. The starting point was knowing that the composition would be built out of particular forms. I was also looking at other paintings I had made, so the previous painting would inform the next one. But what really started the ball rolling was finding the sticker books, which extracted elements from existing paintings in particularly interesting ways. It was also a way to continue to be excited and inspired about painting. Getting lots of new stuff

to look at was a great way to generate a whole new body of work.

I know you have been interested in Sonia Delaunay, Paul Klee and Matisse, among many others. How do you choose the artists?



The rediscovery of Paul Klee came through the sticker books. He is interesting because of the variety of his transitions. There wasn't a single motif that was repeated. There is so much play within his body of work and no signature style, except for the quantity of exploration. He made a lot of pretty weird paintings. Matisse is a steady source and Delaunay interests me because of her work in the decorative arts, where she designed fabric and costumes for performances.

When you do *Taking a Walk*, 2011, the word missing from the naming is "line." "Taking a line for a walk" is Klee's famous definition of drawing. The title came from the fact that I was tracing the edges of the support with a dotted line. Defining the edges seemed like a nice way to explore the framework of the painting. The titles are not necessarily descriptive.

In *Technique*, 2011, you use exactly the same palette on the outer edges of the composition as in *Taking a Walk*. Do you decide on your colours ahead of time?

No. Those paintings from that year were the first smaller paintings I ever made. The simple challenge was, Can I make a small painting? They all went through quite a few changes. I remember *Talking*

1. *Untitled (composition with round feet)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photographs: Scott Massey.

2. *Untitled (windows)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist.

3. *Cut Out*, 2009, photo backdrop paper, pushpins, 11 x 37 feet, 15 x 18 feet. Courtesy the artist.

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a Walk had a glaze on top that was brushed out and then blurred. Sometimes I'll blend the paint out before I leave the studio in case I don't like it. I don't want the material of the paint to accumulate. But the colours are not planned. *Technique* is based on the inside of a basket from a Bonnard still life.



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It is interesting that a number of the painters you admire come from that moment in high Modernism when all hell seemed to be breaking loose. Is that a period you find particularly attractive?

Over the last couple of years that has definitely been my focus because the breadth of experimentation seems so much more exciting than what came later.

Is predictability your biggest enemy in the studio; you don't want to repeat yourself, or do something that either you or the viewer would expect you to do?

That is a good way to phrase it. Though the larger paintings in the body of work I recently exhibited in Toronto are made from a plan which is a completely new and radical shift for me. The two types of work in "Fairy Bread," my show at Diaz, played off each other. There were small, completely improvised paintings that were made quite quickly and with no conscious reference. I was just exploring moving the paint around. Then there were larger works with elements that were cut out, taken out of a context, and repositioned on a new support. I enjoyed both ways of working. I could have the planning aspect and there was still a lot of unpredictability. Each painting had a plan but I didn't know if the plan would work, so a lot of assessment happened as I cycled through things. I never want to fully know what I am going to have at the end because then I wouldn't need to make the painting. But having a subject or a model to base the painting on has been a relief because the vocabulary over the last few years has expanded to the point where there is no way to gather it all together. It was feeling a little overwhelming.

The American novelist William Faulkner said he wanted to get the entire world into one sentence. I gather from what you are saying that there is a whole world in your pictorial imagination that you want to get down, but you recognize the impossibility of getting it onto one canvas. So, do you have to fragment the vision and realize it in a series of works?

Yes, because there are so many routes you could take. It is like a path that keeps dividing and each new path is a new canvas. I admire artists like Giorgio Morandi, who choose one subject that they explore for a long period of time. That seems kind of perfect, but painting can do so many things that limiting it feels wrong for me.

Jan Verwoert says in an essay on your work that your thinking is intuitive. Do you operate primarily by intuition rather than through the application of an idea?

Yes. I always find it difficult to even find words to have a discussion about my work. At the outset, it's definitely not about the idea and that's why this new group of paintings, which were planned, came as such surprise. Typically, I start with a blank canvas and an almost blank mind, and without preconceiving the painting in any way. Those quotations you asked about were chosen at the moment just before beginning a painting—with a quick glance at

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my table of source material, something will catch my eye that will kick-start the painting. Whatever is first put there dictates the next move and then the painting unfolds from all the relationships that exist within that developing field.

