

**Speaking Spaces:**

**Phenomenology, Meditation and Pleinairism**

By

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is about the practice of painting outdoors in the manner of pleinairism. This activity began for me as an effort to overcome a sense of personal alienation by engaging in an applied empathy with space. In turn, the thesis also touches on the general social condition of Postmodern alienation as a context for plein air painting. And it briefly outlines the history of pleinairism, as a methodology that aspired to render the world as it appeared to the contemporaneous eye. My current approach to plein air painting is described as an embodied conversation with space through the index of paint and suggests that in the state of attention, the space and the painter become intertwined in a reciprocal exchange, or a Chiasm as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By painting this way, it is suggested that space and the painter express one another and in so doing, produce an animate document of a painted conversation. This material practice is inspired by phenomenology, meditation and the sensorial experience of working outdoors. This paper seeks to redefine plein air landscape painting for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a model for awareness of ourselves and our relationship to space. It describes a methodology of applied empathy, and forgetting the self and predetermined ideas, in order to become receptive to the agency of space.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
“Speaking Spaces: Phenomenology, Meditation and Pleinairism.....	4
A Brief History of Plein Air Painting.....	5
II Phenomenology and Painting.....	9
III Painting and Meditation.....	12
IV Painting as Applied Empathy.....	22
V Painting as Animate Document.....	24
VI Methodology: Forgetting The Self in Effort.....	29
WORKS CITED.....	34
WORKS CONSULTED.....	36

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 12pm-7pm, January 19, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	26
Figure 2: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 10am-6pm. January 26, 2011 (rain and overcast) Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	26
Figure 3: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 4pm-12am. February 9, 2011. Oil in canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	26
Figure 4: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 5am-12pm. February 25, 2011 (-6° Celsius) Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	27
Figure 5: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 12pm-7pm. April 18, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	27
Figure 6: Jeremy Herndl, <i>View from Whalley</i> , BC. 10am-6pm. April 28, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.....	27
Figure 7: Jeremy Herndl, <i>Outside the House</i> , March 16-April 6, 2011. Oil on canvas, 68" x 66" Photo by the artist.....	28

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## DEDICATION

Without the help and support of my family, it would have been impossible for me to undertake this program. My Father, Peter Sproson and Wendy, provided a place to stay and as much food as I could eat as well as moral support. My Wife, Izabela took care of home matters in Victoria and our children, Zofia and Niko, working as a self employed house painter all the while proving to be an exceptional mother and partner.

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to describe the thinking that motivates my choice to paint landscapes en plein air (outdoors). It is beyond my capability to fully describe my process with words, nor do I think it is altogether beneficial since words are so concrete and rational in this context and my experience with the practice of plein air painting is that it is far from concrete. It is like talking about what you intend to do. If you talk too much, you risk losing the impetus to proceed. So, in this essay I will attempt to put together the ideas of meditation, phenomenology and my actual experience of painting outdoors while avoiding the dangers of trying to say too much and deflating my process with certainty.

Plein air painting is a conversation with space as the characteristics of light, temperature, sound and colour are in a continual state of flux. My goal is to be attentive to animate space because it is in the state of attention that the self and space become indistinguishable. The point I would like to make is that the space is an active participant in the creation of the work and the human act of painting has the potential for relinquishing conceptual control in favour of an emergent expression of space.

My painting practice involves a direct conversation with space in the form of painting outdoors, which is an effort to attend to a multiplicity of actions, histories and phenomena that occur there. It began for me as a boy, who was constantly moving from the city to the country to the city, coast to coast, often many times per year. My childhood did not have the security of familiar faces or extended family. After I left home, I continued to migrate all over Canada and abroad. I never settled or cultivated any roots. All of my

belongings fit predictably in the same blue Tupperware boxes and stacked readily in some friend's van.

My motivation for painting outside in the tradition of pleinairism<sup>1</sup> is personal. It is, and has been, a way for me to identify with a space and therefore myself in it. It is tactile and slow. My experience with this way of painting is that it is bigger than me (I cannot possibly account for everything I see and experience) and it causes me to slow down my breathing and lose track of my own incessant thinking. Painting is a specific kind of thinking. It is more of a doing, like a child who is immersed in the creative act of playing in the sand. In this situation, I can forget about my ego. I can let go of my plans, watch the phenomenal world in front of me and do my best to paint what I see. It is by watching the events of the day unfold, the changing light, temperature, scent and so on, that I began to be interested in the possibility of the agency of space. While it has been my personal remedy for alienation<sup>2</sup> and a busy, mind-less mind, in the process I discovered, that while painting is a human expression these spaces were also expressed.

The late Gerald Ferguson, my professor at The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, once said to me, "Why bother painting outdoors when you can just take a picture and paint it in the studio?" I have spent a good deal of the last decade pondering this question.

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<sup>1</sup> Pleinairism (from the French Plein-air, meaning outdoors) refers to a tradition of painting outdoors. It was pioneered by the likes of Gustave Courbet and the Barbizon School and later by The Impressionists with the advent of portable tubes of paint in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Canada, the Group of Seven adopted this approach to painting in an attempt to procure a distinctly Canadian aesthetic.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I am using the term "alienation" in a generalized sense to refer to a subject's disconnection, or estrangement from space and the material world.

What is it about painting outdoors with the discomfort, the awkwardness, and exposure to the elements and curious public eyes that obliges me to return to it?

