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Alex Livingston: The Painted World

by Susan Gibson Garvey

In Alex Livingston's painting *Young Alex Points Out the Exact Spot That He Saw the Tiger*, the boldly delineated image of a boy points to the yellow outline of a tiger apparently lurking in the steam behind a hot water radiator. This work was part of his graduating exhibition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1983, an exhibition filled with large, figurative, colour-saturated canvases that confirmed Livingston's commitment to imaginative expression in paint. It also marked him as one of a handful of graduates who chose to disregard NSCAD's 15-year identification with conceptual, minimal and process-oriented art in favour of a very different aesthetic. Vigorous, expressive works such as these singled him out as a painter to watch. Indeed, not long after graduating, he was invited to participate in the nationally-touring neo-expressionist exhibition INNOVASCOTIA, and in 1985 his huge, vibrant painting *Haven* (a tree filled with jewel-like birds) was selected to grace the cover of the Nova Scotia telephone directory, bringing his work to broad public attention across the province. Such early exposure helped launch the first period of Livingston's career, one characterized by gorgeous, painterly images of trees, gardens, birds and animals that were greeted with enthusiasm by image-starved viewers.

His early success is all the more remarkable when one considers that it was almost by accident that Livingston became a painter. Raised in Oakville, Ontario, the youngest of four children, Livingston was by his own admission an average student — a bit of a dreamer and not particularly motivated to study. Even though he did enjoy art classes, and continued to draw for pleasure after

leaving school, it simply did not occur to him to consider art as a career. After high school he tried several different jobs and eventually hitchhiked across Canada to British Columbia, where he found work for a while in the forest service. He does note that the experience of working in the coastal mountains — hiking through the rain forest and flying in helicopters from the ocean's edge to the rugged interior terrain — completely changed his awareness of the natural world. "After that," he says, "I was never indifferent to nature."

Livingston had returned to Oakville and was working as a kitchen installer when he and a couple of artistically-inclined friends came up with the idea of trying for art school. Among the application packages that they obtained from colleges across the country, the one from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design seemed to them to be the most appealing — largely because the entry portfolio tasks were intriguing and unconventional, and no previous art experience was required. So they all applied to NSCAD and, somewhat to their surprise, were accepted. Even then, Livingston almost didn't make it. He had a serious motorcycle accident on the way to Nova Scotia and only after months of recovery did he finally arrive at the college. Once there, however, he found his métier. "It was an absolute joy," he comments, "I loved the foundation year. Solving visual problems was very gratifying — organizing reality in two and three dimensions, manipulating materials and ideas…"

Livingston's enthusiasm was not dampened by the fact that at the time NSCAD was in a period of ideological conflict. Professors favouring socio-critical and conceptual art clashed with those working to reintroduce "painterly" painting into the curriculum, and students were often caught up in the dispute. Livingston's ability to survive and thrive in the sometimes-acrimonious atmosphere was due in part to his sheer delight in studio classes and in the daily discoveries made manipulating paint. Despite comments from some quarters that painting was a "suspect space," he was encouraged by his studio professors (such as the late John Clark) and he absorbed the recent examples afforded by inter-national neo-Expressionist and New Image painters such as Leon Golub, Francisco Clemente and Susan Rothenberg. His own growing conviction that painting was a legitimate creative act that echoed the inherent creativity of the

Haven
1985
oil on canvas
238.7 x 226.6 cm

collection: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS

natural universe allowed him to pass through the NSCAD debate relatively unscathed.

As a result, Livingston the painter quickly found his feet, as demonstrated by the bold, imaginative confidence of his graduating exhibition. However, the intellectual challenge of his time at NSCAD — the fundamental question about the nature and value of painting itself — had also embedded itself in his consciousness and would surface cyclically throughout the next quarter century, demanding answers.

Untitled
1987
oil on canvas
122.0 x 122.0 cm

Scanning a painter's career (even one still unfolding), one looks for patterns — for related clusters of concerns or recurring elements in form, technique or subject matter — in an attempt to discover the particular constellation of practices and preoccupations that characterizes the oeuvre. Current critical thinking tends to view the task of looking for underlying consistencies or unfolding narratives as foolish, given the random, fragmented and contingent nature of existence. I am not persuaded that the attempt is vain or useless, however. In fact, the same observations and perceptions that enable us to identify at least some of the characteristics that mark another human being as uniquely themselves also enable us to examine an artist's body of work to similar effect. The pleasure of looking at complex structures — even structures as complicated as individual lives and individual oeuvres — derives from the expectation that there is indeed a structure of relational elements to be observed, however loosely-associated the parts might be and however provisional and incomplete one's grasp of the whole. I think that Livingston's studio practice is similarly concerned with the pleasure of seeking structures — structures both in the natural universe and in the analogous universe of painting.