So that original gesture would almost necessarily get covered up, or get buried deep in pentimento? Yes. I think whatever I need to start is one thing and whatever develops from that is where the process becomes interesting. The source is something I find beautiful but it's not important to the outcome of the painting.

Your paintings assume the character of recognizable objects in the world, say a table, a geodesic dome or even the spindly legs of a spider. Is that a deliberate association or one that comes to you after the piece has been made?

It depends on the painting. *Untitled (table)* is a pretty old painting from 2005 where there was an idea at the outset. Because it is a literal description it seems fine to call the table what it is. The spider painting was titled after the painting was finished and is perhaps a little too close to the subject and dictates too much how the painting should be interpreted.

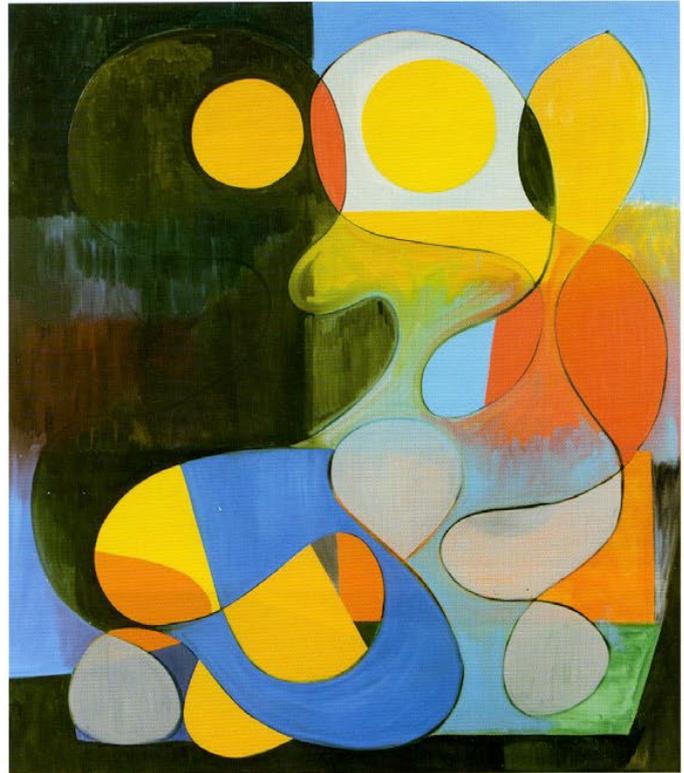
I was interested in the idea of making strange, which one of your paintings refers to. Making strange is a literary and aesthetic strategy for making art in which the senses get destabilized. Is that what you want to do to the viewer?

I think about it pretty loosely, but it has been an influence from when I first started painting. When I make something I don't understand, or that I haven't seen before, or that surprises me, or seems unexpected, I'm doing it for myself. The need to alienate my way of seeing things or to take away a sense of familiarity is always there. I used to try more consciously to make awkward paintings.

In *Shapes or Things*, 2011, I hear two possible reads in the title—a painterly one where the shapes come in, and a representational one where the things come in. I read both of them as possible but as almost mutually exclusive.

I don't think they have to be mutually exclusive; I think that they can flip back and forth as you're looking at them. In one instance, it may allude to something in the world that we're familiar with and at another moment they may be shapes that only have relationships within that painting. In the process of viewing, you could go one way or the other. I like how that ambiguity can open up much wider possibilities for each viewer.

When you parenthetically subtitle a piece *Untitled (flags and crowns)* I see the pennant flags and then paper hat crowns. But that subtitle makes a move back to the representational world rather than staying inside the world of abstraction. Do you want to encourage the viewer to do that?



Yes. That painting was made toward the beginning of when I started using titles. I'm not opposed to those connections and *flags and crowns* probably had something to do with what I was thinking about at the time. I was looking a lot at Brian Wildsmith illustrations, so there is a fanciful element in those paintings. As I've titled more, I've tried to not have them become too specifically descriptive.

The combination of intersecting triangles and paint application in some of your *Untitled* pieces in 2006 creates the suggestion of volume, as if there were an unstated cubist insinuation operating. They don't read in a purely flat, two-dimensional way.

I was pretty excited to have an element of depth incorporated in my work. Up until that point my paintings had been super-flat, so when I started working with triangles I enjoyed playing with that illusionistic aspect, with creating

1. *Ballsy*, 2013, oil on canvas, 85 x 75 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photographs: Scott Massey.

