



ANOTHER ROADSIDE ABSTRACTION David Garneau and Monica Tap



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David Garneau and Monica Tap



ORGANIZED BY THE *Dunlop Art Gallery* CURATED BY *Jeff Nye*



*Dunlop Art Gallery*  
Regina Public Library  
2311 – 12th Avenue  
P.O. Box 2311  
Regina, Saskatchewan  
Canada, S4P 3Z5  
  
(306) 777-6040  
dunlop@reginalibrary.ca  
dunlopartgallery.org

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ORGANIZED BY THE *Dunlop Art Gallery, Central Branch*

CURATED BY *Jeff Nye*

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## THE ROAD HAS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE. AS IT EXTENDS BEYOND THE HORIZON, THE ROAD SEDUCES US WITH ITS UNIQUE BRAND OF FREEDOM TOWARD THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHER CULTURES, AND THE THRILLING PANORAMAS OF NEW LANDSCAPES.

Canada's romance with the road is as old as the colonial drive westward and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, something that Canadian painters had an active hand in promoting. At the same time that the first railways were being established around the world, the medium of photography was being introduced – both transformed the perception of time and space. *Another Roadside Abstraction* takes a detailed look at the historical ties between painting, the road and photographic technology.

David Garneau and Monica Tap were, of course, instrumental in the development of this exhibition. *Another Roadside Abstraction* has benefited from their intellectual rigour, their commitment to studio practice, their passion for painting, and their drive to advance the discourse around painting's condition in our times. Thanks to David and Monica for their professionalism and generosity during the research and development of this exhibition.

Dunlop Art Gallery is also thankful for Robert Enright's brilliant contribution to this publication. It has been an honour to work with a writer who is so passionately engaged in the development of Canadian artists and critical voices for the arts in Canada.

For design and production of the catalogue, we thank Danielle Tuchelt and Dwayne Dobson from Combine Design and Communications, and Friesens Corporation. We are also grateful to Don Hall and Trevor Hopkin from the University of Regina's Photography Department

as well as to Rick Johnston Photography. We extend our gratitude to Mysteria Art Gallery and Wynick/Tuck Gallery for assisting us with access to some of the works in the exhibition.

The members of the Dunlop Art Gallery staff have worked very hard to bring this exhibition together, so special mention must be made of Corey Bryson, Joyce Clark, Catherine Livingstone, and Sonia Parra. Thanks as well to Regina Public Library Director, Jeff Barber, and Deputy Director, Julie McKenna, for their guidance and support of this project. Thanks are extended to our team of installers: Colby Avram, Shane Crerar, Ben Holbrow and Jeff Morton. Thanks as well to the Dunlop's former Director/Curator, Amanda Cachia, whose advice helped to shape the early direction of this exhibition. We are also grateful for the support of our gallery facilitators, who respond so well to our audience's reactions and questions: Margaret Bessai, Terri Ekvall, Brette Gabel, Janell Ranae Rempel, and Ashley Tuchscherer.

The Dunlop Art Gallery is also grateful to our core funders: the Saskatchewan Arts Board and the Canada Council for the Arts.

*Jeff Nye, Assistant Curator*

# ANOTHER ROADSIDE ABSTRACTION

## Intersections

Beginnings are hard to locate, especially when looking at paintings that present moments of passage. Does *Another Roadside Abstraction* begin with a quiet still moment, standing in front of a painting – eyes surveying the textures, colours and gestures left behind by the artist? Or does it begin with the sensation of driving through a landscape while attempting to observe the objects and spaces that are racing past? From either point of departure the paintings of Monica Tap and David Garneau speed into the terrains of technology, art history, personal memory, Canada's cultural histories, the environment, and the politics of mobility.

A long line of coincidences have drawn these two artists to a shared interest in images of landscape captured from the road. David Garneau and Monica Tap were both born in Edmonton, Alberta in 1962. Both are painters. Both are Associate Professors, Garneau at the University of Regina and Tap at the University of Guelph. Both curate and write about art. Both created pastiche paintings based on art historical works – Tap's based on 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch drawings, and Garneau's based on collaged illustrations from art history text books. At about the same time, both began to consider their inherited cultural roots, Métis for Garneau and Dutch for Tap, which caused the emergence of new developments in their practices. A near intersection came in 2004, when both artists started to make paintings based on blurred and abstracted digital images of landscapes taken from car and train windows.

Despite all of these coincidences, Garneau and Tap didn't meet until 2006.

As a graduate student at the University of Regina in 2004, I visited David Garneau's studio where I saw his first "drive-by" paintings. Subsequently, I encountered



the motion blurred landscape paintings that Monica Tap was working on during her tenure at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York in 2006. Eventually, both attended the Emma Lake Artist Workshop in 2007, Garneau was working on drawings for his *Road Kill* series, and Tap was working on her *One-second Hudson* paintings. I participated in that workshop as well, paying close attention to their extended discussions, and it was then that this curatorial concept originated. As a result, Emma Lake and its legacy were also taken into account in the exhibition's development.

Although landscape has made up the majority of Monica Tap's output for the last 15 years, she is, as

Nancy Tousley wrote, not a landscape painter, but rather "a conceptualist painter who uses landscape as a motif" to investigate painting, and its relationship to representation.<sup>1</sup> Tap translates compressed video stills that are captured by a digital camera into paintings with formally and conceptually rich spaces "in which movement and stillness, depth and surface wrestle."<sup>2</sup> The activity of translating screen-based, digitally compressed visual information into the physicality of paint, brush work, drips, glazes, opacity and translucency is crucial to Tap's practice. As the alchemist who strives to make gold out of *materia prima*, Tap is attempting to make painterly magic out of toss-away representations.<sup>3</sup> Her palette is suggested through the digital abstraction of landscape into RGB pixels. The traces and blurs and shocks of unexpected colour are compression artefacts caused by the rendering of the visual world into data. Tap exploits the instance when the seemingly seamless virtual world of digital imaging fails. She employs this failure as a critical compositional device in her paintings. For example, the earthy tones in lower left of *Going to the Sun IV* are interrupted by two diagonal shards of colour, while the tree trunks in the middle ground are dematerialized into shafts of orange and pink light.

The visual and conceptual dissonance that results within Tap's paintings is magnified by the tenuous hold they have on both representation and abstraction. Her most successful paintings seem to be about to materialise or unravel completely. They are slow paintings of moments never really seen and only technologically accessible – physical painterly translations of the abstraction of landscape by speed, and digital imaging processes such as video compression.<sup>4</sup> The physiological and psychological failure to keep up with the speed of our own technological progress is only part of the content of Tap's heavily coded works.