At first it is not easy to discern any kind of a pattern to Livingston's twenty-five years of production. His work is rife with dualities, oppositions and contrasts — of representation and abstraction, of the natural and human-made worlds, of the microcosm and the macrocosm, of all-over patternings and the central iconic image, of thickly-worked surfaces in saturated colours and flat, simplified forms in monochromatic hues, of multiple small canvases and singular large ones. Each period of focused production seems to have led to a time of

uncertainty and questioning before the work has taken off again — usually in quite a different direction. Nevertheless, within this broad range of styles and subject matter and apparently random directions, one can indeed trace a consistent sensibility and underlying set of concerns.

In the years immediately after leaving art school Livingston painted trees and gardens, often with Eden-like characteristics. His *Vistas* exhibition presented dramatic perspectival views of ornamental gardens in oversized canvases dripping with spontaneous brushwork and saturated fields of colour. Recalling the visual delight of Matisse or late Monet as well as Richard Diebenkorn's lyrical abstraction, the panoramas of receding avenues of cypresses, of geometrically trimmed topiary, of fountains, trellises and bowers were filled with pleasurable sensuousness. But, having demonstrated his ability to handle the long perspective of the garden scenes, Livingston quickly abandoned it in order to zoom in on individual flowers. He invented stylized emblematic blossoms and buds, painting them in bold, heraldic configurations that curved sensuously across the canvas, recalling a range of cultural sources, from Celtic illuminations to Islamic arabesques. Then, as if probing towards the basic elements of biological life, the twisting vines and stems of his flowers metamorphosed into tiny seedlings, thence to protozoa and spermatozoa, and, reaching inside the cell itself, to the double helix of DNA. In a few short years of intense production, Livingston managed to collapse the oppositions of micro- and macrocosm into a fascinating painted world of analogous forms: stalks, chromosomes, ribbons, waves, sperm, snakes.

Twist
1989
oil on canvas
141.0 x 179.0 cm

It seems that Livingston's primary motive at this time was to find meaningful "content" to parallel his engagement with the sensuous physicality of paint. His permissions came not from art theory but from literature and from readings in myth and archetype (the works of Carl Jung, Mercea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, among others) that encouraged a popular re-enchantment with symbolic imagery. In fact Livingston found his subject matter in the rich and varied feast of nature; but it is nature viewed through culture: not untamed wilderness but cultivated gardens; plants and animals not in their natural habitats but woven into heraldic patterns; nature not "raw" but "cooked," acculturated into a set of signs and symbols.

Aesop's Hillside
1993
oil on canvas
182.9 x 138.1 cm

collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, purchased with support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program, 2005

In the fall of 1992, Livingston undertook an artist's residency in Glasgow, Scotland, where he acquainted himself with the wonderful historical and decorative art works in the famous Burrell Collection: intricate weavings of mediaeval tapestries and seventeenth-century embroideries filled with depictions of birds, animals and fantastical beasts on *milefiore* patterned backgrounds, and Persian miniature landscapes, with their vertical perspectives of serried ranks of hills in jewel-like patterns and colours. Upon his return to Halifax, he made a number of works which drew directly on the visual stimulus of the Burrell Collection, of which *Aesop's Hillside* 1993 is perhaps the best example. The vertical orientation and "all-over" distribution of animal and vegetal forms in this work led to a new series of paintings that Livingston exhibited at the Owens Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, in 1994. These were large all-over compositions of vaguely biological forms and gestures that seem to float, change shape and recombine in the gravity-less space of the picture. As in the work *Big Blue*, the biomorphic elements burgeon, attenuate, suggest familiar shapes — body parts, internal organs, flowers, gonads, planets, parts of animals — but mutate into other less familiar forms across a painted surface that itself modulates in such a way that distance seems unfixed. No longer clearly referencing specific art historical and cultural sources, these new paintings were generated through a very different process from his previous work.

