

UNTITLED (WORDS ON PAINTINGS ON PAPER)

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ONE. Whenever I walk into Elizabeth McIntosh's studio I am a little afraid. Chances are high that one of my favorite compositions from the last visit, usually a new one she had just began that felt fresh and direct and distributed colours and shapes with unapologetic, somewhat awkward umph, is by now likely to be painted over, layered, recomposed, and reworked beyond recognition. I am never, or rarely, sure about the final painting—the memory of its first or early state is too strong. But memory is a funny thing in the experience of works of art, and the strength of it is actually always already the strength of the pain of memory loss. Perhaps this is especially important to note, given that the artist herself has increasingly articulated the criteria for her work (and that of certain colleagues) as a matter of the facticity and transparency of decision-making. This linguistic reframing also allows for a rethinking of staid, increasingly meaningless terminology, like “abstraction.” Indeed, the project is thereby pushed towards more subjective and even political terms, if not ends. And yet, as hard as I look, I cannot say that the process of getting from A to B is really that transparent for me in the final work. What I experience are layers that cover unseen depths. This process and the pangs of fear (say of a better picture underneath) that it engenders—is perfectly embodied in the relatively small, recent canvas entitled, *The Brute*.

ONE, TWO. Most of McIntosh's paintings, however, are not so suggestively titled. Or when bracketed qualifiers accompany Untitled, the emphasis is on a “just the facts ma'am” notation of the colours (and sometimes shapes) used. Red, Purple, Blue, Orange, Yellow, Green, Silver, Black—these are the bracketed protagonists. Call it the deadpan suspension of a constant struggle to provide just enough verbal information, to let the paint do its work and not let language skew the viewer. But this is something that does not sit easily with a writer. I recall a moment when I resisted the lack of meaningful words, and in a studio visit actually misheard *Red, Blue and Purple* as *Red, Blue and the People!* Lodged somewhere deep inside my psyche was a notion that paintings this bright and this big had a kind of public function (one that the artist did not embrace fully). And this particular painting, to my eyes at least, veered very close to the representation of a very public realm. An uneven geodesic expanse, composed so as to recompose

continually in front of the eyes, covered most of the canvas, but not all. The reticular pattern, spread across the full width and about nine tenths of the height of the painting, was strangely propped up on (what looked like) brown, blue, red, pink and black rounded stumps, painted at the bottom of the canvas. Beyond the stumps, one can glimpse a totally different painting: a red, orange and purple haze, almost a landscape at sunset, whose presence periodically transformed the entire scene into something I could call “landscape with abstract billboard.” oops! Here is that pesky word again—abstraction—revealing itself to be a representational element.

ONE, TWO, THREE. To paint like McIntosh does and to insist on not calling it abstraction, puts some pressure on the viewer, not to mention the writer, to come up with new terms. In part, I’m going to reject the notion of facticity and transparency floated by the artist and her colleagues (in an unpublished conversation I’ve had the privilege to read) because, for one, I do not think the moves are so obvious, indeed much is hidden *beyond recognition*; two, paint is anything but a transparent medium; and three, it seems important here to go against the grain of what the artist is saying and to offer some resistance. Paradoxically perhaps, this is the way to create some parallels between how (I think) Elizabeth McIntosh paints and how this text is written. It all feels a bit like the work of a musician improvising—one who continues to realize how difficult it is *not to* fall into a familiar, scripted tune.

FOR ONCE, SOMETHING NEW. Abstract painting is relatively old. This is to say that most non-representational images today tend to look like representations of something we now comfortably call abstraction (though it also had names like non-objective art in the early part of the last century). Mary Heilmann’s work is thus often introduced as a funky loosening of Piet Mondriaan’s grid, before it is celebrated for its own frankness and freshness. And this raises the question of what tradition best befits a contemporary work. If Elizabeth McIntosh is fond of Heilmann (indeed she introduced me to the painter way back when we first began to talk about painting on a regular basis), she is *not* fond of quotation. Heilmann’s path to freshness is more of a crutch, something to try to forget, all the while proverbially aiming to hang in the same room. I get the sense when visiting McIntosh’s studio that comparisons to other artists present a problem rather than the point of departure. This is in direct counterpoint to much post-conceptual work, which innovates by piling on the references. In McIntosh’s work, the post-modernist escape from originality into the reassuring world of nods and allusions that inscribe one’s work into one’s chosen tradition is tripped up. She works with the energy of this shaky ground (and even of the full stumble or fall). The artist’s unwillingness to admit success too quickly, indeed, her obdurate insistence on renewing her composition to the point of non-recognition (even mild terror) on the part of regular visitors to the studio, replaces the logic of novelty with the threat of restless renewal. Few of McIntosh’s paintings are new, *once*. Indeed, they may be new several times over, and what remains is only that composition which achieves a threat of de-composition.