2. *Conversation*, 2013, oil on canvas, 75 x 85 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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and then destroying depth, or cancelling it out in some other way. It is obviously a trick, but it can make a painting more interesting to look at. I never did figurative painting. I always thought about painting as organizing shapes on a two-dimensional support. There was never a desire to



create illusion. When I was in school I didn't know what I wanted to do with illusion but as soon as I started making work in my own studio it wasn't something I was interested in or had really considered. When I studied there wasn't a lot of instruction on how to paint. There were so many more pressing concerns; it felt backward to make a painting, and a woman making a painting was almost a radical gesture. I was at York University where they had an especially strong Women's Studies Department and that dialogue was invigorating.

You seem fearless in accepting the possibility of failure in the making of a painting. Do you never have any doubts about doubt?

I'm riddled with doubt. Last year I was becoming crippled and there is a whole group of paintings I have never shown—I made them between shows and then something else developed that seemed more exciting—but in my studio things had slowed down to a snail's pace. I was going through this anguishing, plodding process. But the paintings were some of the best I have ever made, so maybe that says something about how I'm supposed to work. I'm not sure.

When you do *Beginner's Luck*, 2011, you're not a beginner?

The title is tongue-in-cheek—I think it was the first time I was referencing Picasso. That painting didn't involve any of the long drawn-out processes that many paintings go through so it seemed lucky. When I give an artist's talk I have a slide show with photos of my work in progress and I take the audience through the process of one or two paintings being made. All of the stages can look very different from one another. It's pretty crazy and the logic of decision-making only makes sense to me.

Do you deliberately mess with the viewer's perception of what they're looking at?

Yes. I like to throw a wrench into things. With pattern, for example, your eye will go into auto-pilot to complete the pattern if you don't interrupt it. I often use a compositional device where I paint certain shapes in colours that are very close in hue and value, so they read as one larger shape. Or I create different focal points by varying the colour—a lime green shape in a field of grey shapes, for example.

You do interesting things to interrupt pattern, so the black dots on *Untitled (black dots on swatches)*, 2009, get sliced into different thicknesses, and they get placed horizontally and vertically. Is that another strategy that keeps both you and the viewer perceptually off-balance?

Yes. I made that painting after I was in Toronto for my project at Goodwater Gallery. It was my first large-scale collage. I came back to Vancouver and made *Untitled (black dots on swatches)* right away—it was mimicking the way the paper cropped the layers underneath. I was also thinking about the use of random patterns in quilt-making and the way that a shape is cut out and then joined to another shape. It could be the same piece of fabric but the pattern doesn't match up, which creates a tension. Each layer could be its own field, and yet it is cut up and put back together. It is a kind of collage.

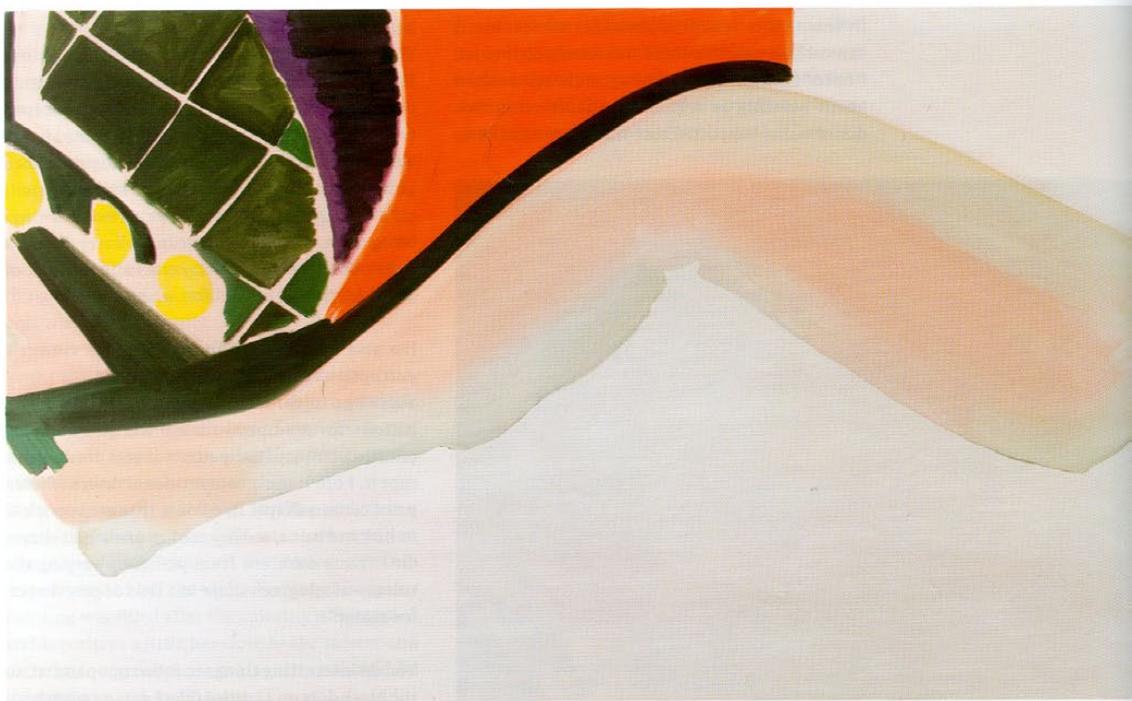
***Untitled (silver blocks)*, 2006, puts me in a quotidian frame of mind because it looks like floor tiles. Then you throw off that perception by connecting them in such an irregular way that were you a floor installer, you'd have to be fired.**