Livingston describes this process as akin to automatism: one starts with a mark, a line or gesture, embellishing it intuitively until it takes on a particular form. "The mark or line is the generative unit — the 'egg and sperm' — of form," he comments, "How do you take that initial abstract gesture and provide it with representational meaning?" In watching what the imagination does, given certain kinds of triggers, Livingston was surprised how small or tentative the mark can be – how little you need, in fact — for the imagination to get going. Essentially, these paintings are as much about Livingston's probing of his own mental and visual processes as they are about external subject-matter. As in the Burgess Shale — the famous fossil-filled deposits discovered in the early 20th century that revealed an astonishing range of previously unknown life-forms,

Big Blue

Heartland

both ancestors of currently known species and hundreds of evolutionary dead ends — so Livingston's biomorphic works also involved a kind of evolutionary trial-and-error process in mark-making and imaginative creation.

After this exhibition, Livingston took a year's sabbatical (he had been teaching at NSCAD since 1985) and went to London, England, to study for his Master's degree at Chelsea School of Art. Here, after several false starts, he found a new direction for the biomorphic imagery. *Heartland* 1995 presents a vessel-shaped central image within which the energetic spirals, serpentine coils and wandering strings of his biomorphic paintings take on new identities, at once reminiscent of mitochondrial meanderings inside a living cell and, at the opposite end of the scale, of the galaxies and gaseous nebulae of outer space. Several versions of *Heartland* followed, large and small, and in the smaller versions in particular one can easily imagine the form of a human head in the oval outline; one might even interpret the internal coils and spirals as representing flashing neurons in the mind of someone thinking or dreaming. In later exhibitions, Livingston would sometimes show these essentially abstract works along side representational animal or flower images, using these juxtapositions to underscore what he considers to be the dualities at work in human perceptions of nature.

In London, Livingston also discovered illustrated antiquarian taxonomies — books which attempt to categorize all known variants of flora and fauna — and here he found his next clear path of enquiry, resulting in works as visually different from the all-over biomorphic paintings as those were from his previous emblematic flowers and snakes. Back in Halifax, in the library of Saint Mary's University, he found a facsimile copy of the 17th century lexicographer and zoologist Edward Topsell's work, *A History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects*, and was immediately drawn to the little woodcut prints illustrating the text, images that ranged from realistic renderings of familiar animals to fanciful depictions of fabulous creatures. He enlarged the printed images and translated them into individual paintings, delineating the animals in black oil paint on brushy grey-and-white grounds. Grouped together in multi-paneled installations (often on a wall painted deep red), the animals take on many resonances: his-

PAGE 54:

Big Blue
1993
oil on canvas
218.4 x 172.7 cm

collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS, gift of the artist

PAGE 55:

Heartland
1995
oil on canvas
183.0 x 152.4 cm

collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS, gift of the artist

installation view of
A History of Four-Footed Beasts and Other Curiosities
1997
Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS

torical, mythological, scientific and allegorical.

Visually, the somewhat dry black-and-white delineations of animal prints were a complete turnaround from Livingston's previously lush, painterly mark-making. But he intended the animal paintings to be exhibited together in one area of a gallery, while an adjacent area would be filled with multiple variants of his abstract *Heartland*-derived works, which were rapidly evolving into small, rather carefully controlled rectangular abstractions. His purpose was to contrast different mechanisms for understanding and ordering nature, from the analytical to the intuitive. He went on to emphasize this relationship by permanently pairing individual animal images with their own abstract canvases, accentuating that juxtaposition in the title, as in *Greyhound and Abstraction* 1988. The contrast between the plain black-and-white illustrational animal and the colourful, almost tartan-like weaving of red, yellow, blue, white and black brushmarks in the adjacent abstraction underscored the different frameworks (scientific, allegorical and so forth) within which we consider the natural world.

Greyhound and Abstraction
1998
oil on canvas
59.7 x 127.0 cm

collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS, purchased with support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program, 2005

However, just as his viewers began to grasp the analogous meanings between Livingston's stylistic choices and his subject matter, he executed another turnabout. His next set of images took as their subject matter not the works of nature but the works of humankind. These are what Livingston calls his "object" paintings (1999-2001). All at once (it seems) the artist's gaze, which had been so concerned with the teeming variety of biological life in multiple arrangements of animal, vegetal and cellular forms, was now turned upon prosaic household items like jugs, boots, scissors, umbrellas and chairs. Not naturalia but artificialia — and pretty mundane artificialia at that! Such a dramatic (and apparently arbitrary) switch in subject matter raised the question of whether subject matter was not in fact his main concern but merely the pretext for a more fundamental line of enquiry.