Using digital photography rather than video as source material, David Garneau's 'drive-by' paintings hold the appearance of more cohesive or legible landscape paintings. The territory at the heart of Garneau's work – the Carlton Trail between Upper Fort Garry, Manitoba

and Fort Edmonton, Alberta – was the first highway into Western Canada, and it is a central route in the history of the Métis in Canada. The context of Métis culture and history provides the conceptual depth beneath the conventional appearance of Garneau's 'drive-by' depictions of the Carlton Trail. Garneau's work offers the viewer symbolic representations of landscape as reconfigured through the binocular lens of his experience of both Métis culture and dominant visual culture and art history. Garneau's work leads the viewer into new ways of looking at national histories, place, and identity, and toward inter-cultural dialogue. In his practice Garneau also wrestles with what it means to identify himself as a Métis artist and maps out the territory that surrounds that identification.<sup>5</sup>



In discussing painting's relationship to time, history, visual representation, and cultural contexts, Ralph Rugoff, curator of *The Painting of Modern Life*, mentioned a kind of intellectual 'stickiness' that he experienced when thinking simultaneously about painting and photography.<sup>6</sup> He was referring to paintings by Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans and Vija Celmins, each of whom re-present different aspects of photographic representation. A version of this 'stickiness' is also at play in Garneau's and Tap's work, particularly in the way that both artists consider the kind of time that is captured in digital images, and the kind of time that is embedded in paintings. The slow muddy pace of painting, fixed in one place, is set in

dynamic contrast to the instantaneous condition of the digital image that can exist almost everywhere at once.

Together, the recent paintings of Garneau and Tap provoke significant questions regarding the current condition of painting in relation to increased mobility and the hyper-accelerated world of visual culture since the infiltration of mechanisation and digital technologies. Both artists inhabit 'in-between-ness' as a strategic state in which tensions between binaries can be held onto and made apparent. Their paintings suspend the viewer in an uneasy condition of misapprehension – wondering which way to go, which meaning to abstract from the canvases, or whether this moment of visual and conceptual suspension is in fact the preferred option.

Garneau and Tap developed their unique stylistic approaches to this subject matter independently, and became interested in it for different reasons. Yet, the coincidences are too rich to ignore. As Rugoff stated,

**BOTH ARTISTS INHABIT 'IN-BETWEEN-NESS' AS A STRATEGIC STATE IN WHICH TENSIONS BETWEEN BINARIES CAN BE HELD ONTO AND MADE APPARENT.**

"Similar work emerging simultaneously in different places indicates that a shift is occurring."<sup>7</sup> So, what shift is indicated by the coincidences linking the practices of Monica Tap and David Garneau, and can that be expanded into a consideration of the condition of painting in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

**The Ditch and the Screen**

Access to any landscape from the road is mediated. The ditch is in the way. The car window is in the way. Speed is in the way. Memories of other countless and ubiquitous landscape images are in the way. When trying to photograph the landscape, the camera's viewfinder is in the way. All of these operate like screens – filtering, blocking, obscuring while simultaneously showing and presenting. This tangle of mediation is a key subject in both Tap's and Garneau's landscapes.

Landscape: the word itself conveys the generations of distancing conventions that have transformed something so essentially real and present into something so virtual and represented. The first barrier is the ditch. The ditch and roadsides are sites for the lurking eye of a painter, as the accounts of the Group of Seven's early forays into Algoma established.<sup>8</sup> The road, on the other hand, is a zone of momentum designed for the speed-of-light capture of the tourist's digital camera.

The ditches or roadsides in Tap's and Garneau's paintings are described in long horizontal gestures in the foreground. These abstracted foregrounds prevent the viewer from taking an easy imaginative leap into their dissolving or materialising spaces – particularly in the *One-second Hudson* series by Tap and in works like *Interregnum* and *Five Minutes Along the Yellow Head* by Garneau. The convention of atmospheric perspective in representational landscape, where objects in the

foreground are crisply defined in relation to the background, is reversed by the motion blur as captured by the digital camera. The ditch in both artists' paintings is the barrier between us and the cohesive landscape that hovers just beyond reach – just past the slipstream of brushwork that blurs foreground and middle ground. As a result, the space within the canvas is a no-man's land. Entry is prohibited by the abstraction of space vis-a-vis speed, distance, and technology, as well as the painters' stretching and flattening of the picture planes. For Garneau the blurred ditch is also related to a hidden history:

*The ditch and road allowances are the defining, remnant spaces of Prairie colonization. As land was partitioned, cleared and cultivated, indigenous plants, animals, and people that could not be assimilated were pushed to the margins.*

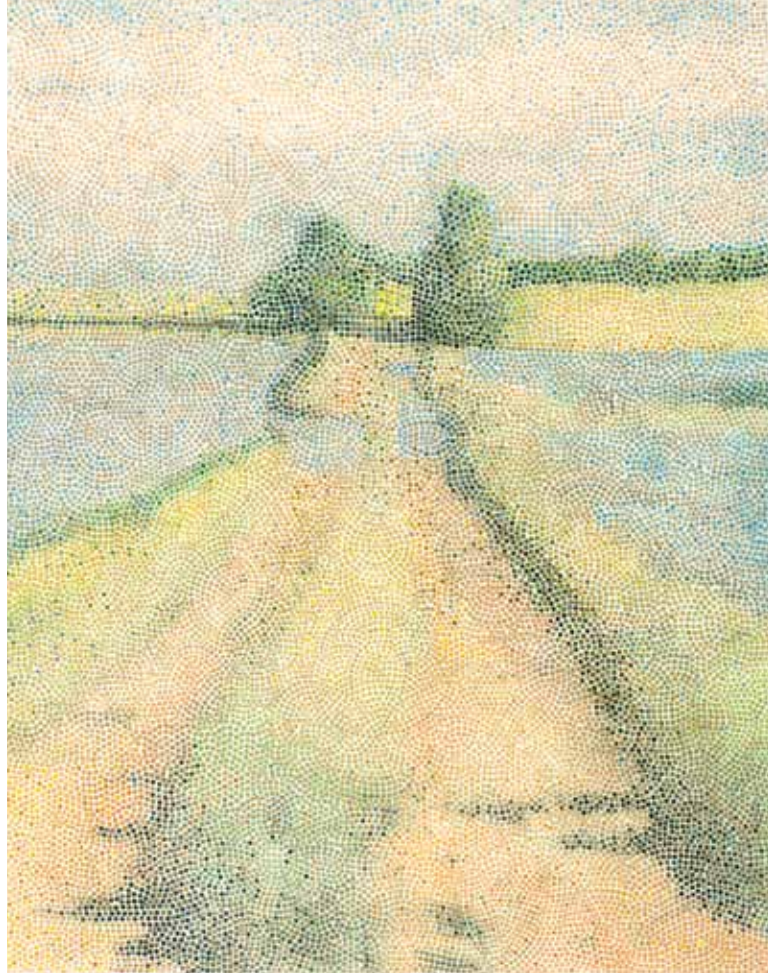


Monica Tap *Between fall and spring*, 2009, oil on canvas, 152 x 203 cm

The ditch and road allowances were refuge for numerous indigenous plants and some people. The two Northwest Resistances (Red River/Winnipeg, 1869 – 1870; Batoche, 1885) were sparked by the Dominion Survey's imposition of a grid of roads and properties that obliterated existing land claims and uses. Disenfranchised in the aftermath of the battles and subsequent mass European immigration and land rush, many Métis families took refuge in the only unclaimed lands, marginal territories that lent these impossible people their name, the "Road Allowance People..." For a time, they were tolerated by their neighbours because they were a source of cheap labour. By the 1930s, however, their settlements were seen as blockages in the arteries and many were run off (though some endured into the 1970s).<sup>9</sup>

The blurred ditches in some of Garneau's 'drive-by' paintings, such as *Fixed Fluid or Past, Present, Future (Good Spirit)*, are haunted by the political and historical narrative of Canada's Métis – a people whose intersection with modernity was a traumatic and telling example of the expansion of the modern, mechanised world into Western Canada. Other works from the series, such as *Near Macklin (Agnes Martin)* and *Winter (Ryman)*, reflect the intervention of Modernist abstract painting in the development of visual art in Western Canada that took hold, in large part, because of the Emma Lake workshops that took place between 1955 and 1968.<sup>10</sup> The juxtaposition of both sets of 'drive-by' paintings within *Another Roadside Abstraction* provides a chance to reflect on how Aboriginal cultural expressions and narratives were sidelined by the velocity of the dominant cultural narratives and forms of Modernism.