I made two versions of that painting and one was based on a collage. It wasn't scaled up exactly but the painting was drawn out and then painted. So if you imagine that in the collage each block is a different colour, then the way the spaces are divided makes sense. I would say it's not topographical—it is more like an architectural elevation. The silver is

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metallic paint over a washy black ground and the lines you see are the negative space.

How do you make decisions about scale? “Cut Out,” the Goodwater installation in 2009, was a whole wall, but you have also worked with various scales of painting.

For years I had this standard horizontal size that started out at 75 by 90 inches. It was a scale that was comfortable for the breadth of my gesture and it corresponded to the size of the wall that I use in my studio and how far I could stand back from it. I think of body scale. When I was invited to do a show at Exercise, a project space in Vancouver, I think the curators assumed I would make a site-specific collage. But I thought it would be more interesting to make some small paintings. I had to see if I could scale down and I only had three months to make that show. Previous to that my little paintings always looked like they were part of a big painting, as if they were cropped out of something. I had one format that I considered small, like *Spider Legs*, 2009, but at 30 by 40 inches it wasn't very small.

What interests me about the Goodwater show is that it is an installation as much as a painting. You seem to have an interest in an overall environment that can absorb painting into it. Is that

compensation for some inadequacies of the medium?

It's definitely not compensation for something that painting lacks. I don't feel it is important to add anything to what a painting is. I don't typically think of architecture or the context for showing the work; the works are made in the studio and transported to a space.

You mention architecture and there seem to be occasions when you engage in defining an inside and an outside. So we're looking out a window or looking into an interior space.

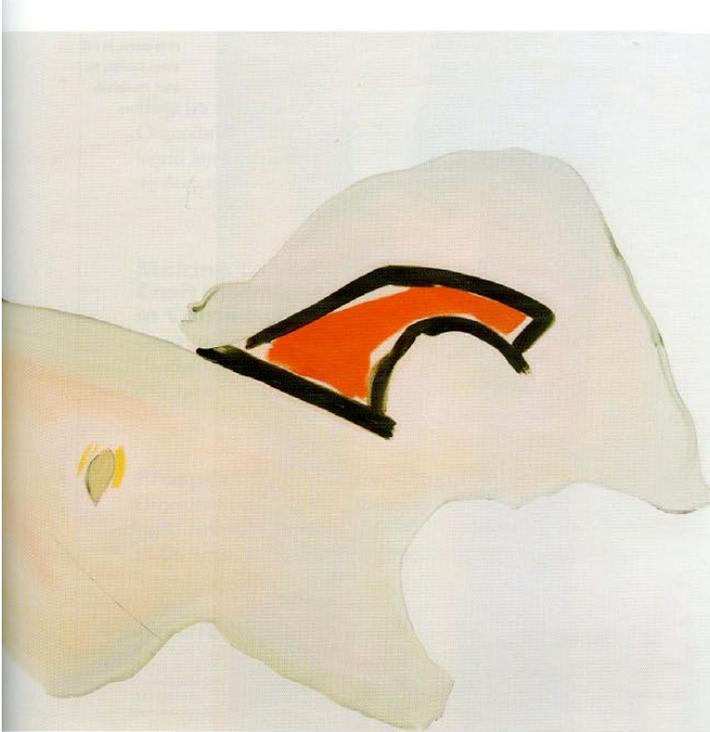
I think that as soon as the paintings become somewhat illusionistic they reference the way buildings sit in space and also landscape, but it is not a goal. I'm interested in two-dimensional work and what can be accomplished within the rectangle and I don't feel the need to comment beyond that. Paintings become their own entity; I don't think they need to allude to the physical world in an obvious way.

