

ARTS *Atlantic*

SUMMER 2001
no 68



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For retail display until Sept. 30 \$6.95

Monica Tap

CLIFF EYLAND

Amazingly, when a similar poll was conducted in other countries, Komar and Melamid discovered that throughout the world people want exactly the same stuff, with local variations... A global majority of respondents also shared Americans' aversion to abstract art. The exception was the Dutch, who disliked everything you might have expected to find in a typical Dutch realistic painting. They loved abstract geometrical patterns instead.

— Zinovy Zink describing the results of a set of professionally conducted polls commissioned by the Russian artists Komar and Melamid in "Wanted: Komar and Melamid" *Modern Painters*, Spring 1999, p.66.

NSCAD-educated Monica Tap is of Dutch extraction. She was born in 1962 and raised in Edmonton, Alberta. Tap began her career with work based on rich still life paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, especially the work of the Dutch seventeenth-century painter Rachel Ruysch: "Tap has a personal attachment to the neglected works of her long-dead countrywoman and a feminist interest in their revival ..." — Susan Gibson Garvey in an essay for *Monica Tap Reprise* (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery 1996). In her more recent work, Tap incorporates Baroque landscape drawings into her paintings using a layer technique that more or less effaces the original slide-projected landscape (re)drawings under layer upon layer of overpainted images.

The effort at historical recovery in these paintings makes Tap's Dutch connection plain, but her more recent work, based on reproductions from the book *The Northern Landscape, Flemish, Dutch and British Drawings from the Courtauld Collections* by Dennis Farr and William Bradford [London: Trefoil Books 1986] is less obviously Dutch. In these pieces she traces multiple projections of historical European landscape drawings onto a single canvas. The result is a dense web of lines within which the source drawings can seldom be picked out.

Recently, in "Lifetime Brush-Marked By a Child's-Eye View" [*The National Post* 30 Jan 1999, N.P. Weekend, p.5] Tap wrote about the impression she had of an Edmonton Art Gallery painting she saw as a child called *The Approaching Storm*, by the nineteenth-century artist Adolphe Vogt. She thought it 'formulaic' and 'academic,' and yet, "When I think of Vogt's painting today," she continues, "I see a good example of some of the more melodramatic tendencies in Romantic landscape

painting. Also, his figures are recognizably stock characters that can be found ambling through countless landscapes since the mid-1600s. I know this because these same charming figures lurk in the dense layers that make up my own work."

Tap's painting is as much a part of the recent tradition of so-called 'layer' or 'process' painting as it is related to her Dutchness. Nova Scotian Gerald Ferguson, and several Alberta-based artists — including Eric Cameron, Jeffrey Spalding and Angela Inglis — make or have made layer paintings that are linked to process and conceptual art.

'Process painting' grew out of the gesturalism of Abstract Expressionist painting, particularly that of Jackson Pollock. Debates about the Abstract Expressionist gesture led to a succession of artists, including Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Robert Ryman, using various media to make art that concerned itself with processes of art production.

A 'layer painter' breaks down the components of a work into discrete units of paint layers the way a post-impressionist painter such as Georges Seurat used discrete primary-coloured dots to make a painting. Layers are added as if counting out a procedure (in fact, layer painters Eric Cameron and Bruce Campbell do literally count paint layers), or as if to make visible the amount of time taken up in the work's making. Layer painting can show counting and evidence of time passing like a clock.

Process art highlighted industrial working methods, but in more recent work — not only Tap's Baroque layering, but also Gerald Ferguson's and Eric Cameron's increasingly fraught layer painting — process painting



Fieldwork, Gallery 111, Winnipeg Photo courtesy the artist

has taken an existentialist and humanistic turn as iconic content competes for attention with evidence of the layering process.

Monica Tap's layer painting adds an imagistic surplus to an art that usually revels in a scarcity of imagery. Early layer painters such as Jeffrey Spalding and Patrick Kelly made monochromes, whereas more recent layer painters often use charged imagery.

Layer painting can make the artist's personal touch disappear: Gerald Ferguson, for example, employs assistants to make his work under supervision. (Ferguson has even made paintings with instructions to an 'end user' to 'maintain' the painting by doing their own layering.) Tap's touch, however, can't be imitated without being 'forged.'

Yve-Alain Bois insists that process art, layer painting's antecedent, needn't be allegorized into an art 'without qualities.' *Like the hunt for sources that used to take place in literary studies, or the search for the motif in art history...the narrative of process establishes a primary meaning, an ultimate, originating referent that cuts off the interpretative*

chain. That is, an aesthetic of causality is reintroduced, a positivist monologue that we thought modern art was supposed to have gotten rid of: A (paintbrush) + B (paint) + C (support) + D (the manner in which these are combined) give E (painting). There would be nothing left over in this equation. Given E, ABCD could be deciphered, absolutely. By making the artist a kind of engineer who solves a problem of many parameters in his work..., the discussion of process in art is refitted to this heuristic mold. The object of this critical discourse then would seem to be: given the solution (the painter's 'eureka'), find the problem.

Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1990), p.216

At its iconic extremes – in David Salle, Sigmar Polke and late Picabia – a layered or transparent palimpsest painting technique produces dissonant effects that historically contradict layer painting's minimalist origins, but in Monica Tap's paintings the strict procedural order of process art lends an obsessional gravity to all sorts of loaded imagery.

