

# BORDERCROSSINGS

A MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS

**Julian  
Schnabel**  
**Gina  
Rorai**

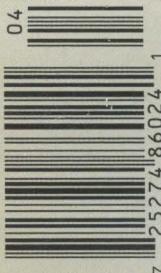
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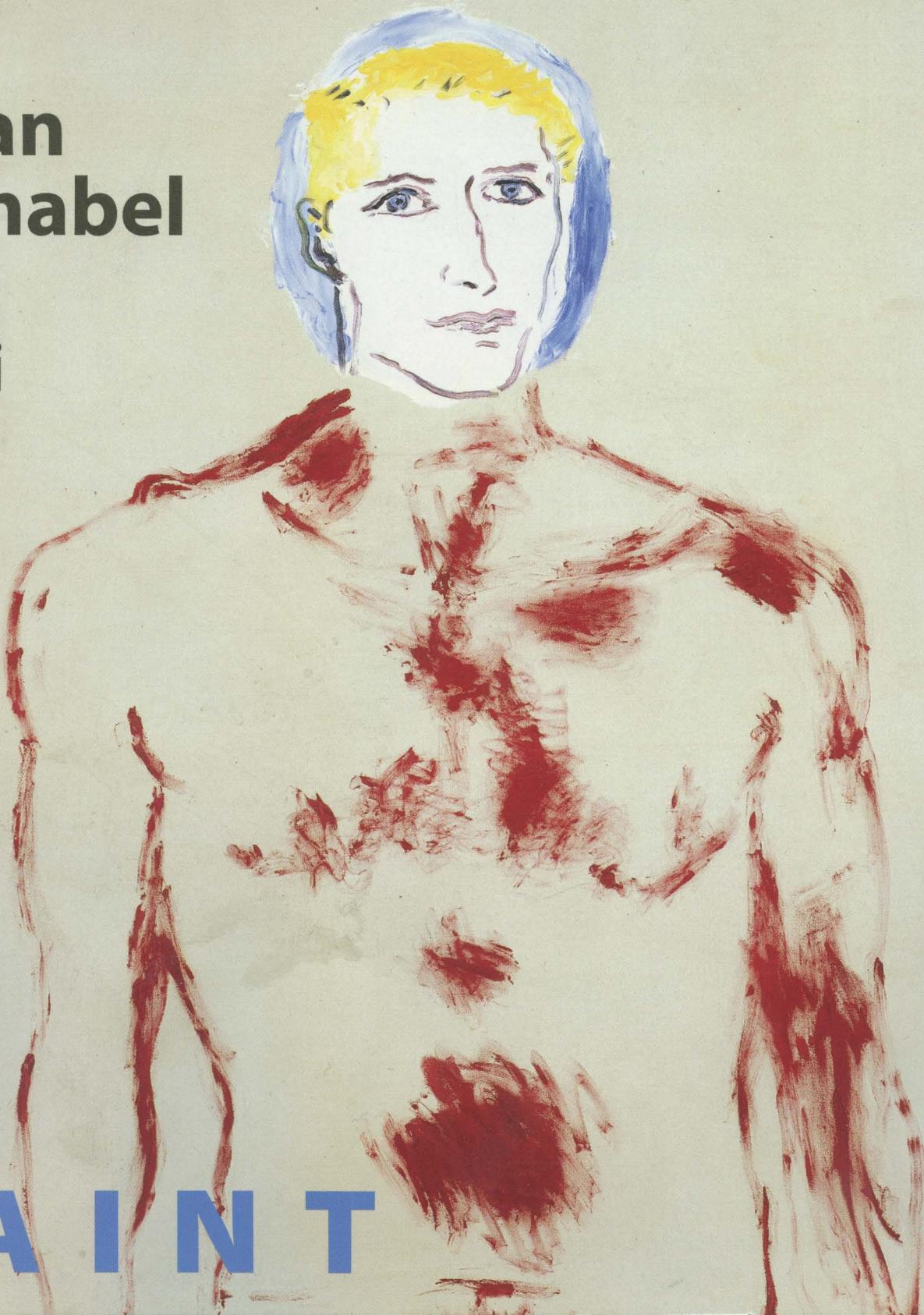
Eliza  
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Karel  
Funk