In the realm of abstraction, *Untitled (intersecting lines)*, 2008, reads as an abstract composition, whereas *Slats*, 2009, reads as if it could be blinds on a window looking out. So even though it is an abstract painting it insinuates a space outside the painting.



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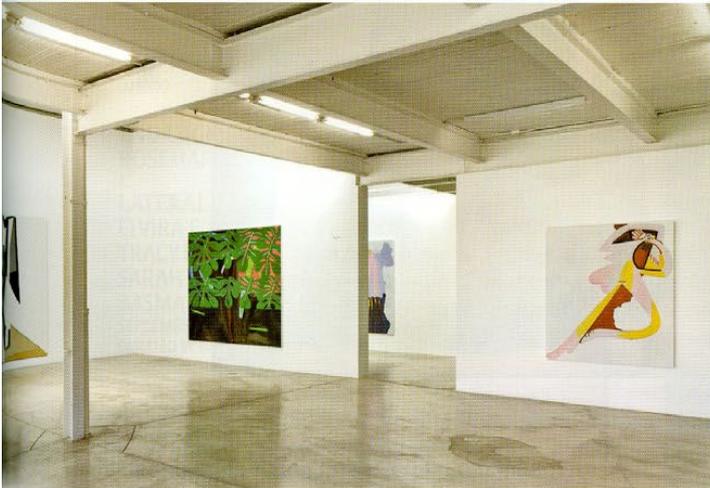


What is it about that composition that you find so appealing?

The horizontal lines are a light yellow colour and they're painted by hand. You can't really control the way the paint comes off the brush. Some of the lines veer off a bit; the thickness of the lines determines the spacing between them. In one section it looks like the yellow lines are on top and in another it looks like the blue lines are on top. It's hard to decipher the figure/ground relationship. The painting has such a simple structure, but there are a lot of variables.

Your rectangular forms in *Untitled (windows)*, 2006, look less like windows than paintings. My read is that you don't put windows onto the world; you just make paintings that may be about the world.

That painting is definitely many paintings within a painting. I think the window is probably more of an art historical reference for me. I am interested in the way Matisse and Bonnard use windows in such inventive ways in their paintings. When Bonnard uses a window, the foliage on the outside is often painted in a way that is more animated than what is in the room itself. The windows in this case are a device that doesn't make much sense illusionistically, but are interesting in the way they create multiple spaces within one painting.



What role does collage play in your practice? Has it always been a part of it in different scales?

No. I started making collages about 11 years ago after discovering a really great collage that my mom made in 1972. She also paints, and we have it hanging in our house. Also, I was pregnant and I didn't want to expose myself to oil paints, so I started making collages and drawings. The first collages I made helped me to switch tracks and to open up something new in my work. They are fun because they are so quick and not labour intensive, like the process of painting. I like the directness and the flatness of the coloured paper and the way it doesn't have all the options available with paint, like scumbling and glazing and impasto. In collage those choices are pared down to colour, shape and composition.

1. *Big Lady*, 2014, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 107 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Scott Massey.

2. Installation view, "*Fairy Bread*," 2014, Diaz Contemporary, Toronto. Courtesy Diaz Contemporary. Photograph: Toni Kafkenscheld.

Yes, I don't think I actually make that many paintings that are purely abstract but *Intersecting Lines* is an abstract composition. *Slats*, on the other hand, is both abstract and figurative. The proportion of each rectangle within the larger rectangle of the frame reads quite differently and there is the suggestion of an illusionistic space. I didn't set out to reference blinds, but it definitely does.