Garneau's dot paintings, *Rifle Pit (Batoche)* and *Perspective (Carlton Trail)*, provide us with another of his



David Garneau *Perspective (Carlton Trail)*, 2008, pastel and acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 122 cm and *Rifle Pit (Batoche)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 20.5 x 25.5 cm

recent compositional strategies. Patterns of dots are superimposed over images of the original Carlton Trail. The dot patterns take on a screen-like and hallucinatory appearance that prevents complete access to the landscape. The patterns echo the beadwork and design that Garneau encountered while researching the Métis art and craft production that informs his studio practice. The screen of dots reminds the viewer of the distance between us and the landscape, but also the distance between 'our space' and 'theirs'. The agricultural spaces beyond the ditch are not wilderness, but cultivated, bought and sold real-estate. To step into such spaces is to trespass. The only routes through these massive stretches of private space are by way of the road or along the ditch.

David Garneau and Monica Tap have also looked into the relationship between painting and screen culture

extended into the televisual - 'tele' is the Greek prefix for distant. Abstraction also implies distance, the removal of something from its original context.

The distancing effect that Tap's paintings address is found throughout her process, from the image gathering to the execution of the work in the studio. The echo of the digital video is also found in the serial aspect of Tap's working method. She produces sets of paintings that correspond to the sequences of frames that make up her source videos. *One-second Hudson*, for example, is a set of 15 paintings that correspond to the 15 frames that made up one second of the source video. In a similar manner, the six large canvases comprising *Going to the Sun* represent a mere 6/10ths of one second.

Another kind of screen over-shadows the paintings of Garneau and Tap, and that is the history of landscape

## DAVID GARNEAU AND MONICA TAP HAVE ALSO LOOKED INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PAINTING AND SCREEN CULTURE – THE SCREEN IS EVERYWHERE IN SOME FORM OR ANOTHER. THE CAR WINDOW, ITSELF, OPERATES AS A SCREEN, TRANSFORMING THE CAR INTO A CINEMATIC DEVICE.

– the screen is everywhere in some form or another. The car window, itself, operates as a screen, transforming the car into a cinematic device. As one drives, memories of the landscapes from paintings, films and photographs overlap with the view out the window and one becomes lost in an illusion of timelessness and placelessness – the sense of freedom that has come to be associated with the road.

More literal screens have been imposed in both artists' practices through the mediation of digital technologies. Monica Tap's paintings, themselves, act as projection screens. While working in the studio, Tap intermittently projects the video still onto the surface of the canvas allowing the projected digital image to determine the painting. At these points, the paintings and their digital source are momentarily fused, the interference of the screen is physically manifested, and the work is

painting. Many painters acknowledge that each new painting drags the history of the medium along with it, clouding and informing their visual experience. A painter can't look at Georgian Bay without recalling Frederick Varley's *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, or look out over Emma Lake without catching glimpses of the paintings of Dorothy Knowles. All of these images have become so prevalent and so commonplace that they take on the illusion of being natural.<sup>11</sup> The effect of these beautiful paintings was to create a desire in their viewers to inhabit such spaces, hence the development of cottage communities and the establishment of nature preserves and National and Provincial Parks – all of them mediated zones for pleasurable interactions with "nature". The source video for Tap's six *Going to the Sun* paintings was recorded while driving through one such zone – the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park,



David Garneau *Gyre*, 2006, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 122 cm

Montana. Completed in 1932, it was the first such road in a nature preserve, a test case for the National Parks Service.<sup>12</sup> For Tap, this site demonstrates the “opportunities and ironies provided by places like the Going-to-the-Sun Road.”<sup>13</sup> In the service of automobile travellers, such roads transfigure the depth of wilderness into flattened “scenic views” or “photo opportunities”. Through this series of paintings, Tap is attempting to re-introduce aspects of the physical volume and historical weight of such spaces. Garneau points to a similar desire, to use the physicality of paint and its history to bring to light the “fullness” that is absent in his photographic source material.<sup>14</sup> The inscription and juxtaposition of signs of cultural, digital or mechanical interference into the paintings of Tap and Garneau call the hidden aspects of painting and the history of landscape representations into account.

**THE SPACE AND TIME EXPERIENCED BETWEEN THE PAINTINGS ARE ABSTRACTIONS OF THE ORIGINAL TIME...THE STILLNESS THAT THEY SEEM TO OFFER IS ONLY ANOTHER ILLUSION.**

Contemporary painting cannot escape its history nor the flood of digital imagery that we are witness to in an age defined by the omnipresence of digital screens – in cars, phones, public spaces, along roads and embedded, even, in architecture. Our gaze has already been infiltrated – obscured by the haze of billions of images. What role can painting play in this historical moment? Is it to be pushed aside – a ditch-dwelling spectacle, witnessed for brief moments from the break-neck vantage of speeding vehicles? Or is painting that lurking amorphous figure hidden in the shadows just off the roadside, about to step in front of the car?

***Painting as Collision***

The illusion of freedom offered by the road is exactly that, an illusion: one brought to its crashing conclusion at the moment that nature and culture collide. The inclusion of David Garneau’s *Gyre* in the exhibition presents the

collateral damage of mobility – the death and loss of nature via its transfiguration into “landscape”, “tourist destination”, or “industrial resource”. Road kill is the threatened consequence of stillness in a mobile age. *Gyre* is one of the few depictions of stillness in the exhibition – instances that vibrate with anxiety, especially in the context of the other works. Other instances of stillness are found in Tap’s two *Emma Lake (dock)* paintings. Unlike Monet’s famous paintings of the shifting light on the Rouen Cathedral, which represented a span of months, Tap’s *Emma Lake (dock)* paintings represent a span of milliseconds. Tap’s works were not, as one might expect, painted plein air. In fact, while shooting the video from the dock at Emma Lake, Tap was taking a break from working on paintings of the Hudson River. The Emma Lake paintings were later made in her studio in Toronto. Installed with a distance between

the two similar pieces, *Emma Lake (dock)* encourages the viewer’s attention to switch from one painting to the other. In the gallery, the space and time experienced between the paintings are abstractions of the original time, one-tenth of a second, which existed between the two moments captured from the dock at Emma Lake. The stillness that they seem to offer is only another illusion.

Paul Virilio states that “tele-presence,” the virtual or digitalised presentation of the audio-visual world, “in reality is an iconoclasm of real presence.”<sup>15</sup> It provides the viewer with the illusion of “being there”. In a similar way the landscapes of the Group of Seven, for example, provide their viewers with illusions, with dazzling surfaces. Virilio contends that such illusions, if left unexamined, reduce art to spectacle. Tap and Garneau have come up against this historical moment in which their medium is positioned to take on the illusions that mobility and visual technology (as embodied in the compression of

space-time into digital imagery) have placed between humans and what Virilio calls “real presence”. Perhaps painting is an antidote.