Since the sixties, The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design has been a bastion of Conceptual Art practice, and pleinairism and was seen as an archaic, sentimental throwback to a previous century. As an undergraduate student there, I did my best to progress beyond painting outdoors and worked for years in the studio, occasionally returning to the outdoors to reinvigorate my enthusiasm because I always felt accountable to that experience of immersion. It was as if I didn't trust my work in the studio, it was too insular and too self-conscious: prone to techniques and habits and to ideas of things rather than an open response to the world.<sup>3</sup>

Painting outdoors is often regarded as an old fashioned practice that the story of art has left behind. This paper asks whether painting in the tradition of plein air can have renewed critical relevance. In the process of painting en plein air, I have discovered that space has a voice of its own. And I am mindful that this voice, or agency, has been neglected by humans' headlong pursuit of progress.

Ultimately this paper is an appeal to the reader and the viewer of my work to consider the agency of spaces: an experience that I have had while painting outdoors where the self and the space become intertwined, and in this way begin to express one another.

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<sup>3</sup> The studio is described as a place of a kind of psychosis in James Elkins book What Painting Is (147-167) where the author describes an ongoing dialogue with the self confined in the mess and fumes of the studio and compares it to a kind of self-love from which a divine creativity is conceived.

## SPEAKING SPACES

This is an auspicious time to consider the agency of space. The 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West has been an arena for new awareness of agency and balances of power: for women, same-sex couples, children, non-human species and so on. Now, on the cusp of an environmental transformation, our attention should also be turned to the animate world of space. The term “animate” in this thesis refers to the characteristic of bearing or of being life, but also as defined in depth by David Abrams in his book The Spell of the Sensuous where ‘animate’ is intrinsic to the world of objects perceived by humans. By using the term ‘space’ I will start with the context that Michel de Certeau suggests in his book The Practice of Everyday Life, where ‘space’ could be distinguished from ‘place’ by the fact that a place is static and defined whereas a space “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables...It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities...In short, *space is a practiced place*” (117). Space, in this context is a human construct. It implies a human presence, lived or experienced within the structure of place. It is anthropological, “space is existential” and “existence is spatial”. Place is considered static and defined; the “panoptic schema” of the city, for example, is rational and structured but social, human interaction with the city renders it as space. For de Certeau, walking in the city subverts its formal order, it is the action that occurs there that engenders it as a space: the play within the proscenium. Painting plein air, in a similar way, might be seen to activate an



explored space. It attempts to chronicle the actions that occur in space implicit of the painter. The painting is continually attended to and revised over the duration of its making as the relationship between painter and space is continually in flux.

### **A Brief History of Plein Air Painting**

Painters have long used sketches from observation to inform their studio practices. One can recall the highly detailed botanical and biological drawings by Leonardo DaVinci for example. The practice was used as a learning tool and to document new discoveries in science or as a representational account of wealth especially during the Renaissance. painting and drawing from life was an analytical exercise that was not considered a work in itself.

Landscape painting first operated as a backdrop or context for human activity or even to assert English Lords' ownership of their estates in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for example Thomas Gainsboroughs' portrait, Mr and Mrs. Robert Andrews (1748-1750). And the colonial practice of painting landscape was a way of articulating an idealized European gaze on a 'new' land, as an inventory and in this manner, denying the space and its inhabitants their agency for example the works of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Landscape was recognized as worthy subject unto itself when it was officially listed, as an albeit lesser genre, by Andre Felibien, secretary to the French Academie in 1669 (Art Encyclopedia).

Earlier painters such as Rembrandt and Chardin, with their lively handling of the paint would inspire Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), the French realist painter who became disenchanted with the sterile Neoclassical narratives expected from the Paris Academie and Salon and chose to document real life lived by the proletariat. Courbet was to become the subject of much scandal, confronting the bourgeoisie with images of everyday life and the working class like in *The Stone Breakers* (1848) and *Burial at Ornans* (1849-1850). This first affront of the avant-garde would in turn inspire Jean-Francoise Millet and the Barbizon School who also endeavored to paint real life. The tastes and expectations of the Academie seemed to no longer have any relevance in a world that was changing so rapidly. This was the time of Industrialization, the Nouveau Riche, train travel, electricity, the philosophy of Karl Marx and theories of Charles Darwin. The modern age was upon the people of Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and historical disciplines of art, the rigid compositions and subdued palettes of Neoclassicism and the imaginary flights of Romanticism did not serve to describe the facts of the new modern life of individualism and leisure. What was needed was a new aesthetic that would represent the new modern world.

This new perspective would be Realism introduced in France by Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Jean Francois Millet, Berthe Morisot, Eduard Manet and The Barbizon School. Morisot introduced Eduard Manet (1832-1883) to the practice of painting outdoors which marked a shift from Realism to Impressionism. In his work Manet, sought to paint the modern world, observing the penchant of the Bourgeoisie for leisure in parks, bars and other new social venues. It was in this context that Manet, the ‘Father of Modernism’

sought a formal solution to the new “unsureness, as to the nature of representation in art” (Clark) rather than utilizing the historic tools of representation. Inspired by new knowledge and science. Manet’s painting, “in addition to regarding with accuracy the appearance of the physical world, had as its aim the authentic representation of the colour and light that reveal the world to the eye” (Tansey 980).