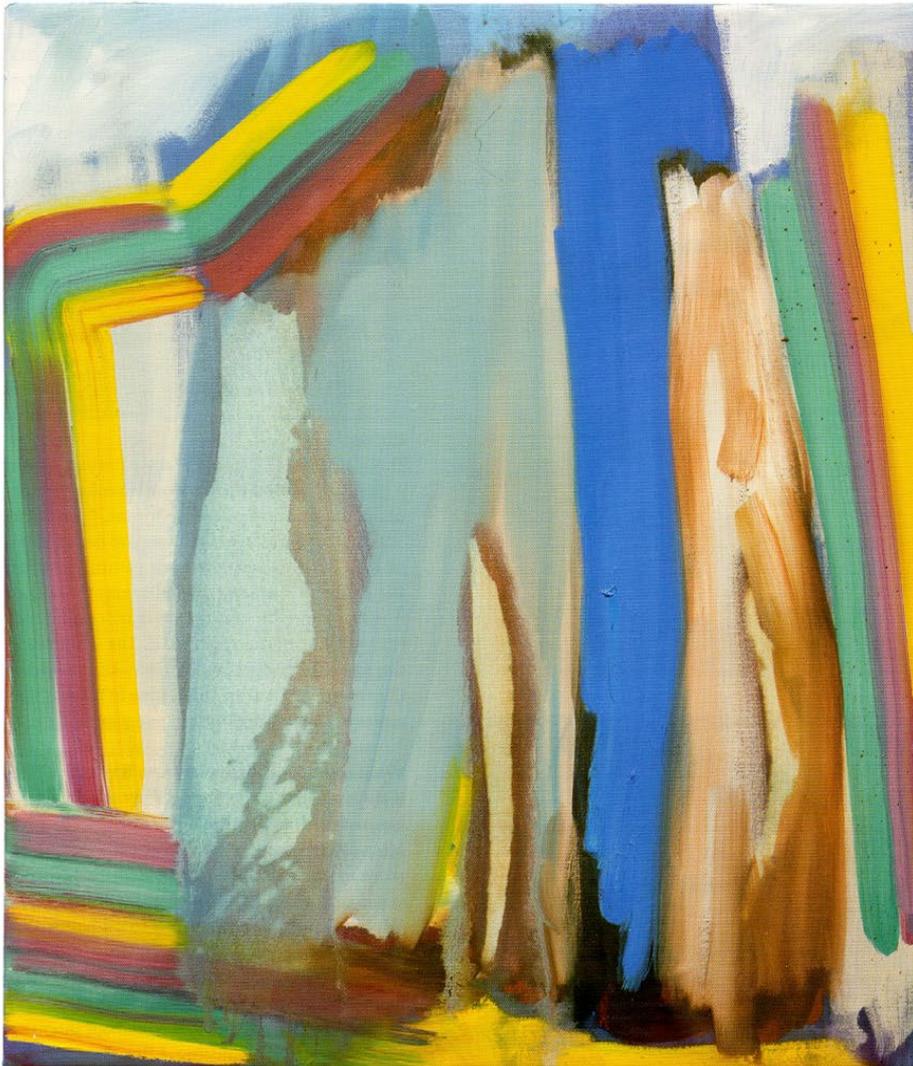
One critic writing about your work talks about you "zooming in during moments of epiphany in modern painting." I'm paraphrasing but it is an interesting idea. It suggests that you're in search of the high, intense points. Do you think of your movement through modern art as a search for those epiphanic moments?

No. The quotations I use are mostly from little corners or backgrounds.

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Eighties Rainbow, 2014,
oil on canvas, 24 x 20
inches. Courtesy the
artist. Photograph:
Scott Massey.

They're incidental rather than epiphanic?

Yes. Certain elements, like the leaves that turn up in *Conversation*, 2013, and *Leaves*, 2014, are a pretty big moment from Matisse, but a lot of the inspiration comes from choosing a small, insignificant detail from a great painting.

So your quotation is about homage and not competition and doing it better?

Exactly. I do feel that I am messing with it in a way but not as a challenge. It is out of respect and as a way of studying something and learning about it.

Barry Schwabsky characterized painting today as “multiple, simultaneous and decentred,” and he says that in an approving way.

I think the big thing right now with art in general is the return to making things that are physical and tactile in juxtaposition to our Internet age. Within painting there is no specific approach being championed and that has been the case for my entire career. With no rules, overarching ideology or philosophy, anything goes. It is exciting as well as confusing at times, but I enjoy the freedom of choosing my own agenda. Painting is an intimate and in some ways a romantic choice, but at this point in time it's the small gestures that are important. ■

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