

Elizabeth McIntosh

CANADA

It's been fourteen years since Elizabeth McIntosh has had a one-person show in New York. Her work has changed since then, not surprisingly, and twice over. The Canadian painter's work of the early 2000s was strictly abstract—in fact, as I remember, it was strict altogether: rather tight and orderly. A break from the studio following the birth of her daughter shortly after that 2002 show was followed by the first shift: Her paintings started looking looser, faster, more playful. This tendency has only intensified as time has gone on. Her use of flatness, pattern, and geometry remained certifiably modernist, yet the insouciance of her approach kept the work fresh and unpredictable.

The second shift came much more recently: It would no longer be quite accurate to describe the paintings in McIntosh's recent exhibition "Bricks Are Heavy" as abstract. By the same token, though, you'd be

hard put to classify her works as figurative, either. Perhaps the best way to describe the new paintings would be to say that they employ imagistic fragments with an improvisational liberty—a heady sense that anything can happen—that feels like a kind of abstraction by default, although there is no shying away from referentiality. Take *Black Dress* (all works 2016), my favorite piece in this show: It's a mostly black, white, and yellow concatenation of elastic forms that very quickly read, from right to left, as a triad of variations on a single form or figure. The way that it insists on making its viewer scan against the grain of an eye that's been trained by Western textuality to move from left to right is part of the painting's power. The figure

itself is that of a tall, slender woman in a long black dress, like something you'd imagine Emily Dickinson wearing, but whose head and feet are edited out at the top and bottom of the canvas, respectively. All that appears of her beyond the dress is a forearm and hand, from which dangles a yellow . . . something. What? That it's rectangular is about all that can be said with certainty. A purse, maybe? Why not—but for some reason I can't help seeing it anachronistically as a cell phone in a Day-Glo cover. The central vertical portion of the painting is occupied by a sort of cut-up remake of the same image, interrupted by a blank white zone that could well be an upside-down negative of the skirt of the same dress—and there's part of that yellow appendage again—while the left shows the same black-clad figure, but upside down (as in a playing card) and a bit smaller in scale, so that there's some blank space at the top (bottom) where the feet ought to be but aren't.

McIntosh's acute sense of rhythm, her ruthless exactness of placement and formal precision, are what make *Black Dress* more than a spirited conundrum, though it is undeniably that too. How does it manage to be severe and exuberant all at once? Each of the six paintings on view in this show was quite distinct from the others—from the Matissean *Windows*, with its slightly dizzying play between interior and exterior space to *Chlose + Agnes*, with its blunt linearity—but all of them engage mind and eye in ways that only painting can. Of late, word has been circulating

of a surprising revival of that art in Vancouver, a city whose scene has long been dominated by great Photoconceptualists (Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ian Wallace, and company), and those in the know credit McIntosh with inspiring it. It's easy to see what the excitement's about.

—Barry Schwabsky



Elizabeth McIntosh, *Black Dress*, 2016, oil on canvas, 85 × 75".