After the waning of Modernism, the thrust of Conceptualism, and the saturation of Pop, the studios of contemporary painters have become sites for collision, resulting in hybrid forms of painting that extend into other disciplines and encompass multiple techniques, technologies, and histories. In Garneau’s practice the collision is embodied in the intersections of Aboriginal and dominant cultures, between theory and practice, and between nature and culture. In Tap’s practice a hybrid of digital image capture and painting processes results in the collision of visual languages through the activity of translation. The paintings that result, Tap proposes, are representations of landscape that are essentially of this digital age – impossible without technological mediation. Abstraction is not only a stylistic or formal device, but also a representation of a digitalised environment.

To go along for the ride, the viewers are abstracted from the stasis of the gallery into whatever memory they have of driving through a landscape. The illusion of “being there” collides with the experience of “being here”.

The dissonance between motion and stillness, place and time, presence and representation, concrete and abstract, arrests the viewers before these painted surfaces. At best – with faces pressed against the screen – they are caught, beholding a still image that appears to be suspended in motion. The rendering of time-space in the paintings of Garneau and Tap is mind-boggling – a horizontal manifestation of vertigo. The stasis and corporeal nature of these paintings provides a material counterpoint to the fleeting quality of digital information. The incoherence of the landscapes racing past are translations of speed into slowness: the immaterial into the frozen drips and daubs of paint. The paintings are collisions of the substance of the ditch with the virtuality of digital video, photography, and memory. All of this is haunted by the distant and disappearing stillness of the land.

Jeff Nye, 2010



David Garneau *Gyre*, (detail) 2006



Monica Tap *Emma Lake (dock)*, 2007, oil on linen, 46 x 61 cm each, space between variable

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Tousley, “Monica Tap, Paintings and Perception”, *Monica Tap: Paintings* (Tom Thompson Memorial Art Gallery and Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2003), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Monica Tap, in discussion with the author, August 25, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Compression artefacts are the result of data encoding in which parts of the original data are discarded to achieve video files that are small enough for certain applications, such as email, or for use in devices with restricted memory. Artefacts can show up as traces of frames of video that persist and overlap into subsequent frames, appearing painterly at times.

<sup>5</sup> David Garneau, “Métis Artist or Métis Artist.” *The Politics of Community and Identity: Learning from One Another* (paper presented at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and the Faculty of Law of the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, October, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Rugoff, Haward Gallery, London, UK, *Photography by Other Means* (conference keynote address for “Mixing the Message: Painting and Translation”, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, March 20, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1995), 80.

<sup>9</sup> David Garneau, *Renovating Wildlife Art and Landscape Painting: Road Kill and the Space of the Ditch, an Artist Statement* (unpublished paper, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Workshop leaders of note during this time period include: Jack Shadbolt (1955), Barnett Newman (1959), Clement Greenberg (1962), and Jules Olitski (1964). John O’Brien, *The Flat Side of the Landscape* (Saskatoon, SK: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Peter White, “Out of the Woods”, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, eds. John O’Brien and Peter White (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Olin, *Glacier National Park: Insiders’ Guide* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Monica Tap, e-mail message to the author, September 10, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> David Garneau, e-mail message to the author, October 4, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York, NY: semiotext[e], 2005), 26.



David Garneau *Past, Present, Future (Good Spirit)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 122 x 152.5 cm

