

VANCOUVER

Elizabeth McIntosh, Monique Mouton, Silke Otto-Knapp

CATRIONA JEFFRIES

As elsewhere, painting's status is still fractious in Vancouver's art scene, enough so that the press release for this recent group show at Catriona Jeffries—which featured an international, all-female lineup comprising Elizabeth McIntosh, Monique Mouton, and Silke Otto-Knapp—felt the need to reassure people that “painting is not a problem.” Even if the medium has died a thousand deaths and undergone a thousand revivals, it seems destined to continually negotiate its associations with social complicity, bourgeois complacency, market contingency, etc.—and to confront new possibilities in structuring meaning. At Catriona Jeffries, the works collectively pushed expression, gesture, and figuration into explorations of illusionistic space—not only in the pictorial

field but also in the realms of affect, memory, and history.

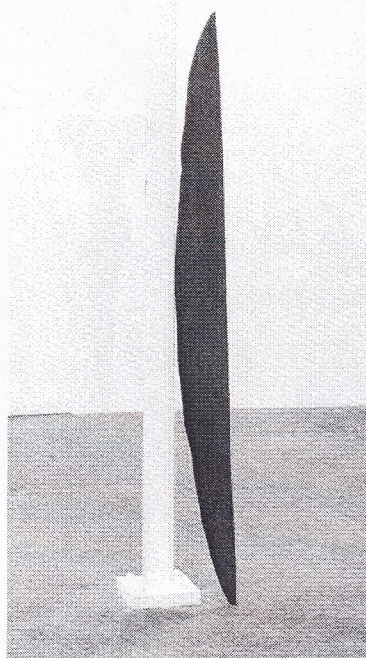
The first work the visitor encountered upon entering the space was Otto-Knapp's *Monotones (Moonlit scene after Samuel Palmer)*, 2016, an expansive watercolor landscape of misty forms arrayed across a dark ground. In this homage to Palmer, who along with his nineteenth-century peers in the Ancients group was inspired by the poetry of William Blake, Otto-Knapp conveys the spirit of Romantic contemplation through monochromatic reduction, delicately layering soft billows of white over a gunmetal-stained canvas. Installed on an adjacent wall, Otto-Knapp's *Schatten Theatre*, 2017, finds the artist inverting the layering technique employed in *Monotones*. An ethereal layer of white pigment covers a dark ground, so that the silhouettes of anti-Vietnam War demonstrators are surrounded by a veiled glow. The negative figures dance their protest, arms akimbo, as they surface from a shadowed past into a numinous present—bringing historical politics into a contemporary field of possibility.

This play between figure and ground, mark and support, figured elsewhere in the show: A pair of oil paintings by McIntosh, *Green In* and *Out Hands Black*, both 2017,

depicted arms entangled with rope set against monochrome grounds. Though each arm is nearly identical to the last, their varying configurations articulate contrasting moods of optimism and gloom. In *Green In*, the arms, each of which wears a pale-blue sleeve snug around its wrist, are aligned in two rows, their hands coming together at the center of the composition to guide a black rope across a lush, absinthegreen field. *Out Hands Black* is populated by eight prop-like arms similarly aligned in two rows—but this time, save for one outlier, they reach toward the top and bottom edges of the canvas. Segments of white rope lie on the thick, black background, winding through and around the hands. The otherwise ominous atmosphere is disrupted by swaths of dull mustard that form the cartoonish arms and by the fleshy hands affixed to these props by the weight of the paint itself. As Otto-Knapp does with watercolor canvases, McIntosh experiments with formal and mnemonic layering, weaving rope in and around her strangely isolated arms to create spatial and temporal depth.

Mouton's contributions to the show—scraps of plywood cut into oblong shapes and enhanced with gently brushed undulations of oil and pastel—hung in conventional fashion on the walls but were also scattered across the gallery floor, rendering the architectural space itself a ground. Standing out in this gallery field were *Untitled*, 2013, a long, midnight-black rectangular panel that had been screwed to the wall, and *Untitled*, 2012, an ellipsoid shape painted purple on one side and left bare on the other. The latter work was installed in the center of the gallery, propped against a column, imposing a kind of brash vitality on the physical space. For *Untitled*, 2017, an oval-shaped painting treated with a white base, Mouton applied a thin sheen of black as a topcoat. The composition features, in the bottom-left foreground, an elongated L shape rendered in luminescent white pigment. This shape is echoed by a smaller L painted in black, which is positioned at the top-right section of the painting. The left edge of the oval is contoured by a cobalt line, sending a jolt of color through the work's largely black-and-white palette. Like Mouton's other plywood inventions, the understated piece demonstrates painting's compositional potential and echoes the medium's spill into sculpture, architecture, and world.

—Lee Plested



Monique Mouton, *Untitled*, 2012, oil on plywood, 94 x 8 x 1/4".