The Artist  
as Flâneur



**PAINT**



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P A I N T E R S

# Cliff Eyland Monica Tap Eliza Griffiths



INTERVIEWS BY ROBERT ENRIGHT



# Hover Crafting the Art of Monica Tap

The intelligence of Monica Tap's engagement with the vexing questions of "what is a painting" and "how do you make one" is exceeded only by the beauty of the works she creates through that purposeful interrogation. In the mid '90s, while still a graduate student at NSCAD in Halifax, she began projecting layered images

on top of one another in order to discover a new way to make a painting and to frustrate any notions of composition she might have acquired up to that point. The continued application of that method has resulted in landscape paintings that hover between abstraction and representation. The nature of the



works she has chosen to use as projected images—drawings by masters from Pieter Breughel to Van Gogh—has also meant that her oils on canvas variously occupy the space between drawing and painting. Tap has become a virtuoso of the interstitial, a painter who deftly negotiates the subtle relationship between mark and no-mark, between form and void. She likes it when her work “hovers on the edge of recognition,” when the viewer shifts back and forth between looking *into* a landscape and looking *at* an abstraction, and, in the process, not being able to determine which is which. Her successful confusion causes the viewer to become aware of the act of looking, which Tap considers one of the subjects of her painting.

In her visual word, looking is its own reward. The intense, close-valued inventory of marks in *Lament*; the lyric vivaciousness of *Whee*; the weightless translucency of *Brio*; and the luminous tapestry of complementary red, orange and lavender in *Memento* are all reminders that the act of looking at a Monica Tap painting is equally an act of remembering paintings that have been made before. One of the attributes she admires in painting is its capacity to collapse time, and

her way of acknowledging that quality is to set parts of landscapes from the 16th to the 19th centuries in the same canvas. In one sense, hers is a process of aesthetic retrieval; in another it is an act of arbitrary violence performed on an art history she genuinely admires. Her own succinct way of describing the intelligent doubleness of her practice is that it involves “equal parts irony and homage.”

Recently Tap has been using her own sketches as points of departure for her compelling tracery. In works like *Hmmmm* and *Shoulder Fly*, both from 2002, she has made paintings of remarkable energy, as if someone had first combined Franz Kline, Max Ernst and Roy Lichtenstein, and then deconstructed the paintings that resulted from that improbable hybridizing. What remains is a species of illusionistic painting, in which the marks seem to float in space. It’s as if a painterly cosmos were caught in the process of coming apart, just before it coheres, once again, into something orderly, elegant and irresistibly engaging.

Installation, Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 2002.

facing page: *Brio*, 2002, oil on canvas, 203 x 228 cm.  
Photograph courtesy Douglas Udell Gallery, Edmonton and Vancouver, and Wynick Tuck, Toronto.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *Can you trace the genesis of the layered*

*landscape paintings? Where did the idea originate and how long have you been doing them?*

MONICA TAP: The most direct route comes from work I began in my graduate studies at NSCAD around 1995-96. I was layering the floral paintings of Rachel Ruysch as a way to inventory the blossoms she was using, trying to break down the unity of a particular object. There were a lot of reasons why I initially started throwing slide projections one on top of the other, some of them not really art reasons, either. I was simply excited by what I saw. Before I could project an image I had to wait until it was dark because I had skylights. I was also working with oil paint and needed to allow for some drying time. So I would have to wait until the next day to go in with the second image, which would be a different bouquet. Some things lined up and some didn't. On subsequent evenings I would have anywhere from three to six different images being layered onto a single canvas. On one hand, it was an incredibly prosaic answer to the question of what do you paint and what do you do when you get to the studio. If it's Tuesday, it must be slide number two and layer number three. That was one way to deal with the anxiety of what you next put onto the painting. But on the other hand, it allowed me to work around my own aesthetic judgements and to do things that normally I may not have considered doing. The slide projection would be strong enough that it would almost obliterate the image underneath. You could see the painted marks from underneath, but one of the rules I had for myself was that I couldn't save bits that looked particularly nice. I had to stay with the program I had adopted.

*BC: So it was a process of resisting or abandoning what was obviously beautiful and going for something even more fugitive?*

MT: It was about suspending my own aesthetic judgement during the working process and allowing the process to reveal things of its own accord, to which I would then have to respond. I couldn't intervene while the process was in progress.

*BC: Why did you want to do that?*

MT: That's a very good question. I think we can become too comfortable with things, and this

was a way of setting up new parameters. I think historically artists have done that a lot. I remember coming across the 18th-century English landscape artist Alexander Cozens. He would begin his landscapes often with an ink blot, which was a way of resisting facility and suspending a certain degree of judgement. There was also a great deal of critical discussion in the mid-'80s and '90s in response to the return to figuration and Neo-Expressionist painting. People were moving away from the authorial voice, which was especially true if you were making painterly paintings. So this was one way I was able to make a painting that was all about pleasure but that was deferred at the same time. Some of us didn't participate in the act of Expressionism while we still could use some of the look of Expressionism. I was trying to find a way to have my cake and eat it too.