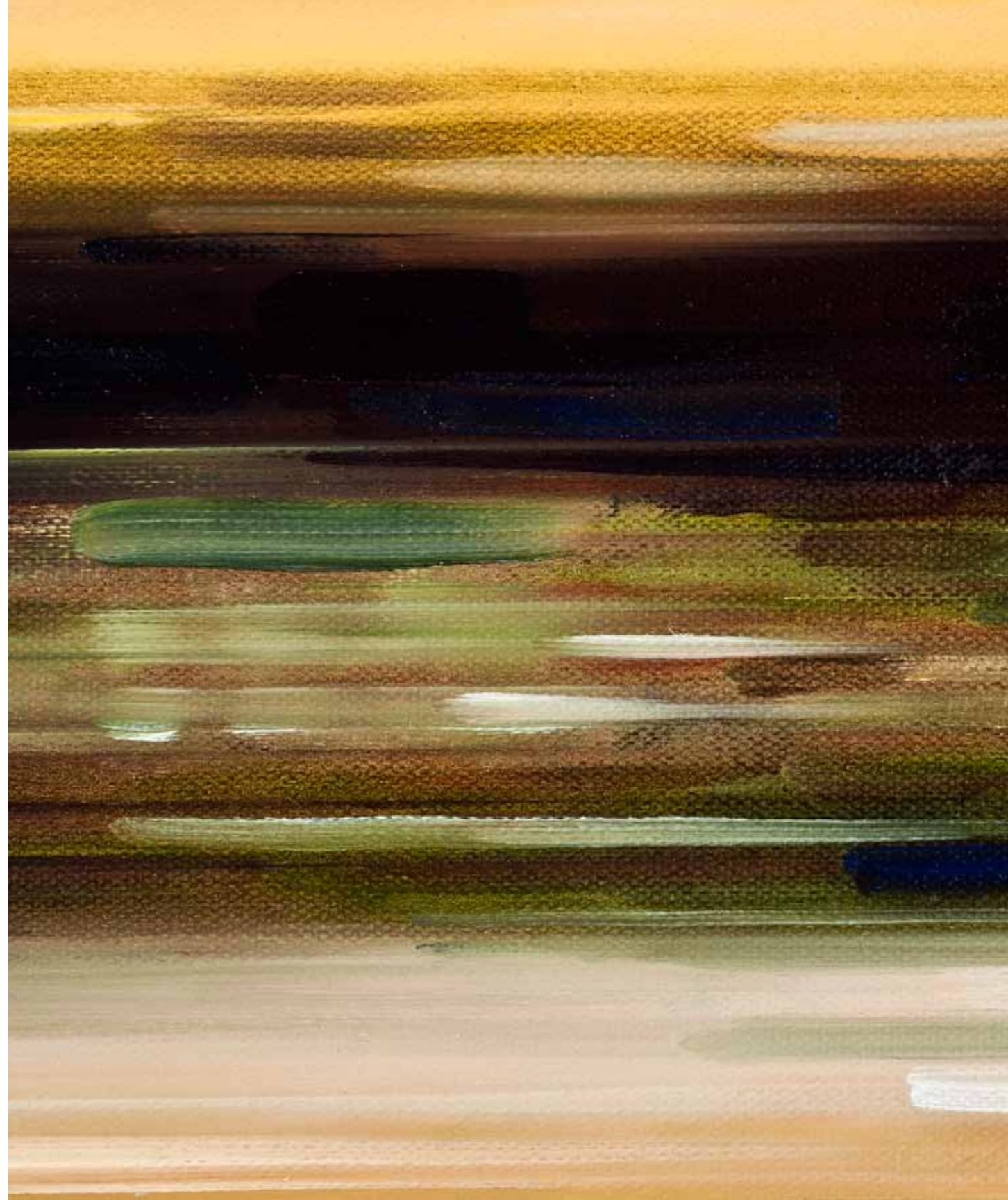


David Garneau *Interregnum*, 2010, oil on canvas, 61 x 45.5 cm



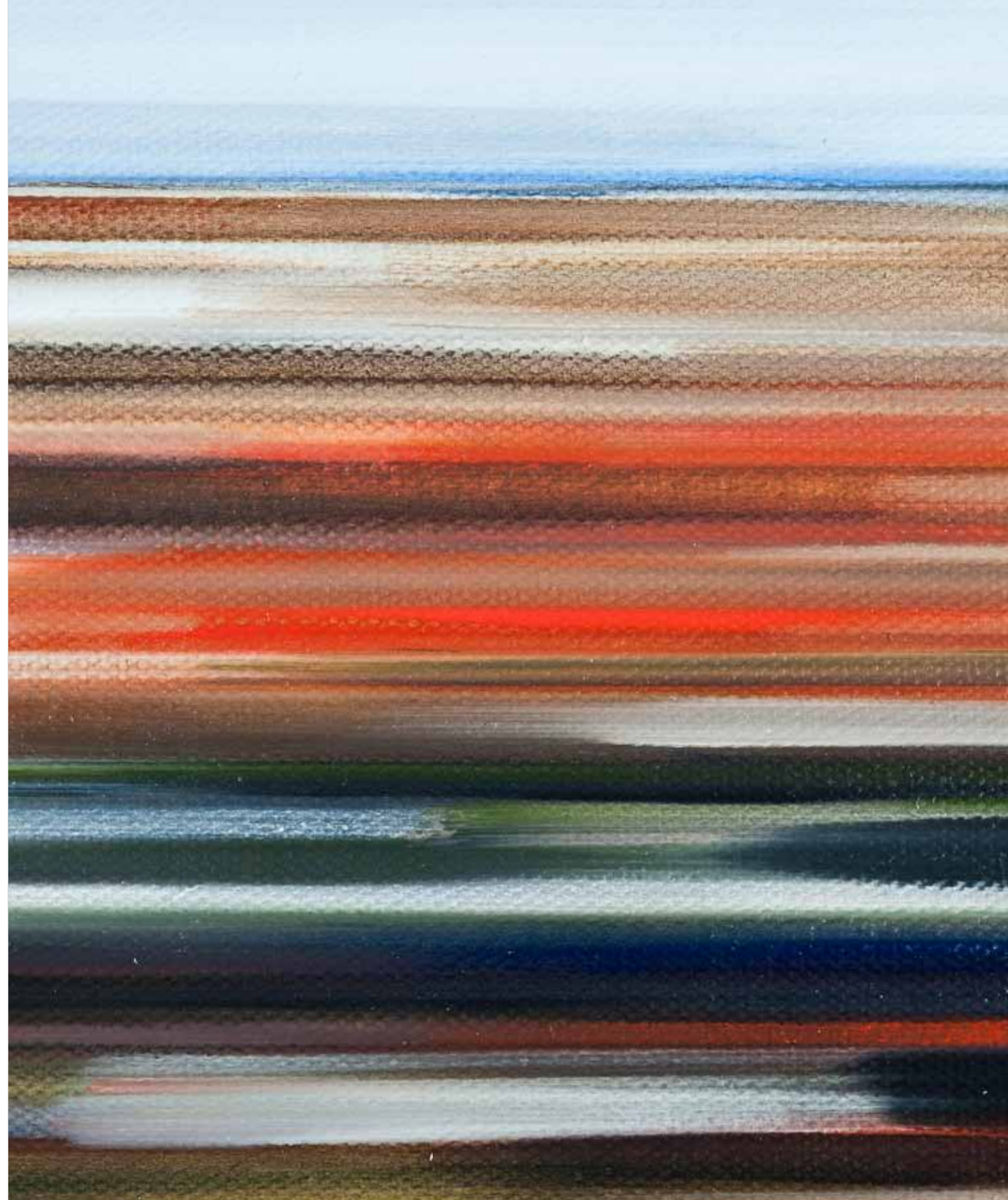


David Garneau *Fixed Fluid*, 2010, oil on canvas, 61 x 45 cm



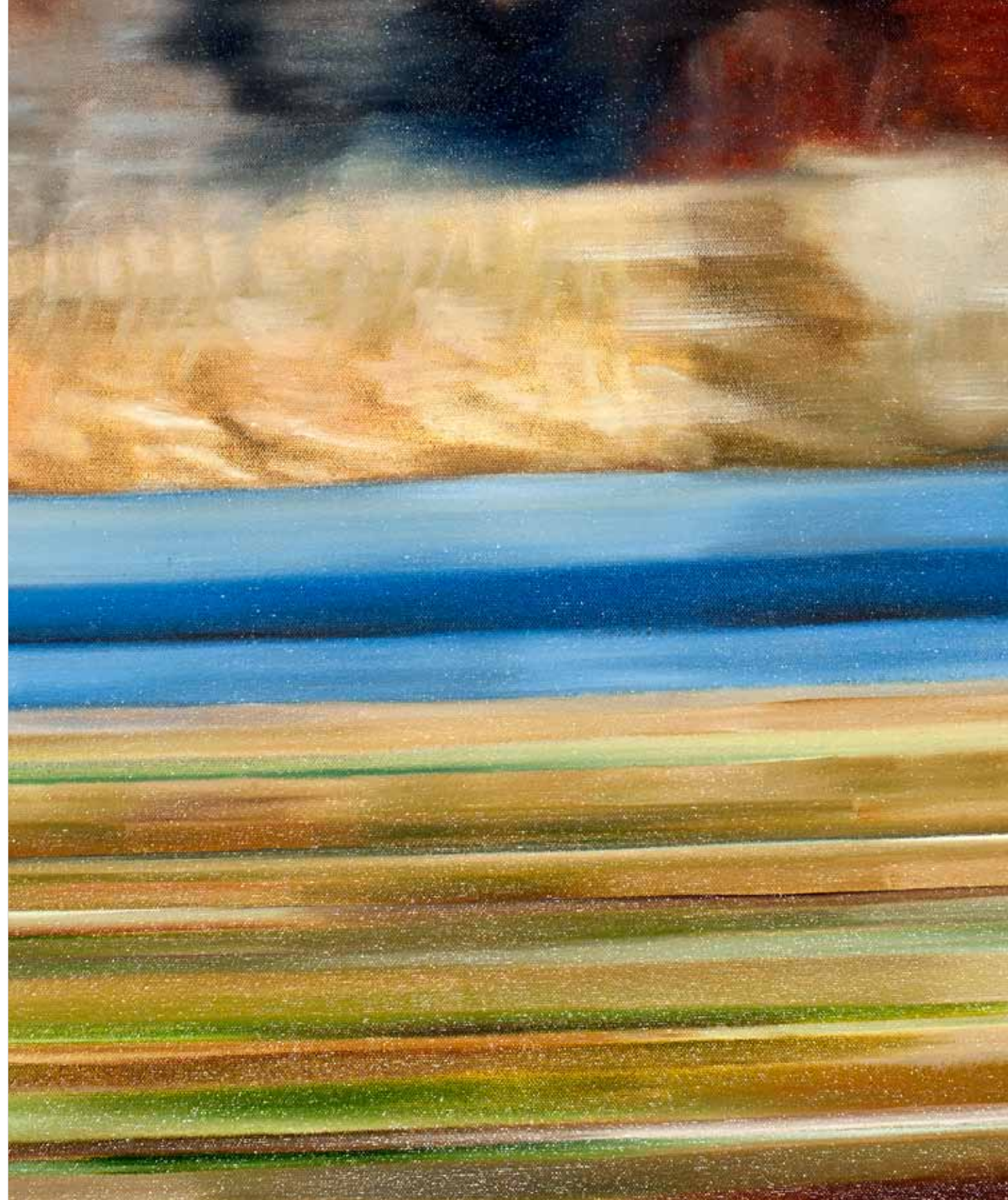


David Garneau *Passing Industry*, 2010, oil on canvas, 61 x 45.5 cm





David Garneau *Five Minutes Along the Yellow Head*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 122.5 cm