IN OTHER WORDS. Searching for a foil to the conventional notion of composition, I'm tempted to compare McIntosh's process to improvisation. But in the back of my mind are the words of Mina Totino, McIntosh's fellow painter and my fellow writer, who once remarked to me (when I floated the notion of improvisation in relation to McIntosh's work) that she doubted this was a good paradigm for painting since you cannot improvise alone. I would agree in so far as you need to have someone or at least something other to listen and respond to, and more importantly to resist, in order to make a peep, to make a mark, to begin to improvise. And this something else may be difficult to detect inside the work of a painter who is not fond of quotation or even representation. But what if that something to listen to is the paint itself? In my experience of free jazz improvisations—say of Peter Brötzmann's wild windy experiments - not only is the idea of composition contradicted, but also the idea of harmony among players. They no longer really call themselves a band, but an ensemble, which has a slightly looser feel to it. The musicians definitely listen to each other, but often it feels like they are waiting for a break to sound a different and a dissident chord. One will out-do another, resist and compete; albeit, this is done with just enough nonchalance to make it friendly and also make it sound like he, and sometimes she, is momentarily the only player in the room. The requirement of not being alone is complicated by this lonestar aspect of improvisation. And it is perhaps with this strange tension, that improvisation begins to inform McIntosh's paintings. It is as if she is laying down colours so as to watch them out-sing each other and if by chance they hang together like an ensemble, they cannot forsake the autonomy of parts.

BETTER STILL. Improvisation comes from the Latin *improvisus*, or in [not] + *provisus* [foreseen or provided]. But if you look at it, improvisation begins with the same letters as improvement. The semantic link is weak as the latter derives from the Latinate *emprouwer* "to turn to profit," but, however im-probably, the terms mix well in McIntosh's paintings. For all this talk of improvisation as de-composition, the horizon is never a bad painting, but a *better* one. Moreover in McIntosh's work, the sense that things could be different can lead to rather radical differentiation. If the geodesic matrix dominated a lot of work ca. 2004/2005, this was not the only thing on the artist's mind. The one exception I cannot get out of mine, although it is out of sight in this catalogue, is an experiment with a blocky tree motif so black, blunt, leafless (though not lifeless!) and downright un-natural as to make me wonder how the artist viewed her new habitat of Vancouver or whether, for all its famed foliage, the views outside the studio were what mattered. I only once saw similar, chthonic specimen in the real world, but far from super-natural British Columbia, outside a military academy in Kaliningrad. I am still curious whether the tree paintings disappeared because they were too real or not real enough—i.e. if they were ever meant to re-present anything or use a representational motif to underscore the rejection of painting as a representational medium. Words cannot preserve what has been painted over, which makes me wonder about their usefulness as representational media. How

better to use them in relation to this artist's work? Of late, McIntosh's canvases seem increasingly inflected with a parallel practice of paper collage (underway for some years, but rising to the fore of late). Working with coloured or geometrically patterned paper allows for surprise and quick experiments with shape and colour combinations that the slow-drying medium of paint resists. But if a change of mind is rendered more quickly with the dry, light medium of paper, it is also more decisive. Once you make a cut, then set a shape in place with glue or tape, a certain logic sets in—one that is more prone to the laws of physics than the fluid medium of paint. To continue changing things, you might have to start again. Recently, McIntosh installed a wall-sized collage at Goodwater gallery in Toronto. There was about one week to work and after several adjustments on large chunks of (this time un-cut) coloured paper, the entire thing was taken down in the last evening. All needed to be reformed and improved. In the end, McIntosh's is never alone, always in a kind of friendly conflict with her materials. And I suspect that her paintings are large—and the collage needed to be unwieldy and wall sized—to remind her that each work must have a mind of its own.

AUTONOMOUS AND EXEMPLARY. With the sudden compositional shifts, the restless refusal of visual harmony, but also the refusal of clear refusals (of representation for instance, given the temporary appearance of the aforementioned trees and one elementary table, to name my personal favorites), it might seem strange to discuss style in Elizabeth MacIntosh's paintings. But style is something I'm compelled to speak about, recalling Susan Sontag's last words in her essay on the subject (an essay which is mainly concerned with literature, but which holds especially for the kind of painting McIntosh makes, as it proceeds from a refusal to separate style and content): "Whenever speech or movement or behavior or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having a "style," and being both autonomous and exemplary." What makes McIntosh's paintings interesting is that—in the absence of any sense of what is in fact direct, useful or insensible (after all anything goes in painting and in art in general so the norm from which we may diverge is rather elusive)—her work still embodies a sense of deviation, albeit from itself. It is as if the work (and the artist) was signaling away from a signature look, away from what we might conventionally identify with style. This restless deviation has become more palpable in a recent series of smaller canvases (likely chosen to allow for swifter completion, swifter variation), each of which seems to be testing altogether different compositional elements. Autonomous, but are they exemplary? What might be different in McIntosh's sense of style, from that described by Sontag, is that the distinct works, which definitely aim at autonomy, cannot really be viewed as cases in point, cannot really be seen as examples. If you look at one (letter-sized, intricate, geometric) painting by Tomma Abts (a close colleague of McIntosh's from art school), you are looking at an example of a painting program. The same could be said of works by Jutta Koether, or Mina

Totino, or Silke Otto-Knapp, who work in series and have much more of a signature vocabulary of motifs and gestures. These are some painters McIntosh admires. But her own work does something very different.

