

Monica Tap: Views from the train: One-second Hudson and other works

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Observation in Motion

by Sarah Beveridge*

In 2006, Monica Tap completed a residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York. It was at this time that the artist took the train from Grand Central Station along the Hudson River to visit the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, New York. *One-second Hudson* renders fifteen fleeting moments from this passing landscape. In this new series of paintings, the artist continues her exploration into questions of time and representation in painting while offering a new perception in paint.

Tap's fascination with landscapes hurtling past a window has early roots:

I have a 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 the 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. [1]

In *One-second Hudson*, the images in motion are captured through the window of the fast-moving train by a low-resolution video from a digital still camera at fifteen frames per second, and then distilled into a sequence of still images. [2] To select the images, Tap methodically viewed the recorded footage over and over, searching for a single second that would yield fifteen consecutive video stills compelling enough to paint. What she found most interesting were "the parts of the video where there was a lot of change happening (towns,

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houses, the river).” [3] Tap explains that the rather primitive nature of the video function on her digital camera resulted in a kind of technical failure that provided some of the most interesting footage for the making of the paintings. In these visual fragments, ordinary things like trees, cars and distant hills are far removed from their original representation. At one-fifteenth of one-second, these image stills assume strange and ambiguous configurations.

In Tap’s painting process, the very technology that she utilizes is mimicked: a split-second image is cut short and stopped in time. Tension is created between our visual perception of time relative to a moving image and the more traditional and labour-intensive system of painting on canvas used to represent it. In her studio, the room is dark; warm light emanating from the projector illuminates the stretched canvas on the wall. Tap uses a data projector as one of her visual tools. A tactile experience begins as she traces lines in an anticipated unknown exploration of the image. Tap affirms that “the projector is used mostly as a distancing device; it’s a way of separating making and viewing, forcing me into a direct translation of projected light into paint (making me in some ways into an extremely slow, low-tech ink jet printer, I suppose).”[4] There is a sensory relationship to place, a transference of time and space that is occurring in this magical transformation, as line and colour formulates on the painting surface. This process of seeing, as described by Walter Benjamin, highlights this intersection of technology and the human eye: “The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones.” [5] It is in this study that a moment between representation and abstraction from the real world is conceptualized, providing a slowed experience of our perceptions of space and our surroundings. In this sequence of enlarged frames, Tap reconstitutes the past as part of a meaningful dialogue with the present. The viewers’ experience, as well as the work itself, represents a duality of illusion that simultaneously suggests an interpretation of both the ephemeral past and the present.

In previous series, Tap referenced historical painters; she ambitiously studied and reflected on works by Leonardo da Vinci and Vincent Van Gogh, as well as 17th century Dutch painter Rachel Ruysch. More recently, the life and work of artist Homer Watson inspired an exhibition titled *Séance* for the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery in early 2007, which travelled to New York in June. In *One-second Hudson*, Tap removes herself from historical interpretations of

past paintings and connects with present surroundings and experience, revisiting a landscape once explored by early American painters. The historical references are present even though not explicit in the work. As Tap explains, “Highway 69 and the Hudson River bear strong connections to national landscape traditions on both sides of the border—the Group of Seven in the first case, and the Hudson River School in the latter.”[6] Tap’s series *Highway 69*, where she travelled into Ontario’s near north, corresponds to the rustic scenery popularized in the early 1900s by the Group of Seven. The same pursuit of wild places also preoccupied early American painters, who collected visual data from these often extreme and untouched environments.

“During these expeditions, sketches and memories would be recorded and the paintings would be rendered later; the Hudson River School paintings reflect three themes of America in the 19th century: discovery, exploration, and settlement.” [7] From these nationalistic landscapes, Tap then turned her attention to the aesthetics of Claude Monet. She identified with Monet’s five-colour palette as a starting point for *One-second Hudson*, which consists of cobalt blue, cadmium yellow, chrome oxide green, rose madder, and vermillion. When asked about the relationship to Monet, Tap admits that there is an incidental connection to his series of “impressions,” as he is a perceptual painter similarly concerned with optical matters. His perception of time is reflected in on-going studies of the same subject at different times of day, such as his *Haystacks* series and the light of his subsequent *Sunrises*: “certain effects of light only last for a few minutes, thus the canvases documenting such ephemera received attention for no more than a few minutes a day.”[8]

Tap’s practice plays with interpretations and isolations, extensions and accelerations, enlargements and reductions, the appropriation of imagery, and questions of authorship in an open space of influence. Each series expands on the next, as the artist embraces and negotiates the terrain between landscape and abstraction, and between painting and other media.[9] As one encounters these paintings, presented in chronological order, one responds not only to the aesthetic seduction of these fragments, but to the stillness of time as interpreted: “Works of art exist simultaneously in the past, from which we draw them, and in the present, in which we see them, and each of us parses the formula of time past and time present in our own way.”[10] In this sphere of collapsed traditions, Tap’s work highlights a new perspective in contemporary painting, and enhances a way of seeing, a more conscious awareness of our immediate surroundings. She reminds us to take pause and investigate, if only for a second.

Notes

1. Cliff Eylan. "Interview with Monica Tap," conducted by post, e-mail and fax between Guelph and Winnipeg, in *Arts Atlantic*, 1999, p.18-19.
2. Margaret Thatcher. *Séance*, Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery, January 2007.
3. Gary Michael Dault. "Through a train window and onto a canvas," review in "Gallery Going," *The Globe and Mail*, December 29, 2007, R10.
4. Monica Tap. E-mail correspondence, *more thoughts on painting*, 2007 (unpublished).
5. Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Film, Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford, 1985) p.690.
6. Monica Tap. E-mail correspondence, *more thoughts on painting*, 2007 (unpublished).
7. John K. Howat. *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987).
8. John House, et al. *Monet in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) p.142.
9. Monica Tap. Artist Statement, 2007 (unpublished), <http://www.monicatap.com/about.html>.
10. Adam Gopnick. "The Mindful Museum," *The Walrus*, February 23, 2008, p.3.