Monica Tap *Going to the Sun I*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm



Monica Tap *Going to the Sun II*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm



Monica Tap *Going to the Sun III*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm



Monica Tap *Going to the Sun IV*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm



Monica Tap *Going to the Sun V*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm



Monica Tap *Going to the Sun VI*, 2010, oil on canvas, 152 x 216 cm (detail shown inside back cover)

# TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL LANDSCAPE

Monica Tap and David Garneau in Conversation with Robert Enright

*Enright: I want to know how each of you became drive-by shooters?*

*Tap:* The first video-based paintings I made were in the summer of 2004 when I was in a residency in Rotterdam. It was near the end of the layered landscape drawing works and I had been working almost exclusively with

different centuries and bringing them together in the unified space of a single canvas. So with these videos – there was only one kind, videos shot outside the passenger window of the passing landscape – I thought what if I take different moments of the same landscape, different fragments of the same second, and try to layer those

**THE LANDSCAPE IS A VERY FORGIVING SUBJECT.  
IT'S PLIABLE IN TERMS OF HOW IT CAN BE ABSTRACTED  
AND STILL BE PERCEPTUALLY UNDERSTOOD...**

Van Gogh's drawings as source imagery. I was very conscious of being in Holland and working with Dutch Old Master drawings and there was something about being in contemporary Holland that led me to question those choices and to ask, 'Why am I working with these historic drawings when there are all sorts of new ways of seeing the world?'. I also became more aware of myself as a Canadian rather than as someone of Dutch heritage. I think sometimes when you're in another culture your own culture comes into higher relief. The only interesting images I had on my laptop were these 30 second videos that I had been shooting with my first digital camera. Because the layered landscape drawings were premised on the notion of layering different moments of time, the first question I posed to myself when watching the video landscapes was, 'What if I compressed a single second instead of 200 or 100 years?'. I had been taking drawings from artists who had worked in

onto a single canvas? The landscape is a very forgiving subject. It's pliable in terms of how it can be abstracted and still be perceptually understood without moving into the monstrous effect you can get if you apply that same strategy to the human figure.

*Garneau:* I think I've been working my way down the ontological hierarchy through history paintings, portraits, still life and, finally, to landscape. I'm trying to redeem landscape and find qualities that move it up a little bit higher. Like Monica, I'm trying to find the histories and the ideas embedded in something that seems very optical. I moved here from Calgary in 1999 and saw it as an opportunity to start clean. I tried a whole lot of different experiments and among them were landscapes. I grew up on the prairies in Edmonton and Calgary. I assumed they were prairie but since moving to Regina I see this place as very prairie in every direction. I wanted to understand the landscape

and encounter it through the abstract painters who were, and still are, living here. I wanted to pay homage to them and also to see what they were seeing in the landscape. What's also mixed in there is my interest in Métis history. In 2001 and 2002 I was driving the highway between Winnipeg to Edmonton, pretty much the Yellow Head Trail, and taking photographs of road kill, silos and landscapes, particularly locations around towns or spaces where Métis people resided for some period of time. Part of it is being a multi-tasker. Sticking the camera out the window was just another thing to do between spaces so as not to waste time. I did the first large drive-by painting in 2003 and the top two-thirds was a pretty conventional landscape with the blur record of the camera below. I found that interesting and started making explorations in smaller pieces. I wasn't sure if

**I WANT TO GIVE YOU THE PLEASURE OF LOOKING AT SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL. BUT I ALSO WANT TO ARREST YOU AT THE SURFACE AND MAKE YOU AWARE THIS IS NOT AN EASEL SET UP IN THE LANDSCAPE; THAT YOU ARE PASSING BY, AND SO IT MUST BE A PHOTOGRAPH.**

I wanted to abstract them to a complete blur, because I also wanted the integrity of the paint and not just the recording of a photograph. So this play between photo representation and painting representation, between pictures and paintings, was on my mind.

*E: I guess that landscape is inescapably pre-inhabited. Neither of you have been able to make a landscape that doesn't make a reference to, or acknowledge the presence of, someone having represented it before.*

*T:* Most of the images that I am drawn to include some evidence of human habitation, so there's often a cabin, a house or a road that you can make out within the structure of the painting. There's also evidence of either video compression-artefacting or the kinds of breaks you get from reflections on the car window, so the screen of the window is brought in as another

space. The result is a further suggestion of an unstable viewing position. There is a human being on both sides of the landscape.

*G:* I want to give you the pleasure of looking at something beautiful. But I also want to arrest you at the surface and make you aware this is not an easel set up in the landscape; that you are passing by, and so it must be a photograph. You're trying to get the pleasure of looking through the window but then you're caught up with how the thing was made and that awareness has you oscillate back and forth. But for me this idea of history also echoes, and often very directly references, specific painters who inhabited that same landscape or one like it.

*T:* My historical references are closer to the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Monet and Cezanne

are more strongly present in my work than the prairie school of American abstraction, which is referenced more clearly in David's work.

*E: Is that because these French painters attract you more or because there is some perceptual underpinning in the way you were reading the blur and the movement through the landscape?*

*T:* Both. The perceptual is key to these paintings. Trying to account for the technological failure of low resolution, 10 frames per second video to capture the landscape at high speed brings the pictures to a point where you can start to recognize something, a representation that is solid and understood. I like to keep the image hovering at that perceptual threshold and that isn't foreign to what happens in Cezanne's investigations, or in Monet's interest in the effects of light on a subject at different times. I think the perceptual



Monica Tap *One-second Hudson No. 12 v.2*, 2007, oil on linen, 61 x 92 cm



David Garneau *Elegy (Robert Motherwell)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 102 x 51 cm (detail shown inside cover)

elements of that era of painting have come into focus again through digital technologies, which allow us to examine things more closely by seeing them frame by frame. It's also a time of painting that I've always loved.

**E:** *David, you inhabit a landscape which you have described as colonized. Monica referred to colour-field painting, which took hold in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Is that necessarily a tradition you have to grapple with if you're going to direct your eye and point your camera at the landscape?*

**G:** I would prefer to be Monica because I like those artists a lot more. I'm not a fan of Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland, and the others I've been quoting. I've proselytized against non-objective painting pretty much all my life. It has to do with growing up in Edmonton and going to all those exhibitions at the Edmonton Art Gallery. I thought I was being socially responsible in addressing this work but

to talk to people, have them tell me stories, and show me places and things in land that was otherwise vacant. So the grid of dots I use is a way of setting up an interruption and suggesting there is more to see than what we can see.

**E:** *The dots represent Métis beadwork, don't they? They don't reference European pointillism but rather your own cultural tradition.*

**G:** It's a reference to many things. It comes from Métis beading and clearly there is an influence from Seurat and, even more so, Chuck Close. But where they were using the dots as formal devices, I'm trying to add them as content. In some paintings they are references to maps and to sweat lodge design. I want to get a sense of another presence in this space because it is a contested space.