The Impressionists, originally led by Manet, presented a new way of seeing the new world. In the paintings, individual marks necessarily revealed the artist’s temperament and individuality rather than being subdued. Although it was understood that experience was subjective, they endeavored to capture the sensations of the visible world where rigid lines broke apart and colours were rendered as mathematical sums to capture the transience of light. Claude Monet (1840-1926) exemplified the scientific analysis of how light and colour alone were the structural ingredients of the perceived world in his series of paintings of Rouen Cathedral (1892-1894) and Haystacks (1890-1891). “With scientific precision, [he] created an unparalleled and unexcelled record of the passing of time as seen in the movement of light over identical forms” (Tansey 991). In these chronologies of time rendered with colour, Monet, with his impeccable accuracy showed the world that what we know of a thing or space, is learned through sensation and attention to the chemistry of light and colour.

Armed with oil paint sold in tubes by the 1870’s, the Impressionists defied the Academie and set out to paint outdoors where contemporary life was occurring. Manet and the Impressionists formally addressed the prevalent doubt about archaic, academic models of

representation. “Doubts about vision became doubts about almost everything involved in the act of painting; and in time the uncertainty became a value in its own right; we could almost say it became an aesthetic” (Clark 12). This doubt became the career of painter Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) who, although sympathetic to Impressionism soon became dissatisfied with its adherence to colour over form. Instead of the limited palette of pure, individuated colours used by Impressionists, he used blacks and browns. “His aim was not truth nor was it the “truth” of Impressionism, but rather a lasting structure behind the formless and fleeting scenes of colour the eyes take in” (Tansey 996). The science of Impressionism for Cezanne was only part of the ‘truth’. He realized that our perception of nature is not just a mass of colours but also of patterns and planes. It was his lifelong attention to the colours and faceted structures of the perceived world that would in part inspire Cubism.

Plein air painting continued to appeal to serious artists for decades to come in other parts of the Western world as it was seen as a means to depict a new reality. In the United States, there was the Ashcan School and in Canada, the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson with Emily Carr on the West Coast. It seems plein air painting in the past has been employed as way to see the world anew, as if, as a methodology, it provides us with tangible evidence of details of the times: how things appeared to the contemporaneous eye.

## **II Phenomenology and Painting**

Since its inception by Edmund Husserl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology has taken many different directions and is now a vast field. Of particular interest here, is its consideration in understanding the implications of plein air painting. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the most accessible and poetic of the philosophers of phenomenology wrote extensively about this ontology as it applies to ethics and art. I will begin with an admittedly rudimentary conception of the phenomenon called the “Chiasm”. This is the term Merleau-Ponty used to describe the “intertwining” of the subject and the object. One of the fundamental theories in this philosophy defies the Cartesian duality of subject and object, instead arguing that all things and beings are implicit and intertwined. In this state of intersubjectivity, perception is no longer a linear action but rather one experiences oneself as a subject among other subjects and perception is a reciprocal act. The Chiasm is described also in the simple analogy of touch. When one touches an object, one is also touched by the object. In the practice of painting outdoors, when attention is trained in such a way so that one is immersed, ‘looking’ seems to become a tactile sensation, which indeed it is as photons penetrate the retina and stimulate appropriate sensors within the eye. ‘Seeing’, on the other hand is a conscious construct, one that is immersed in and defined by culture. But painting en plein air, in a meditative state can, at its best, transcend the inventory of representations in the mind. In this case, it is like a conversation or reciprocation between the subject and the object where their relationship defines them. The singularity of the mind and the world arrive in the midst of attention in painting.

In the essay “Cezanne’s Doubt”, from Sense and Non-Sense (1964), a collection of essays by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the author describes the painter’s process as a futile attempt to describe the world as it takes form through painting. Perception can never be complete since it is relative to a specific position in space and hence, for Cezanne, chronicling what he saw was an agonizing pursuit. The painting could never be truly complete and that is why he would spend hundreds of hours attempting to come abreast with what he saw. In other cases, he would create volumes of paintings of the same space— for example the hundreds of paintings and sketches of Mont Saint-Victoire. Cezanne knew that his pursuit to render what he saw would never be complete. In Merleau-Ponty’s essay, he cites a conversation between Cezanne and Emil Bernard when the latter suggests to Cezanne that, “for classical artists, painting demanded outline, composition, and distribution of light.” To which Cezanne replied, “They created pictures; we are attempting a piece of nature.” (Sense and Non-Sense 12) The essay outlines the artist’s conviction that he endeavored to paint *as* nature and that he saw no distinction between himself, the paintings and the space<sup>4</sup>.

These ideas are not new in western thought. Baruch Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was excommunicated from the Jewish faith because he observed a comparable singularity.

Most incriminating for him was the dissolution of the distinction between man and God

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<sup>4</sup> In 1995, I had the opportunity to study at Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. At that time there was a massive retrospective of Cezanne’s oeuvre at The Orangerie. I recall at a few moments, that I was so emotionally struck by the paintings that I was brought to tears. The work was not sentimental, what I was reacting to was almost like a profound gratitude, that through the paintings, I was able to experience what Cezanne had experienced over one hundred years before. These paintings were not just pictures but experiences, immortalized in paint for people throughout time to partake.

and God and nature. I will offer this summary of Spinoza's investigation of singularity from the Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "It seems very odd to think that objects and individuals—what we ordinarily think of as independent "things"—are, in fact, merely properties of a thing." Spinoza referred to God as a substance from which everything is derived. This seems to compliment, (albeit over a millennium later), the ancient Hindu belief in the singularity of all things and beings as Brahman. The prospect that the human and space are of the same substance and intertwined is an old one, visited by philosophers, religions and cultures over the centuries. As David Abram suggests, "We can perceive things at all, only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of the world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us" (68).