*BC: One of the things that emerges for me in your double-desserting is how much the work seems to be about homage and maybe even outright theft. You can discern art styles from all-over painting, to Impressionism and even to Chinese landscape painting.*

MT: Many of those were completely unintentional, especially the Chinese landscape. That came about more or less because I moved to drawings as a source material very quickly after the flowers. The flowers were just a question of inventorying and that's what got me into layering. The movement to landscape came when I realized I was really interested in the veils and layers of marks that were possible. Paintings are dense, whereas drawings are inherently abstract, and landscape drawings, in particular, seem to embody something about abstraction that I found really compelling. It wasn't until later that I started to figure out it had to do with a grammar of description, of pictorial illusion.

*BC: The other thing drawing gives you that painting doesn't have is a sense of interstitial space, of spaces between the lines.*

MT: Precisely. In that way my work is all wrong, because painting is usually about using shape and value to create these illusions of form, and drawing is more traditionally concerned with the use of broken line and interstitial space. In order to get the layers, I have to have those spaces. The white of the paper becomes a real player in that case.

BC: Would there be as many as six or more tracings before you'd complete a painting?

MT: There's no hard-and-fast rule. It depends on the painting. Some would have only three or four.

BC: How do you know when the painting is finished?

MT: Theoretically the painting is finished when I'm finished following what I've said I was going to do. But sometimes all that has happened presents me

with an incredibly interesting problem. Then I turn into a much more traditional abstract painter and there's a great deal of considered looking at the painting. I'll still use very similar methods to take the painting to the next step. I'll generally stay with the tracery but I may go back to an earlier projection from within the same painting. Or it may need another colour. Things change considerably when you go up in scale. There was one painting called *Tangle*, which,

*Mmmmm*, 2002, oil on canvas, 203 x 179 cm.





## How I know the work is finished is that it hovers on the edge of recognition. That's where I want it to be.

*Whee*, 2001, oil, enamel on canvas, 80 x 80 cm.

in the small scale, seemed to be perfectly fine. It used processed colours—yellow, cyan and magenta—and it ended in black. The single image I was using was a beautiful drawing by Van Gogh called *Tree with Fence in Arles*. The smoky grey-blue in the painting came up last of all, because after I'd finished those first four layers it looked like a black and white Christmas card or something. It was awful. You

could see the image too clearly. Often, how I know the work is finished is that it hovers on the edge of recognition. That's where I want it to be. I want people to think they might be looking at something that's abstract but then there is some sense of landscape. But they can't quite pin down why it looks like landscape to them. That kind of confusion engages the viewer in a kind of puzzle in which they

*Whee*, detail.

become aware of the act of looking, which is actually one of my subjects.

*BC: Can you go the other way? If you resist too much recognition, is there an equivalent resistance to too much abstraction? Can you lose the painting by making it merely a collection of marks?*

*MT:* That happened in a painting called *Flirt*. It got that name as a result of not delivering. It promised a lot but didn't really come through. It just became a collection of floating marks that had some interest on their own.

*BC: Coquettish?*

*MT:* There was a lot of pink in that painting. But there was no literal gravity in the piece. It was taken from close-up marks that artists, predominantly Van Gogh, used to describe things like ground cover—a mess of rocks and little leaves and bushes. That tangle of information is really difficult to draw because there's too much stuff. It's like a shorthand for underbrush.

*BC: What makes you choose a particular source drawing or painting?*

*MT:* It depends. I became more and more engaged with Van Gogh's drawings because he uses a larger scale mark, so as I was moving up in scale myself,

those marks translated better for me than some 16th-century drawings that were considerably smaller. This summer I had the opportunity to see some of these drawings when I spent five days in the vault at the Van Gogh Museum. It was great but the drawings didn't look like what I'd expected. I thought I knew them pretty well but they were bigger than I thought. I had also thought they were reed pen and sepia ink, but most of them were brush and ink. So the translation from brush to brush was completely natural. There was also a significant amount of layering in his drawings that doesn't come through effectively in reproductions at all.

*BC: So your homage was closer than you thought?*

*MT:* It was much closer than I thought and I was really excited by that. Also, at the Courtauld in London, I managed to see the little drawing by Breughel the Younger, Pieter Breughel's grandson. It was a drawing I had always expected would be 16 by 20 inches or so because it has a huge amount of space in it. It just goes back forever. But it's only 4 by 6 inches. How he contains several people walking through the woods and villages and mountains in that space is amazing. It was so fine, practically a silverpoint. So you asked how I choose. Partially it's love.