**E:** *Monica, let's talk more about this idea of politics and the occupied painting space. Historically land-*

## **THE POSITION I SEE THE WORK, AND MYSELF, OCCUPYING IS MORE THE MOBILE VIEWER IN A TECHNOLOGICAL TIME, AND THAT'S NOT NECESSARILY A GENDERED SPACE.**

it's been growing on me. I can enter into it and see the problems of novelty and beauty they were wrestling with. It's infectious.

**E:** *Is it seductive?*

**G:** It is seductive but so is the landscape. That's the thing: this isn't the sort of painting I ought to be doing and if I were living in a large metropolitan city I wouldn't be doing landscape painting. So I don't know whether to embrace or regret it. One of the first bits of writing I did was 20 years ago on Carol Moppett-Lindoe. In her work she was trying to rescue the landscape from her father, Luke Lindoe, and his friends, who were important painters, and for the longest time she couldn't see the landscape apart from their eyes. That's the kind of colonization I'm thinking about. Of course, there is also a literal colonization. When I started the Métis-related work I thought it would be easy to find traces of our inhabitation, but it turned out to be difficult. I had

*scape painting has been male, and I wonder if you feel the space has been gendered in any way?*

**T:** The position I see the work, and myself, occupying is more the mobile viewer in a technological time, and that's not necessarily a gendered space. So the political reading is not nearly as direct and it's not the major content of the work. I recognize the reasons why landscape painting, as David initially pointed out, has been so demoted. In the hierarchy it's far below still life, and things are even more complicated in Canada because of the great shadow of the Group of Seven. Maybe the way I address that, or at least signal an understanding of it, is that the paintings I am making are not singular paintings. I work in groups of related images and make different iterations of the exact same moment. They are sequential but not in the way that film stills are sequential. These video images are all completely interrelated, one with the other, so you haven't got a singular painting.

You have a group of six paintings in *Going To the Sun*, a kind of panorama in which each painting contains multiple viewpoints. So I'm not re-presenting the singular viewpoint of the owner surveying the lands in front of him, which is traditionally a more gendered viewpoint as well. These are very unstable pictures both in terms of their viewpoint and their realization. Perhaps on that level they question assumptions at the heart of traditional landscape painting, (that is, the stable vantage point); painting that is more readily, and rightly, critiqued for the political agenda that is hidden inside it.

*E: How these paintings look interests me. Obviously, the blur lends itself towards abstraction as a perceptual phenomenon, but David, you stack a traditional landscape above an Elegy to the Spanish Republic; or below a Lawren Harris structured skyscape, is a Kenneth Noland. How important is the recognition of the source image in what you're doing? This is both*

why I left to go to Halifax. I remember touring the U. of A. before deciding where to go to art school and seeing miles of gel and I thought, 'Oh my god, I can't go here'. It's obviously a much more complex and interesting story but that's what it looked like to a young eye. I guess what I see is that my work's relationship to place is specific in a very different way. I often find myself intentionally referencing the landscape tradition but it's not necessarily a Canadian landscape tradition, and it's not the landscape that had a great influence on me growing up. It's not the prairies that were my home for so long. When I was at Emma Lake, I painted *One-second Hudson*. Two years ago, when I was leading a residency in Grande Prairie, I painted *One-second Emma*. It's a series of 12 paintings from the end of the Emma Lake dock and it is the only video I've ever shot from a stationary viewpoint, so the horizon of the lake angles slightly from one panel to

## THE SEDUCTION OF THE PAINTING AND THE SEDUCTION OF THE LANDSCAPE REQUIRES ME TO MAKE SOMETHING GORGEOUS. I DON'T THINK I'M THERE YET, BUT I'M ON MY WAY.

*a technical question and one which addresses your disposition towards the artists you are citing.*

*G:* One of the sliding scale tensions is that if it's an illustration of an idea, then I would get more literal, but the seduction of the painting and the seduction of the landscape requires me to make something gorgeous. I don't think I'm there yet, but I'm on my way. There is a part of me that wants to resist that, so the copying or influence-derived pieces below, if not tongue-in-cheek, are more about citation; whereas the paintings above are a sincere attempt to render what was in front of me. That kind of ambivalence pretty much runs through everything I've made.

*T:* One of the things I really appreciate about David's work is how specific to locale it is. You are engaged and wrestling with the art historical ghosts who are specific to Edmonton and the prairies. I remember them, too, and they're probably one of the reasons

the left. When you have all 12 together, it makes you feel a little seasick.

*E: It's one thing to talk about the landscape as a space to be possessed or driven through, but it's quite another to talk about it as a beautiful space to be looked at. It occurs to me that making something beautiful is a fairly compelling imperative for both of you.*

*G:* I'm always interested in that Kantian problem of the beautiful versus the thoughtful, and if the two can be combined. Can you have something that is visually compelling and makes you thoughtless, and something that is thoughtful and allows you to oscillate between the two?

*E: But neither of you is riding on the 'dumb as a painter' highway. If anything, the more applicable question for you is, can you be too aware? David, you've referred, almost nostalgically, to the impossibility*



Monica Tap *One-second Hudson No. 13 v.2*, 2007, oil on linen, 61 x 92 cm



David Garneau *Near Macklin (Agnes Martin)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 26 cm and *Winter (Ryman)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 30.5 cm

*of ever retrieving an innocent eye, when it comes to looking at landscape.*

**G:** You can't get back to innocence but I think it's possible to paint one's way into a kind of thoughtlessness, and that's the seductive part I'm trying to resist. So once I've set the design up, the dots are incredibly mindless and I can't believe I'm drawn towards that empty activity.

**E:** *Is there any irony in what either of you is doing? Homage is one way of dealing with the past, but so are irony, resistance and rejection. Where would you place yourself along that spectrum?*

**G:** If irony means saying something other than what you believe, then there is some sense to it. I can find some rhyming within myself of the pleasures or challenges the painters I'm citing might have had. But being in the historical present for me is an echo, an imitation, and

by video and then the initial recording on the canvas happens through projection. So there's an echo of the experience of being in a car and feeling like the landscape is being projected on the passenger window or on the windshield. It's the kind of experience you have in a movie when you feel that you can see out, but that nothing out can see in. That's also not a romanticized or traditional position from which to make a painting. Relative to the Impressionist project of perception, there is something completely ridiculous about the absolute speed at which these landscapes are captured.

**E:** *What you seem to be involved with is a compression of time and an expansion of space.*

**T:** The word compression is particularly important. I was thinking how different these would be if they were based on film stills. Film has an indexical relationship,

**I'M INTERESTED IN THE MACHINE'S PERCEPTUAL COMPRESSION AND HOW IT ECHOES OR REVEALS THE KINDS OF PERCEPTUAL COMPRESSION THAT PAINTERS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WHEN WE TRY TO REPRESENT SOMETHING IN A WAY THAT CREATES A SENSE OF ILLUSION AND SOMETHING RECOGNIZABLE.**

has none of their pleasure in breaking ground. I'm not participating in the same way. There's this ironic distance in making a copy, or a play on someone else's work. But the same goes for Nature. If I'm painting landscape I'm taking an ironic disposition to it. I'm doing it in the studio. It's not romantic; we're not setting up easels in the field. We're not recording a space, we're recording a recorded vision and there's always a certain irony in that.