Pleinairism as a methodology provides an arena to explore the open form or stage for unexpected characteristics to emerge and perform. Light, weather and temperature are in a state of perpetual change and while attentive to the animate space, I also strive for awareness of my own personal, physical and mental changes. Robert Smithson wrote in A Sedimentation of the Mind that, "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason" (877). At first this can be taken as a metaphor but as Simon Schama, art historian with Columbia University, in his book Landscape and Memory stated; "although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible" (6).

This line of thought parallels how landscape may be posited as an allegory for a social, human condition. For example, Group of Seven painter, Lauren Harris' so called utopian vision for a racially "homogenous" Canada<sup>5</sup> is rendered in smooth, pure un-textured landscapes or Kim Dorland's coarse applications of paint that describe a dystopic Canadian suburbia.

The picturing of landscape has also set the conditions for our perception of nature itself. W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>6</sup> suggests thinking of landscape not as a noun but as a verb. In the introduction to Landscape And Power, Mitchell prepares us for this by saying, "What we have done and are doing to our environment, what the environment in turn does to us, how we naturalize what we do to each other, and how all these "doings" are enacted in the media of representation we call landscape are the real subjects of Landscape and Power" (2).

### **III Painting and Meditation**

The primary purpose of meditation in the Tibetan Buddhist form (as with others) is to gain skill with the mind. The pretext for this is that in our daily life, we become habit

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Linsley is an artist and professor at The University of Waterloo. He has written and lectured extensively on the subject of Canadian landscape painting, in particular in his essay Landscapes in Motion: Lawren Harris, Emily Carr and the Heterogeneous Modern Nation. Linsley suggests that Lawren Harris' specific agenda was a reaction to the multiplicity of cultures he observed in the United States and a promotion of a Canadian national aesthetic that was pure and free of immigrants.

<sup>6</sup> W.J.T Mitchell is professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago. He is Editor of the quarterly publication, Critical Inquiry, dedicated to critical discussions about art and social sciences. He is widely published including the edited work, Landscape and Power, a seminal resource of critical discourse on the subject of the contemporary landscape.



oriented, we may become overrun by greed and self serving, indulge in self pity or be led by delusions. These types of suffering are called the “kleshas” and when actions are directed by them, they can result in aggression, deceit and violence. Meditation is a practice that is designed to train one’s mind, to enlist your own personal “spy” or “watcher” who can observe these thoughts as they arrive in the resting mind. What is often called mindfulness training, meditation can empower the practitioner over the potentially wild mind, recognizing thoughts as merely thoughts and not a mandate. It is understood that this practice, while engendering overall peace within the practitioner, is beneficial to the community as a whole.

Plein air painting is similar to meditation. In the Tibetan Buddhist style of meditation, as with other styles, the practice is a formal exercise. In groups we sit in a grid formation facing the front. One sits cross-legged with the back straight and the chin up. Posture is paramount as it keeps the mind and body awake rather than slipping into laziness or sleep. The focus is then on the out-breath, with the gaze directed at the floor ahead. When thoughts inevitably enter the mind, one returns their attention to the out-breath, adjusts the posture and gaze and continues with the meditation. The practice empowers the meditator to dispense with thoughts as a sort of inconvenient guest rather than the narrator of the lived experience.

My introduction to meditation came at a time, maybe twenty years ago, when I was in a personal crisis. I had become alienated, nihilistic and wayward and felt a profound despair in what I thought was a relatively meaningless existence. I was caught up in

regret about the past and anxiety about the future in an unsettling mix of hope and fear. In Buddhist terminology, this is the character of “discursive mind” and because it dwells in the past and future, it is not in the present moment. It has a quality of speediness, especially in the case of ambition or hope, where one is looking beyond immediate reality. Meditation was a practice by which I could train my mind and reign in the projections and learn the skill of contending with myself at that moment. Surprising to me at the time, contending with myself was actually a lot simpler than I *thought* it would be and to my relief, I was able to become empathetic with myself and therefore others.

Alienation is common and while the term was used by Karl Marx to describe the proletariat feeling of exclusion from the means of production at the dawn of the Industrial age, it is now a symptom of the Postmodern, multiplicity of Western and Global culture which is so far removed from the process of production that it is rendered almost entirely as a dependant consumer culture. The increasingly diversified cultural, social and economic concerns all coexisting under the same consumerist public domain, seems to engender an overall alienation despite the advent of the global village emerging through technology. The causes and effects of this type of alienation are too great of a subject for me to address in this paper completely. In Bruce W. Fergusons essay on the work of Will Gorrill, “Where There Is a Will There Is a Way” the Post-modern condition of alienation is described as when a person becomes an “instrument rather than a social being” (Gorrill 4). My vagabond experience of feeling disconnected is mirrored by a general social disenfranchisement in the West. The “previously comforting narratives” that might have served to orient individuals in society (like family, church and community) are evidently

unraveling, while we are also subject to an ever increasing “communications tsunami”. Gortlitz argues that alienation is “superceded, under Post-modernism, by a hyper-alienation”, as the condition has been naturalized. Gortlitz’s paintings are motivated by the “possibility of mutuality” by painting “outside himself”. In addition to changing social and family paradigms in our culture, there is also a changing environmental situation. Our immersion in the high-speed technological world is reflected by our alienation from the tactile, phenomenal world. The manual act of painting, the painting itself perhaps, is a way of becoming reacquainted with the world.