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INTERVIEW *with Monica Tap*

Cliff Eyland: Can you talk about the work’s Dutch connection?

Monica Tap: There are several Dutch connections in this work. Most obviously, many of the artists whose works I reference are Dutch (Gaspar van Wittel, Herbert Swanevelt, Jan Lievens, Paul Bril, etc.). While I have used other sources, it intrigues me that many of the conventions of landscape painting developed in seventeenth-century Holland. The word ‘landscape’ itself derives from the Dutch ‘landschap.’ Many Dutch artists in this period travelled to Italy, where they impressed other artists with their typically Northern attention to detail and careful observation of nature. For example, Claude Lorraine was influenced by the work of Dutch and Flemish artists living in Rome around 1600 – and even roomed for a time with Swanevelt. (Swanevelt’s own work was in turn significantly influenced by Lorraine’s approach.) Landscape developed into a subject in its own right during this period; it no longer served merely as a backdrop for an allegorical or religious theme. My interest is in the point of origin of this genre and in the significant mutations it underwent in its early history. For me, as a painter living in a country with a long-standing commitment to landscape as subject, and as a painter whose own origins are in Holland, the connection resonated strongly.

CE: What about the prairies and your recent work?

MT: A couple of anecdotes may best answer this question. Last summer while travelling between Red Deer and Edmonton, I was surprised to notice that the passing landscape bore more than a passing

resemblance to the early European panoramic landscape drawings that I had been working from. Both are characterized by vast spaces that dwarf but do not overwhelm their inhabitants. People, their homes, farms, towns and roads are miniaturized by that immense space.

I have another memory of riding in the back seat of my parents’ Pontiac when I was a kid, watching the prairies roll past through a blurred screen of trees, my focus fixed on the distant horizon so that the narrow band of trees bordering the field would blur as we drove by. Different layers of focus and detail described the space (and traced our movement through that space). After completing the first few works in this series, I noticed that some of the paintings reminded me of what it looked like to watch the prairie scenery roll by at car speed.

CE: What about the “charming figures lurking in my own work” you allude to in your recent *National Post* article?

MT: Tiny figures populate almost all early landscape drawings. Little figures cross bridges, tend cattle, haul fishing nets, relax under serpentine trees, and sometimes commit crimes in the corners of the drawings. Close examination of original drawings and early drawing instruction books reveals a transnational and transgenerational ‘clip art’ of stock characters. In referencing the drawings of this period I have often transcribed these figures into the dense layers of my work. It pleases me to know that sustained study of an apparently abstract painting will reward the patient viewer, who may discover a frolicking dog, an observant rabbit, a tiny traveller, or, most likely, an artist quietly sitting, drawing the landscape.

the grammar of early landscape drawing...

CE: Can you talk a little bit about your technical method of tracing projections?

MT: In paint, I layer drawings done by different hands in different centuries, bringing together images from different times within the same space. I assign to each layer or drawing a colour, and to each painting or group of paintings a plan that indicates the layering sequence; a sequence that may be curatorial, historical, aesthetic, or happily random. As a post-conceptual artist I allow myself to stray from the strict dictums of process-based art. I am buoyed by Sol LeWit's statement that "Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or a series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined."

Aware of past pedagogical technique in which students learned to draw by steadily copying the work of the masters, I (ironically?) situate myself as novice to the grammar of early landscape drawing, enacting the ritual of copying while simultaneously getting it 'all wrong'. My choices of colour, medium, square format, scale, and my decision to layer the 'copies' to the point of indecipherability belong to contemporary practice. I use projections to facilitate this process, to suspend aesthetic choice while painting, and to keep myself quite literally 'in the dark' regarding the outcome of each layer until it is complete.

CE: How do you associate your work with the tradition of so-called 'layer' or 'process' painting?

I see the tradition of process painting as a source for the work, much as the tradition of seventeenth-century landscape drawing is a source for the work. Initially I adopted a process-based approach for purely pragmatic reasons – the oil paint required drying time between layers and setting out instructions and a schedule made it easier to remember what I intended to do next. My association with the tradition is, I suppose, respectfully cavalier – working procedurally provides a framework and structure in which I can explore questions of paint, space and history. My work differs from 1970s process art in the specificity of its fine art referents (marginal though they are) and in my continued engagement with the pleasure principle in painting, especially in finding ways to play with the notion of the 'authentic mark.'

CE: Could you characterize the look of your work?

MT: This is how I tried to describe it in an artist's statement: "My work hovers at the threshold between abstraction and representation – the suspended moment when an abstract collection of dots and dashes coalesces into a recognizable image. Ideally the paintings also operate at a metaphoric threshold between past and present – obscure bits of the past collected to construct a present that includes memory but refuses nostalgia."

This interview conducted by post, e-mail and fax between Guelph and Winnipeg in 1999.



above: *Rose*, 46 x 46 1999 Photo courtesy the artist
 right: *Untitled*, 80 x 80 1999 Photo courtesy the artist





above: *Two Fields*, 80 x 80, 1999 Photo courtesy the artist
 right: *Journey:red*, 46 x 46 1998 Photo courtesy the artist