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



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

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 *Chloë + 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

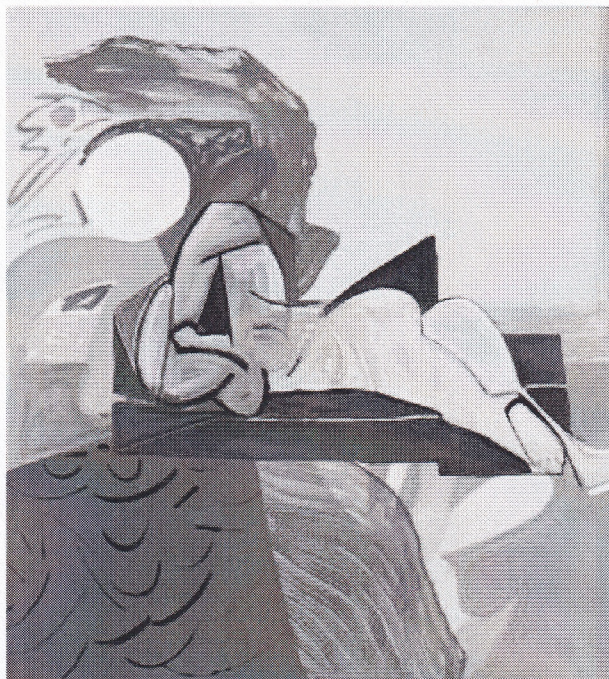
Using repetition of basic forms and pure saturated colour, Elizabeth McIntosh has been exploring abstraction for over twenty years. Moving beyond the conventions established by modernist abstract painting, she is seemingly unconcerned with trying to 'resolve' the image. Instead, she provides an open-ended response to traditional hard-edged abstraction. Teetering between finished and unfinished, figurative and abstract, raw and refined, there is something tangible about McIntosh's paintings despite the fact that shapes linger without resolution. Take, for instance, *With the Moon Under My Arm* (2015), where the breast of the reclining blue figure in the foreground reappears as the yellow moon above. For McIntosh, painting is a deliberately undefined journey. She works in a spirit of play where aesthetic development is not contingent on beginnings or ends, but is continually renewing itself. The decisions she makes are formed through an instinctive process that varies from painting to painting.

McIntosh often begins by priming the canvas with either white base coat or occasionally black gesso, progressively filling the surface with coloured shapes until it is enveloped in pigment. From this starting point, she goes on to apply numerous subsequent layers and over-painted forms. For example, in *Batts Rock* (2015), blocks of bold orange and yellow sit underneath a semi-transparent female figure, reclining on a sofa. The colours seem to warm each other up or cool each other down, and there is no clear, balanced composition but a symbiosis between the parts. McIntosh's rigorous compositional use of colour has become the linchpin to her paintings. For example, in *Tequila Sunrise* (2015), the application of warm, opaque, purples and browns, nestled against the sketchy pinks and yellows, set against the more graphic blue and red lines, harnesses the whole composition and carries the viewer through the picture. The shards of colour waver and feel impermanent, giving the work an improvisational feel. Looking at McIntosh's paintings one might think of the early Cubists (Braque and Picasso) but the artist re-appropriates these reference points to create a new, twenty-first-century Cubism. Through soft edges, awkward shapes and intriguing underpaintings, her finished paintings resist the finality of rationalized abstraction.

Collage is also an important influence on McIntosh's painting and in her sketchbooks she creates collaged drawings of different patterns that often end up as one of her large-scale paintings. On a few occasions, McIntosh has also created collaged installations. In an exhibition in 2011, 'Violet's Hair', at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, she covered a room from floor to ceiling in sheets of coloured paper, tacked to the wall in patterns. As with some of her paintings, McIntosh worked in a shallow pictorial space, decisively arranging and re-arranging forms over the coloured sheets. The resulting holes or 'cut-outs' – a nod to the late work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954) – allowed flashes of colour to peek through at various intersections, paralleling McIntosh's painting process.

– Leila Hasham

ELIZABETH MCINTOSH Born 1967, Simcoe, ON, Canada.
Lives and work in Vancouver. Selected Solo Exhibitions: 2014 – 'Fairy Bread', Diaz Contemporary, Toronto; 2012 – 'Pink Nude', Diaz Contemporary, Toronto; 2011 – 'Three Oranges', Exercise, Vancouver; 'Violet's Hair', Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. Selected Group Exhibitions: 2014 – 'Persian Rosa, Chartreuse Muse, Vancouver Grey', Equinox Gallery, Vancouver; 2013 – 'Moirá Davey: Ornament and Reproach', Presentation House Satellite Gallery, Vancouver; 'The Painting Project', Galerie de L'UQAM, Montreal; 2012 – 'Cut and Paste', Equinox Project Space, Vancouver; 'The Shape of Things', Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. Selected Bibliography: 2014 – Robert Enright, 'Divided Pathways: Paintings Choice: an Interview with Elizabeth McIntosh', *Border Crossings*, Sep; Mitch Speed, 'Strange Forever', *Turps Banana*, Jul; 2010 – Jan Verwoert, *Softedge is Hardcore: In response to Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings*, Emily Carr University Press, Vancouver.



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2.

1. *Batts Rock*, 2015
Flashe and oil on canvas
203.2 x 185.4 cm / 80 x 73 in
2. *Tequila Sunrise*, 2015
Oil on canvas
203.2 x 185.4 cm / 80 x 73 in
3. *With the Moon Under My Arm*, 2015
Flashe and oil on canvas
203.2 x 185.4 cm / 80 x 73 in

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