My concern is, how does this speed that we are living in impact the phenomenal world? In Tibetan Buddhist teaching, speed is a symptom of a discursive mind; one that is constantly grasping beyond itself. Speed cripples our awareness of the present moment to the point where we are no longer aware of it. By speed, I am referring to the rate at which information and communication is transmitted through media and electronic devices, the speed of traffic in the city and international travel. The internet is characterized by its own specific speed, measured in greater amounts of gigabytes to the consuming public. The Dharma refers to this speed as sleepiness, when in the blur of speed we become unaware. The Buddhist practice of meditation, like the practice of painting, is a physical and mental process of slowing down and becoming present and awake. The problem with the perpetual motion of progress is that you can never actually be anywhere; never actually *be* at all.

The structure Buddhist meditation is referred to as the “container” or form that allows one to dispense with the need to think and be free to proceed with the practice.

Meditation is often uncomfortable, the mind tends to wander and the body resists the sustained stillness with itches and aches. The task of the meditator is to cut through these distractions with stillness and mindfulness, returning to the breath and posture, like a pilot wresting control of his craft. Once again, the meditator is simply sitting with nothing else going on. Perhaps for the moment there are no fantasies or adventures, no logical exercises, just the moment and attention to it.

In this way, a highly tuned awareness can occur, where one is conscious of thoughts as they enter the mind, the gravity of the body, the breath and even the most subtle affects in the space. I recall in my own experience of a Dathun<sup>7</sup> that after weeks of this practice, I felt as though I could sense the motionless air resting upon my skin and had an almost aerial sense (not perspective) of my body in space amongst other objects and people. I recall that this sense was somewhat overwhelming and it was because of the “container” that I was able to contend with it if only for moments at a time. The act of painting also arrives at this excruciating clarity and sometimes I feel I am not quite able to manage it but when I am, the painting bears surprising qualities. This heightened sensibility is achieved through stillness and attention to the breath.

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<sup>7</sup> I once participated in a Dathun at Karne Choling Buddhist Meditation Centre in Barnet Vermont. The program lasted one month during which time the participants practiced meditation from seven am until nine pm. There were short breaks for walking meditation and eating in the Zen style of Orioki. During the entire program there was no speaking by any of the participants

Similarly, painting outdoors can be uncomfortable, standing in one place for extended periods of time, as it gets cold, or I get tired, impatient, bored, or I start trying to set ideas down on the canvas. There is also the parallel problem of mind babble both in meditation and in painting. It can be quite an annoyance, this little voice in the head that tells you to make a tree like this or a cloud like that — directives that will undermine the space's agency and my attention to it. Mark Epstein, quoted Agnes Martin in his essay "Meditation As Art/Art As Meditation", saying, "the intellect is a hazard in artwork, I mean, there are so many paintings that have gone down the drain because someone got an idea in the middle" (53). With a simple plein air practice I attempt to leave the self and ideas behind.

The Zen Master, Shunryu Suzuki cautions us about the solipsistic danger of ideas:

If you leave a trace of your thinking on your activity, you will be attached to that trace. For instance, you may say, "This is what I have done!" But actually it is not so. In your recollection you may say, "I did such and such a thing in some certain way," but actually that is never exactly what happened. When you think in this way you limit the actual experience of what you have done. So if you attach to the idea of what you have done, you are involved in selfish ideas.

(Suzuki 62)

There are plenty of ideas, but the problem is that once you have one, you might end up with certainty. Ideas can get in the way of receptivity because a thing is already defined.

To say “tree” immediately conjures an image in the mind but while painting from life, if you are stuck on the idea of a tree, you will not be able to see the tree as it is. There is certainly a place for this kind of painting. Bob Ross made a fortune assembling paintings of ideas, putting a “happy tree” here and a “cozy cabin” there, but if the effort is to engage with and become fully attentive to the phenomenal world through painting, ideas are counterproductive.

Since I began painting, I have continually returned to working plein air because it helps to strip away predetermination and technique (as things never proceed according to plan) and allows me to focus on the basic albeit challenging task of painting what I see, inventing a process in the moment. Jan Verwoert<sup>8</sup>, described the process of Elizabeth McIntosh’s paintings in his essay, “Softedge is Hardcore”, as “a philosophy of being bold, that is, of boldly going beyond the false belief in plans, ploys and declared intentions. To expose painting to the profane reality of hard things with soft edges, ever undulating shapes, and barely controllable resonances” (8). While Verwoert is referring to Elizabeth McIntosh’s studio practice, for me it directly applies to my experience of painting outdoors, that is, being attentive and responsive to the “undulating” expression of space rather than a rigid plan. The space of a painting from life is more than a picture or a rectangle containing a concept of landscape, it is a site of change and flux, of light, weather, sound, scent and moving objects (Please see figures 1-6 on page 26 and 27).

