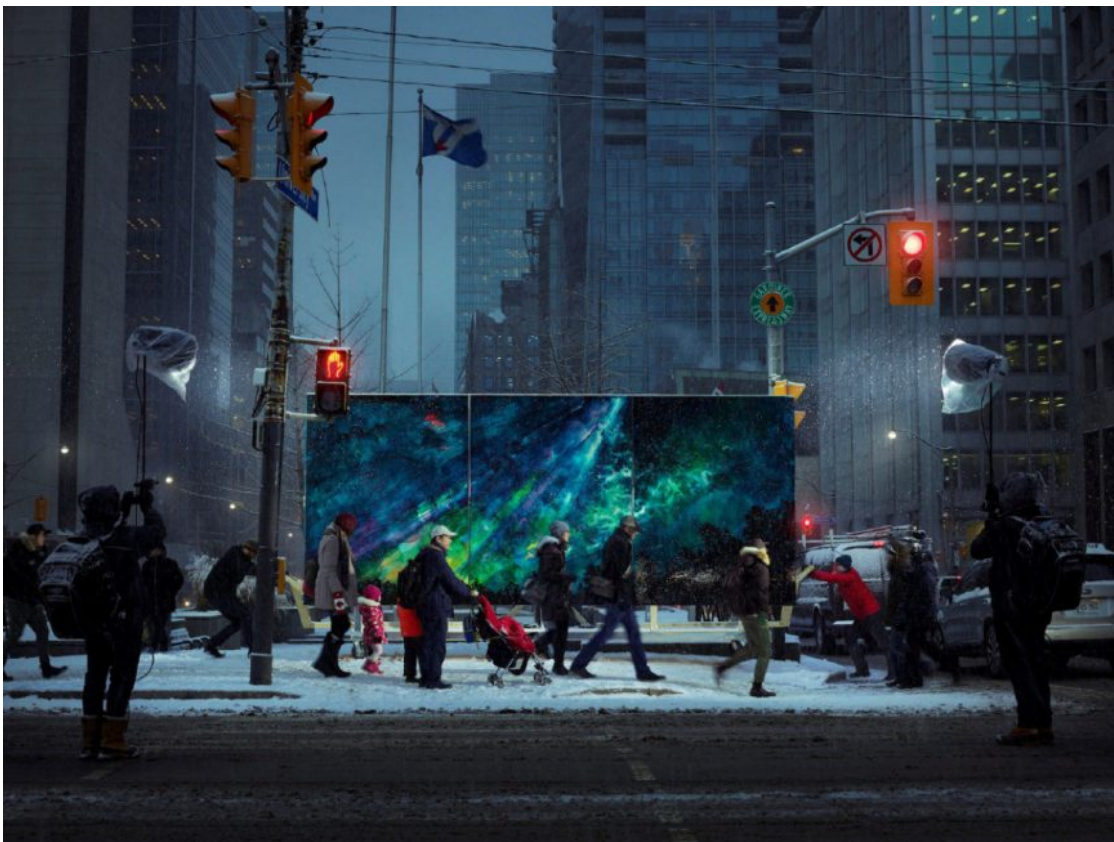


# At the McMichael, the matter with size

Steve Driscoll and Finn O'Hara exhibition reduces Driscoll's big, bold paintings to smaller things in a largely indifferent world



Finn O'Hara (photograph) & Steve Driscoll (painting), 'Some roads were not made for such journeys,' 2017

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

Fri., March 24, 2017

Steve Driscoll makes great big paintings, most often, astonishingly, within the space of just a few hours. And while their garish, electric-neon glare isn't necessarily my cup of tea, no argument you can make would convince me they don't have presence.

Walking into a lower gallery at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, where 16 of Driscoll's Day-Glo compositions are now on view, it's undeniable: they tower as tall as three metres high, their glossy hides shimmeringly alive and near-squirming in the neutral space.

One, *Fall Is A Feeling You Just Can't Lose*, a sunset scene from some far-northern forest, glows as through truly on fire; another, *What Myth*, is made up of three huge panels of radioactive-green aurora borealis flashing across a purple-black sky. It feels as though, if you touched them, you'd have to treat your hand for a chemical burn.

Why, then, are the paintings hung alongside photographs of themselves in odd locales? The Northern Lights extravaganza, for one, is shot installed at the corner of King and Bay one snowy day, as puzzled commuters shuffle by in the slush. It's a slick, well-executed picture that looks more than anything like a droll advertising image for the painter's XL world view (you can almost see the ad copy lines, top right: IT DOESN'T GET ANY BIGGER THAN THIS!).



Finn O'Hara (photo) & Steve Driscoll (painting), *Watched in Awe*, 2016

The exhibition text says it's part of *Size Matters*, a collaboration between Driscoll and photographer Finn O'Hara, all for the purpose of subverting the scale and shifting the experience of Driscoll's works themselves.