**T:** I would echo what David just said about placelessness. Technology grants us the freedom to not be in the space, or even anywhere near the space that we're painting. There's an inherent irony in the video capture that I do. The first time I actually see the landscape is when I start to review it frame by frame on my computer. I haven't seen it in the recording because we're driving too fast. The landscapes are captured

like photography, to what it records; whereas video uses these complex algorithms in order to make decisions — I'm personifying the machine here — about what matters and what doesn't, and what are the points of greatest difference. It will eliminate whatever information it can in order to compress the image sufficiently and still maintain the sense of what's there. That's not so different from what painters do. I guess another nod to irony is the fact that the source images I work from are highly painterly to begin with. The amount of detail and information that has been eliminated by the compression algorithms makes for really beautiful images. So I'm interested in the machine's perceptual compression and how it echoes or reveals the kinds of perceptual compression that painters take advantage of when we try to represent something in a way that creates a sense of illusion and something recognizable. I'm trying

to work both of those at the same time, keeping the machine's logic and the painter's logic in balance in each of these paintings.

**E:** *Are either of you interested in establishing a new language for landscape?*

**G:** I'm here and I take seriously that I'm going to be making work about this place, and not another place, for the foreseeable future. That's my project and it has numerous layers. At the same time, I do a lot of teaching at the university and in workshops and I'm interested in renovating the landscape for people who are captured by the way it has been taught and seen in the past. I want to come up with other options, partially so that they will see their landscape differently. My hope is that we can revive a way of seeing that is indigenous to the space.

**T:** I wouldn't say that I'm specifically trying to invent a new language. I'm just trying to make paintings that account for my experience of the landscape as someone who is a commuter, and who enjoys the guilty pleasure of the dream space you can fall into on road trips. So I understand this project in a more specific sense. Robert, it sounds like you're asking whether we're trying to invent a new kind of painting in the modernist tradition, and I think that's for someone else to say. I'm just trying to figure out how to make these specific paintings and move this project forward.

**E:** *You're quite right. The modernist pronouncement is to 'make it new', which represents less an incremental gain on previous achievements than a kind of rupture. And neither of you seems attracted to rupture as a methodology.*

**G:** I think the impulse is to be a bit more honest about how we see the landscape. The interesting thing about south and central Saskatchewan is how unnatural it is. I've had people visit me and they wonder where the nature is.

**T:** "Where's the view?"

**G:** It's not just the view because everything is flat. It's also that all the land is cultivated. I was astounded to find out we've got more roads here than anywhere

else on the planet. So you have to drive a considerable distance to find the land that is set aside as natural. So what's the real view of "Nature" or "the landscape" here? It's more landscape than nature and so showing how we actually see it is a more honest view. I'll be interested when the exhibition is up to see whether people are disappointed by that mediation, which I would say is a defeat of the romantic.

This interview was conducted by phone to Regina and Toronto on October 12, 2010. **Robert Enright** is the University Research Chair in Art Theory and Criticism at the University of Guelph and the senior contributing editor to *Border Crossings* magazine. He lives in Winnipeg.



Monica Tap *One-second Hudson No. 14*, 2007, oil on linen, 61 x 92 cm and *One-second Hudson No. 15*, 2007, oil on linen, 61 x 92 cm

# ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

## **David Garneau**

David Garneau is Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. He was born and raised in Edmonton; received most of his post secondary education (BFA Painting and Drawing, MA English Literature) at the University of Calgary and taught at the Alberta College of Art and Design for five years before moving to Regina in 1999.

Garneau's practice includes painting, drawing, curation and critical writing. His solo exhibition, *Cowboys and Indians (and Métis?)*, toured Canada (2003-7). *Road Kill* is currently touring Saskatchewan. His work often engages issues of nature, history, masculinity and Aboriginal identity. His paintings are in the collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization; The Canadian Parliament; Indian and Inuit Art Centre; the Glenbow Museum; the Mackenzie Art Gallery; Saskatchewan Arts Board; Alberta Foundation for the Arts; and many other public and private collections. He has curated several large group exhibitions: *The End of the World (as we know it)*; *Picture Windows: New Abstraction*; *Transcendent Squares*; *Sophisticated Folk*; *Contested Histories*; *Making it Like a Man!*; *Graphic Visions* and *TEXTiles*. Garneau has written numerous catalogue essays and reviews and was a co-founder and co-editor of *Artichoke* and *Cameo* magazines. He is currently exploring the Carlton Trail and road kill as landscape subjects, and is working on curatorial projects featuring contemporary Aboriginal art in Australia and Switzerland.

## **Monica Tap**

Monica Tap is an artist whose many activities involve exploring questions of time and representation in painting. Her practice opens up a space between landscape and abstraction, and navigates the terrain between painting and other media. Over the past ten years her canvases, which are conceptual and systematic investigations into the codes of pictorial illusionism and perception, have been exhibited in Canada, New York and London, England. She is the recipient of many grants and awards, including one from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for her project, "Translation as a Strategy of Renewal in Painting." She is an Associate Professor in the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph.

# LIST OF WORKS

## ANOTHER ROADSIDE ABSTRACTION

All measurements are in centimeters. Height precedes width.

- 1 David Garneau  
*Gyre*, 2006  
Oil on canvas  
152.5 x 122.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 2 David Garneau  
*Perspective (Carlton Trail)*, 2008  
Pastel and acrylic on canvas  
152.5 x 122.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 3 David Garneau  
*Elegy (Robert Motherwell)*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
102.0 x 51.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 4 David Garneau  
*Five Minutes Along the Yellow Head*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 122.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 5 David Garneau  
*Fixed Fluid*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
61.0 x 45.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 6 David Garneau,  
*Interregnum*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
61.0 x 45.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 7 David Garneau  
*Near Macklin (Agnes Martin)*, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas  
51.0 x 26.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 8 David Garneau  
*Passing Industry*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
61.0 x 45.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 9 David Garneau  
*Past, Present, Future (Good Spirit)*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
122.0 x 152.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 10 David Garneau  
*Rifle Pit (Batoche)*, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas  
20.5 x 25.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 11 David Garneau  
*Winter (Ryman)*, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas  
91.5 x 30.5  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 12 Monica Tap  
*Emma Lake (dock)*, 2007  
Oil on linen  
46.0 x 61.0 each, space between variable  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 13 Monica Tap  
*One-second Hudson No. 12 v.2*, 2007  
Oil on linen  
61.0 x 92.0  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
- 14 Monica Tap  
*One-second Hudson No. 13 v.2*, 2007  
Oil on linen  
61.0 x 92.0  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
- 15 Monica Tap  
*One-second Hudson No. 14*, 2007  
Oil on linen  
61.0 x 92.0  
COURTESY OF WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY
- 16 Monica Tap  
*One-second Hudson No. 15*, 2007  
Oil on linen  
61.0 x 92.0  
COURTESY OF WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY
- 17 Monica Tap  
*Between fall and spring*, 2009  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 203.0  
COURTESY OF WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY
- 18 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun I*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 19 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun II*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 20 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun III*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 21 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun IV*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 22 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun V*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 23 Monica Tap  
*Going to the Sun VI*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
152.0 x 216.0  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