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Verwoert is an art critic and regular contributor to Frieze Magazine. He offers residencies and seminars around the globe including The European Graduate School. One of Verwoert’s primary concerns in contemporary art is its tether to modernist paradigms. This quote was taken from the catalogue of painter and professor Elizabeth McIntosh’s work titled, A Good Play.

Landscape is subject to and formed by our values and ideologies. As the natural world has been objectified by human use, it in return provides for us our own toxic influence of garbage piled along our riverbanks or chemical smoke in the atmosphere, raining back down upon us. Painting outdoors is a way of conversing with this contemporary nature, a pliable conversation (with paint) with malleable perception (flux) of its expressive potential inclusive of what we have put there. This is a model for my practice that is more receptive to the agency of a space than the representation of an idea about it. Ultimately, for me, painting in this responsive, meditative way could engender new ways of seeing and relating to the world.

However, outdoor painting is not privileged in the realm of truth, an assertion made by historic plein air painters who rejected idealism and sought to represent the 'real' world. The neurotic confines of the studio, to be sure, are in the head, and this psychosis is surely portable. There are still habits, signs and pictorial tricks when painting outside. My experience is that what occurs over time, a sustained attention to space is infinitely more complex than the ideas in my head. At least outside, or working from life, there is an external reference that is alien to my private mental space.

Watching my five year-old son, Niko, paint is an education that rivals any other. I observe from the outset that he may have an idea, but it soon becomes secondary as he maneuvers around the paper with different materials, his tongue pressed between his teeth. He is not so much directing the outcome of the picture, although he is the cause, he is also a witness. His drawings are surprising and brilliant as he has not yet learned the

conventions of how to draw this or that and he has no repertoire of techniques. He is immersed in the process of making and watching and as Mark Epstein suggests, in the creative process, “You experience what you are perceiving as you” (“Sip My Ocean” 21). I come to painting with years of history and knowledge of the medium and I am aware that even the most subtle movement with the paint has historical implications. Watching my son draw is inspiring because there is no self-conscious predetermination. “Thinking in painting is thinking as paint.” (Elkins 113)

Meditation utilizes a formal structure as a “container” to limit the need for conscious thinking, and as a manageable space to contend with infinite. Similarly, in painting, I have chosen to work within the provisions of the rectangle. This is a conscious choice and a recognition of the historic conventions of landscape painting. The rectangle provides an intentional context that addresses human interaction with nature in the conventional history of landscape. This frame is how we have transformed space into a consumable thing, as the depiction of property or conquest. It is the organization of human imposition on space. By working in this convention I hope to add the possibility that the space can also express itself. If the rectangle is a window, perhaps the power balance of the window can be inverted somewhat, and what is outside is now also able to look back.

Another aspect of the “container” I have elected for this work is basic oil painting materials, without resins, waxes or urethanes. This conscious choice of materials limits any further complications about what and what not to use and accepts the history and



limitations of the medium. To continue to use oil paint as an on-going inquiry into attention, the plasticity of paint and surface is a sufficiently vast arena without added complications. Finally, I choose to paint because I love to paint, it is a relationship that I have nurtured for years and over time I have found that, like any relationship, it is through perseverance that I have arrived at new levels of understanding.

Oddly, it is because of the conventional aspect of my “container” for painting, that a free space is opened-up. I would rather look at my work and be a little surprised, as if I don’t quite recall how certain parts of the painting happened. It is as if I am not the sole creator of the work, but in my deepest attention, it is collaboration with space. I do not expect to be entirely liberated from ideas or to be engaged in a purely selfless activity, but painting is an exercise in overcoming repressive certainty. It is an engagement with space based not on a plan, but as a position that is continually negotiated with paint. In the process of painting from life, there is this continual struggle between what is there and how I attempt to render it. Mistakes are immediately evident and usually are the result of trying to find a solution to something I am not quite able to comprehend -- some sort of remedy for something that eludes me. But, with the right discipline and the right attention, which may only be brief, there is a state of attention where there is no attempt at reasoning and the painting proceeds in a manner that supercedes thinking and ideas. This state comes for me when I have worked on the painting for some time. I am oriented with it, almost as if I am inside the painting and the space simultaneously.

#### IV Painting as Applied Empathy

Painting is a physical endeavor – for the painter pushing this unruly viscous material over canvas, and for the viewer who is in the presence of a tactile picture with spikes, stains, scumbles and the scent of oil. Paint rarely does what you expect; the material is inconsistent and messy and even the most mechanical methods reveal the signs of human fallibility. In this digital age, the human, tactile quality carries a specific value because it offers us an intimate, sensorial<sup>9</sup> knowledge of the world. According to James Elkins, in his book What Painting Is, the viewer’s empathetic experience of a painting operates in this way: “Paint records the most delicate gesture and the most tense. It tells whether the painter sat or stood or crouched in front of the canvas. Paint is a cast made of the painter’s movements, a portrait of the painter’s body and thoughts” (5). As we look deeply at a work of art we become implicit in its creation through a kind of empathy that is similar to feeling compelled to dance when listening to music. Painting is an applied empathy between the subject, the painter, the material and the viewer as it provides a tactile conversation that the viewer can enter with texture, scent, and the passage of time suspended in paint. Barry Schwabsky’s essay entitled, “Painting in the Interrogative Mode” in the book Vitamin P suggested that paint can be a particularly responsive medium that, in turn can vicariously engage the viewer:

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<sup>9</sup> The book entitled Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art, edited by Caroline Jones, is devoted to the idea that technology, indeed offers an embodied experience. My practice does not aim to exclude technology or suggest that it is something other than human, rather it is an attempt to render the agency of space in this new “sensorium.”