Although his earlier career involved probing the rich subject matter of the natural world in an attempt to deliver "content" that would adequately match (and justify) his powerful engagement with the sensuous, expressive application of paint, it is evident that Livingston has been at least as much concerned with the nature of painting as he is with the painting of nature. Through his work with

the woodcuts and engravings of plants and animals he became fascinated with the printed line itself, and with how to translate that line into paint. In the "object" paintings he turned his attention from the antique bestiaries and pattern books to the mundane wood- and metal-engravings illustrating 19th century catalogues of commercial and household products. Livingston's blown-up images of jugs, clocks and other commonplace things demonstrate that what really interests him are the enlarged black lines — bold, ragged, sensuous and immediate — that make up the images, and their new role as active, painterly marks on the canvas.

Enlarging the image of the printed mark to huge proportions allows it to take on its own form: not so much a line describing the contour of some other object, but a thing in itself, liberated from its duty of description. In order to facilitate the process of abstracting lines, Livingston began digitally manipulating his source imagery, scanning the catalogue images into his computer, enlarging and restructuring them and basing his paintings on the printouts. This somewhat mechanical process eventually resulted in his elegant "water and land" series, canvases consisting entirely of painted black lines reduced to simple cyphers — translations of the original printed marks describing the textures of different kinds of water or land (derived from catalogue images of ships at sea or farm implements in the landscape). These doubly-distilled linear configurations nevertheless recall "rough wave," "ploughed land," "calm water" or "grassy meadow" by the most slender means (including a simple blue or green wash underlying the all-over pattern of marks). What results is a refined tension between the representational and abstract; a convincing demonstration of the autonomy of the painted mark, even as it poignantly evokes the rich varieties of natural forms on the surface of the earth.

In recent years Livingston's experiments with the autonomous mark have resulted in "pure" abstractions in black and white, employing various widths and lengths of energetic brushmarks on a plain white ground. He comments that eliminating colour and using only linear gestures is "astringent; it clears the mind" and notes that he is once again working with "the basic DNA of painting" — the brushmark. It is interesting how contested that simple element has been in the recent history of western painting, how so many late 20th century

Water and Land Paintings (series 2)
2001-02
18 parts, 20.3 x 25.4 cm each

collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS, purchased with support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program, 2004

artists worked to distance themselves from the personal brushmark, believing it to be suspect, contaminated with Modernist egoism. However, it seems to me that what keeps Livingston going is precisely a guiltless pleasure in the sensuous rewards of the painted mark — something that, combined with his purposeful enquiries, seems neither self-indulgent nor irrelevant.

The little worlds of activity in the indeterminate fields of Livingston's recent black and white canvases represent an enquiry into the behaviour of paint, and an ongoing engagement with the kinds of emotional and figurative resonances that even the most random aggregation of marks can generate. These compositions are not, of course, entirely random, however open and spontaneous the artist has been. There are no accidental drips or splashes (the signature rhetoric of much abstract expressionism). These grey snakes, black squiggles and smeared dashes of off-white tend to pull away from the edges of the canvas and, as if attracted through some internal gravity, weave around and through each other, reminding us of — here we go again — the coming together of matter, as in atoms, cells, star-breeding galaxies or (symbolically) ideas in the human mind.

Untitled 1
2007
oil on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm

Currently Livingston's production includes computer-generated prints created with a digital brush. He stays mainly with a monochromatic palette and abstract gestures, but it is interesting how many of these latest images recall the drawings and paintings of interweaving flower stalks, ribbons and cellular structures that he was producing so many years ago. The progress of his oeuvre is not a linear narrative, but one that spirals around and catches up with itself at different levels of expression and experience. As in most artistic careers, there are also false starts and lines of enquiry that never resolve themselves into paintings. But what seems to me to be most relevant is that from his earliest instinctively expressive works to his latest more measured experiments with mark and gesture, Livingston has never let go of the deep analogical relationship that he perceives between the creative activity of painting and the self-propelled forces of the universe. His ongoing fascination with these complex parallel structures provides a profound satisfaction, engaging the eye, the mind and the heart in equal measure.

(Parts of this text have been adapted from Susan Gibson Garvey's catalogue essay for the mid-career survey exhibition **Alex Livingston: Paintings 1985-2005**, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax 2006, with permission)