THE MOTHER OF ALL STYLES. This is what I first thought of calling the text. I knew I wanted to say something about this strange thing we call style, which might be compared to “having a voice,” the embodiment of distinction. The question I kept coming back to is whether, in her constant and often drastic deviations from her own work, McIntosh is looking for the ultimate style or attempting to master ever more idioms. But she bristled at this phrase, partly because the mother metaphor sounded cliché to an actual mother. And, to be sure, maybe too much has been made of the fact that she is a painter and a woman. So I buried it—this issue of what it means to paint as a woman is, for me, best addressed by the question of what it means to paint an abstraction (yes, I still really like this pesky term). For the record, my sense of “mother” was more Beastie Boys than baby boom—i.e. *mothr*. There was the duplicity of the phrase, but ultimately I wanted to evoke something of the *baaaad* attitude of the paintings. But evoking anything of them in words is bound to present a problem. So what to do next? Stop writing? Not quite. After all, that would mean—forgive the extended metaphor—throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

NAME-NEEDS. Some weeks ago, and some weeks after I had written the first paragraphs of this essay, McIntosh sent me three new titles of three new paintings. It is not important what these titles were. What is important is that she sent them to me without the images, and with an aside “oh and by the way - I have a few new paintings that have titles—no brackets even! only because they seemed to name themselves...” The question of titles had become almost a game—almost a joke—between us. I would come into the studio, look at a new work, or a couple, and promptly ask: what is it called? There is something about abstract paintings that makes titles all-important. A title can change everything, much more so than when, say, seeing a painting of a cat, you find out it is called “Queen.” In such a case, you get a sovereign cat. But the cat remains. The title is subject to the representation. But in an abstract painting, you always direct the eye with the word. Untitled has become the conventional decree of freedom for interpretation, the primacy of the eye, of the experience. Now imagine if *The Brute* was actually called *Untitled*, would it still produce a sense of a work of art that names itself, that has a mind of its own? Would it still meet the viewer as a body meets another body? We are talking about a relatively small painting, so the title is bigger than the canvas. The name does something physical. And it is perhaps only when this happens that it is necessary.

KILOS. In writing about Elizabeth McIntosh’s work, you begin to weigh your words. Each word is a world, especially when applied to paint. The choice to let paint be paint, to let it be a colour first and foremost, still proceeds in words: *Untitled (red, blue and purple)*. The choice to let a painting measure up to something in the world, or in the mind—a brute, a swoop, spider legs, the people—is the choice to forsake absolute autonomy, to give up the facticity of “what you see is what you see,” for something more messy and potentially more blinding. The question becomes one of how to create a balance where the painting and the words carry equal weight.

NEOLOGISMS. “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” These words come from the King in *Hamlet* (III, iii, 100-103). They fly into my head while I’m considering the down-to-earth aspect of McIntosh’s painting, which is a kind of thinking that can escape words. For an wordsmith, it is sometimes hell to confront the world of things untitled. And this, not because of some stubborn *horror vacui*. It is not so much that one finds the work void of meaning, but that one confronts the stranger question of the emptiness of words. One medium for thinking is being fundamentally challenged by another. In many ways, this is why I am drawn to thinking and writing about painting, especially when it appears (what I still prefer to call) abstract. In the past, I’ve proposed that, in a world of conceptual (and therefore language-based) art making, the practice of painting remains more fundamentally psychedelic. This has nothing to do with whether or not it assumes swirly seventies patterns (i.e. “codes” for the mind-expanding promise of hallucinogens). Rather, I am curious about the ability of this morphing medium to manifest (*dellen*) changing states of mind (*psyche*). Aldus Huxley (one of two men who coined the term psychedelic) spoke of his excitement at discovering how the bond between words and thoughts can be relaxed, not just under the influence of LCD, but under the influence of a Vermeer. Let’s not forget, however, that Huxley was first and foremost a writer. The idea was not to stop with words altogether, but to find new ones (such as psychedelic) that might render more clearly the condition of the mind.

BOOM. Ever since painting “came back” with the market boom of the naughties (2000s), it has been called “conservative”—for many observers it is the *quintessential commodity*, paid for by funny money from secondary and tertiary derivative trades. It cannot be political because it’s an old, spent medium. It cannot be political because it’s lapped up by the speculators of the brave new world. Behind this critique is a very narrow view of painting and of the commodity. Today, you can commodify anything and the more immaterial (and the more generic) the image, the better it seems to sell. Porno-graphy (quite literally the most bought and sold of images, as porno is the Greek term for bought, purchased, sold, etc.) is an image form increasingly rooted in immateriality, albeit with a twist. Both the inability to connect with *and* the lack of desire for “real bodies” produces a market in their (pixilated) images. If painting used to be a matter of images, it is now increasingly a matter of matter. And if any new task may be assigned to good old painting today, it is surely the resistance to (or at least “a certain deviation from”) the army of images that (for all their representation of body parts) have no bodies of their own; images that flicker in, out and around virtual space—a bit like the buckets of money without a gold backing. Perhaps this has something to do with the way McIntosh treats paintings (also paper) as matter, first and foremost, or as bodies that confront other bodies, with minds of their own.

BAM!