It has to do with this cultivation of the tactile dimension of things, of a plastic relation to materials (because of the potential this relation offers for continual feedback between matter and sensation) is also a proprioceptive activity—to the indirect benefit of the viewer who partakes of this relation only imaginatively, though as vividly as possible. For the viewer, painting is a noun: the finished object we see. For the painters it can also be a verb: the activity in which they are engaged. (9)

It is this “continual feedback” that painting provides that makes it ideal for conversations with space. And this also relates to the possibility of how the ‘place’ of a picture, in de Certeau’s terms, can be opened-up in the ‘space’ of plein air painting. My practice is simply an effort of exchange with the phenomenological world, which at it’s best, in a state of unmitigated attention becomes an empathic experience. The feeling of empathy to space is comparable to empathy for another person or being. True empathy is experienced when the self yields to the emotion or condition of another and one has transcended the ego, its needs and agendas, if only for a moment. When the painter loses track of her/himself in flow<sup>10</sup> he and what s/he is attentive to become intertwined. The painter and the space coalesce in the painting. In this way, a plein air painting can itself become animate space.

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<sup>10</sup>The book entitled, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by author and psychology professor, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly describes flow as the state when one is engaged in a task that is just beyond capability which is therefore manageable and creatively rewarding. This state can be achieved in any activity including art, music and sports.

## **V Painting as Animate Document**

This suggests an overall attitude, of availing to an agency outside of the “self”.

Introspection in this context yields very little compared to vastness of the animate world.

It is a model or attitude that can apply to relationships with other people, places and beings. In the digital, high-speed world, painting is a return to an embodied mode of thinking. As James Elkins claims, “Substances not only occupy the mind, they become the mind” (116). My experience of painting outdoors is an immersive one. I am in the midst of a living space that is experienced through the skin, ears, nose, mouth and the eyes. As the space reveals its character over time I strive to be mindful, tracking this character, which directs me all over the canvas. Colours and shapes no longer present themselves as absolutes but as moving, breathing parts. In my attention I must try to contend with this moving space, while on the canvas simple picture making conventions, techniques and structures like atmospheric perspective or figure/ground equations can be more of a hindrance to the actual act of painting things as they reveal themselves. I must work all over the canvas simultaneously, foreground and background because as I witness a colour and attempt to create it, when I return my gaze to the space, it has changed.

Working on the painting “Outside the House” (page 29) was a sustained exposure to the space. In the two hundred hours it took to create it, the light and colour changed dramatically. As the sky changed colour into dusk, the colour of the trees in the foreground also changed. Painting this way is like trying to paint a moving object.

Again, on the trees, which dominate this painting, the light appeared on the left of the trunks in the morning, there was no shadow in the afternoon and in the evening, the shadows appeared on the right of the trunks, then gradually faded into dusk while in the distance the lights of Port Coquitlam began to shine through the branches. All the while, rooftops went from pink to green, a backhoe began to work in the distance and the neighbor hung their brilliant laundry, which, strange as it may seem, was an event that I found exhilarating.

I think this compares to painting a portrait where the sitter is breathing, moving, smiling, etcetera. If the portrait is done from a photograph, you have a painting of a photograph, a mechanical record of a single moment, but if it is done from life then it is an animate document, a sustained exposure, perhaps like the landscape paintings of BC artist Anne Kipling, or British painter, Lucien Freud's portraits that embody the painted (or drawn) conversation over time with the sitter. In viewing Freud's work, one is not in the presence of a mere image. After hundreds of hours of attention, he has rendered something that can only exist as a painting, an empathic, animate document. It is at once an object that chronicles all of his thinking and interaction with the model through paint. For my current project, I am painting landscapes in the same spirit as these artists.



Fig. 1: Jeremy Herndl, *View from Whalley, BC*. 12pm-7pm. January 19, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.



Fig. 2: Jeremy Herndl, *View from Whalley, BC*. 10am-6pm. January 26, 2011 (overcast and rain). Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.



Fig. 3: Jeremy Herndl, *View from Whalley, BC*. 4pm-12am. February 9, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.





Fig. 4: Jeremy Herndl, *View from Whalley, BC*. 5am-12pm. February 25, 2011 (-6° celsius). Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.



Fig. 5: Jeremy Herndl, *View From Whalley, BC*. 12 pm-7pm April 18, 2011. Oil on canvas, 22" x 20". Photo by the artist



Fig. 6: Jeremy Herndl, *View from Whalley, BC*. 10am-6pm April, 28. Oil on canvas. 22" x 20". Photo by the artist.





Fig. 7: Jeremy Herndl. Outside the House, March 16-April 6, 2011. Oil on canvas. 68" x 66". Photo by the artist.