BC: That's a pretty good reason. These are acts of adoration for the achievement of the drawings, then.

MT: Yes, and because drawings often get seen as studies, as preparatory work, it's a way of bringing them back into the conversation. There are also times there will be an almost curatorial premise at work.

*Lament*, 2002,  
oil on canvas,  
203 x 179 cm.

BC: What do you mean?

MT: A couple of years back there was a group of paintings that incorporated images of journeys and there was another group in which I put roommates together. I discovered that Jan Lievens and Claude Lorraine had roomed together. One of the initial driving forces behind the landscape work had to do with trying to find some way to bring together, into the space of the canvas, images from different times. It struck me that this was perhaps something painting could excel at,



something that made painting different from video art or photography. It had a way of collapsing time, and what I was doing by working with these old images was bringing them back into the present. What would happen if I combined images from different times? So that was the problem I set for myself right at the beginning. At a certain point I did a group of four paintings that very literally addressed that problem. There was Leonardo da Vinci's *Tuscan Landscape* from 1519, which was his first known drawing. It was spectacularly beautiful and quite ambiguous, a perfect blend of positive and negative shapes and lines. Then there was the little Jan Breughel drawing from 1619: we have a Belgian for the 17th century and an Italian from the 16th century. There was also a German painter named Johann Christian Reinhart, a lovely image of an artist drawing underneath a big leafy tree from the 18th century. And this was the first time I used a Van Gogh drawing to represent the 19th century. It was my United Nations painting: four artists, four centuries, four nationalities.

*BC: When you project an image, how do you determine which marks you'll pay attention to and which ones you'll choose to ignore? There must be some that are irresistible.*

*MT: I work fairly loosely, relative to the projection. There is a kind of freedom to the traced mark. I think people don't always see the notion of copying or tracing in the work because I handle it so casually. I do the selecting when I'm deciding which area of a projection I'll use.*

*BC: And your colour choice? You work like Chuck Close where you completely lay down one colour and then you add another colour. Why that method?*

*MT: It came as a response to the flower paintings. I wanted the systemic aspect of the work to be more obvious, and it seemed that by assigning each layer of the painting a particular colour, it would be easier for the viewer to start seeing the conglomeration of lines and to separate out the group of green lines from the group of yellow lines. I'll mess with that sometimes. I'll go back with the ground colour as the top layer, which starts to knit together the whole picture.*

*BC: I look at a piece like *Wheee!*, a fabulous, joyful painting, and it occurs to me that it's closer to the Mondrian of*

*Broadway Boogie Woogie than it is to Jackson Pollock and his painterly skeining. The point I'm making is that when you get up close to *Wheee!* you realize how careful is the mark making. It isn't the concatenation of colours that it may appear from a distance.*

*MT: It's what I'm hoping will happen with those paintings. As much as I try to have them hover between abstraction and representation, I'm also aiming to have them in-between the gestural and the programmatic so that what you think you see is not necessarily what you see. You have to reconsider. It's one way of slowing down looking.*

*BC: That's a lovely notion. So you're enamoured of the in-between?*

*MT: I guess. I'm not sure exactly what that means. But I'm aware that I do occupy an in-between space, between painting and drawing, abstraction and representation, and, in the floral works, between Holland and Canada.*

*BC: Now, what about work like *Shoulder Fly* or *Mmmmm*—this last title seems a confection because the painting looks good enough to eat. But both these works have a reduced, close-valued palette and they are also much more open than previous paintings you had done.*

*MT: Those are blow-ups of my own sketches. So instead of working from other artists, I'm quoting myself. While they have their origin in studies, they end up being large paintings. Initially, I wasn't sure why I was painting them, but they seemed very compelling as images and I wanted to see what they would look like. But they did not lend themselves at all to any kind of layering. I found myself suddenly thrust back in time to a period when I used to paint interiors very illusionistically, so all those skills had to come back into being, because when you blew up the little brushstrokes, they started to obtain this interesting three-dimensionality. It was only after doing a number of these that I realized they were the other side of the coin of the layered landscape work. Because if, on one hand, I was using the grammar of representation to create abstract paintings, here I was taking sketches that were completely abstract but using the language and the tricks of illusionistic painting in order to complete them. In representing abstraction and abstracting representation, I found myself in-between again. ■*