But why on earth would you want to do that? Driscoll's technique makes his paintings uniquely suited to be dragged into the great outdoors. He paints in fast-drying pigmented urethane, functionally a liquid plastic; [on a studio visit last year](#), he told me the material makes his finished works hearty enough to be hosed down with no ill effect.

But the weird bromance here between him and O'Hara does little more than defuse his paintings' explosive power, inadvertently minimizing them in mockingly contrived everyday circumstances. A paradoxically bright autumn forest scene all but vanishes into the dark of a real glade; *Never Been Seen*, a painting of a shoreline, is propped up on a beach surrounded by sunburned bathers.

It amuses, no doubt, but I'm afraid the joke might be on Driscoll. In the photos, his electrified works seem dull, flaccid. The photographs work as a reductive act, a gimmick, whittling Driscoll's undeniably dynamic practice down to shtick. If I want shtick, I've got Dave Chappelle's Netflix specials. From art, I expect something else.

Self-subversion is a rare bit of circumspection in art, and Driscoll deserves credit both for not taking himself too seriously and for pushing hard against the standard viewing experience. For his show at Angell Gallery last year, he built a reflecting pool in the gallery to double down on his paintings' visual assault.



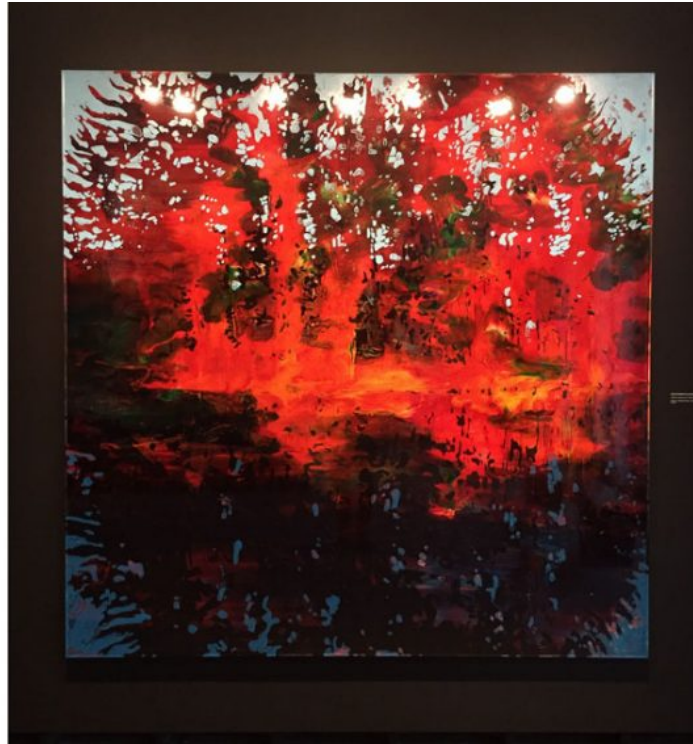
An installation view of Steve Driscoll and Finn O'Hara: *Size Matters* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

His practice is devoted to taking a creaky old convention in landscape painting and giving it a Red Bull jolt of invigorating energy, something the McMichael, a temple of dusty convention itself, does well to embrace (Driscoll's the second such throwdown here, the first being [Kim Dorland, a punk-rock painter of such scenes himself, who did a residency here in 2013](#)).

But the pairing here feels like the gallery trying a little too hard to get with the hip kids, and some standards are standards for reasons better than convention. Here's one: you can't know what an artwork truly is without putting your two feet in front of it and taking in all that it is.

In this moment of Instagrammed everything, too many of us believe a photo replaces that experience. It does not. Especially with painting, where texture, colour, scale and even odour gang up for an experience beyond the merely visual (for me, the faint acridity of a painted surface has huge bearing on the experience, like the wet scent of rot on a walk in the woods).

O'Hara's pictures, well-made as they are, cast Driscoll's works as little things in a big, largely indifferent world. Maybe that's only the truth. Art, in whatever form, has never been part of the cultural prime time; *The Voice* has little to fear.



Steve Driscoll, *Fall Is A Feeling You Just Can't Lose*, at the McMichael Collection.  
(COURTESY MCMICHAEL COLLECTION)

At the same time, art, along with literature, is a cultural form we've clung to for centuries, or even millennia, as assurance that human expression can exist beyond context and epoch. Size, indeed, does matter. Do we really want to make it smaller?

*Steve Driscoll + Finn O'Hara: Size Matters* continues at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 10365 Islington Ave., Kleinburg, Ont., until Aug. 20, 2017 in partnership with the CONTACT Photography Festival. See [mcmichael.com](http://mcmichael.com) for more information.