## VI Methodology: Forgetting the Self in Effort

As much as I am concerned about ecology and the environment I am more interested in the human-ness of nature and how the contemporary human manifests in the landscape. I am painting landscapes where humans have an influence on space. I am not judgmental of it. The sun, rain and cold do not give preference to anything they affect, human-made or otherwise. If I set out to make paintings of a view of Whalley, BC<sup>11</sup> (see figures 1-7 on pages 26-28) with judgments or a biases like, “these things are ugly because they’re human”, or “these things are desirable because they are natural”, then I am painting some sort of ideal and neglecting the task of exchange with the space. I am quite concerned about the environment, but the paradox in working with these concerns is that the only way for me to address them is to relinquish them, by starting with a simple structure of plein air representation and then allowing the painting/space to emerge. In Zen Mind, Beginners Mind, Shunryu Suzuki addresses this paradox in relation to meditation this way:

Strictly speaking, any effort we make is not good for our practice because it creates waves in our mind. It is impossible, however, to attain absolute calmness of our mind without any effort. We must make the effort, but we must forget ourselves in the effort we make. In this realm there is no subjectivity or objectivity. (37)

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<sup>11</sup> Whalley, BC is where I have been living for the duration of the Masters’ program at Emily Carr University. It is a liminal space caught between histories of agriculture, industry and suburban development. It is also a space of human neglect, manifesting as overgrown lots and abandoned houses being consumed by soft earth and vegetation. Whenever I learn of a violent or drug related crime in the Lower Mainland of BC, it is usually just a few blocks from where I live. There are many methadone clinics and halfway houses located in the vicinity that gives Whalley a tangible atmosphere of despair. There are now new municipal efforts to re-vitalize the area.

I choose spaces that somehow triggers an emotional response, storied spaces that I cannot help but to engage with. Like an interesting person or book that compels me to listen, where I forget about my own story, waiting for a chance to be heard. In the paintings of Whalley, BC I hope to yield to its story. Of course, it is a choice on my part. I make decisions of what to attend to and compositions, colours used and so on. At the outset, I may have an idea, but like my son Niko when he has entered his painting, I forget about myself and the painting can then emerge.

Landscapes, from the detritus in Whalley, BC to the lights of downtown Vancouver are human manifestations. It is as if our minds build the spaces we find ourselves in. Peter Doig's paintings have an intense, heavily invested and considered surface depicting our collective spaces, found in movies and popular media among other things. Their evocative power emerges from the artist's attention to material in a spirit of invention and discovery. Charles Burchfield walked out of the studio and engaged with nature intimately, en plein air. His paintings were thus animated by the buzz of electric lights and insects in the bushes. Anselm Kiefer's landscapes are a space of mourning where he seems to physically explore the picture he creates in order to come to terms with his cultural lineage of destruction and cruelty. And Canadian painter, Kim Dorland paints wilderness as a frightful human space of litter, graffiti and bush parties with heavy brush strokes slashed over fluorescent spray paint. This apparently eclectic selection of artists that I am referring to have at least one fundamental quality in common and that is that their work is the expression of the spaces they attend to. Their work is an embodied thinking through paint as opposed to an illustrated idea. They have attended to these

spaces by attending to the material that describes them. One can never see the spaces that they depict the same way, and after viewing their pictures, we have learned these spaces from them.

Because the genre of landscape painting is so vast it is not possible to note all the influences that motivate my work. There is no single movement, manifesto or artist that covers it all. The above noted painters are examples of artists working beyond representation, and by an attitude of invention they make paintings that are far more than just pictures in paint. They become part of our collective understanding and their work has profound resonance because of the reciprocal relation that these artists have with their world and material. In my practice, I invest my memory, body and skill in a conversation with space, the material and the viewer. This world, from which we are created and which we create is real and imagined because what is there can only be realized through the creative act of perception. For W.J.T. Mitchell the expression of nature is ultimately human,

Landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation. Landscape is a medium not only for expressing value but also expressing meaning, for communication between persons—most radically, for communication between the human and non-human. Landscape mediates the cultural and the natural, or “Man” and “Nature,” as eighteenth-century theorists would say. It is not only a natural scene, and not just a representation of a natural scene, but a *natural* representation of a natural scene, a trace or icon of nature *in* nature itself, as if nature were imprinting and encoding its

essential structures on our perceptual apparatus. Perhaps this is why we place a special value on landscapes with lakes or reflecting pools. The reflection exhibits nature representing itself to itself, displaying the identity of the Real and the Imaginary that certifies the reality of our own images. (15)

The practice of plein air painting may now have an urgent relevance if it can indeed be the mediation of the natural and human. If we are now immersed in an abstract world, of high-speed information and technology and we are experiencing a sort of Post-modern alienation, then, perhaps in this new context, pleinairism should be revived as a serious contemporary practice. David Abrams suggests a contemporary appreciation for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that I think has a direct relevance to painting outdoors;

For Merleau-Ponty, all of the creativity and free ranging mobility that we have come to associate with the human intellect is, in truth, an elaboration or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception. The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising to things and to the world. The body's actions and engagements are never wholly determinate, since they must ceaselessly adjust themselves to a world and terrain that is itself continually shifting. (49)

Pleinairism may not be merely an historic practice since the phenomenal world and the human condition is always in a state of flux. Plein air painting is an applied empathy with space. It is a humble exercise in compassion. In this digital age of so many images

and speed, it is a peaceful act of resistance that aspires to bring our attention out of the discursive world of contemporary life and back to the tangible world that sustains us.

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