



Total Eclipse of my Heart: An Interview with Gavin Lynch

by Laura Horne-Gaul February 10, 2017

Gavin Lynch (Ottawa) grew up in Northern British Columbia and was a witness to its ever evolving landscape. In his recent exhibition titled "Total Eclipse of My Heart" at Toronto's Angell Gallery, Lynch moves away from his typical depictions of the great Canadian landscape and moves into the tropical, borrowing key elements from the paintings of Henri Rousseau like leaf shapes and the bright orange sun. The imagery is also filtered from "botanical gardens, my wife Genevieve and I's collection of tropical house plants (some of which are in the exhibition), the internet (in particular jungle themed Instagram accounts) and of course from other painters," says Lynch.

Lynch uses masking techniques to create collage like textures which evoke an almost digital quality. "In my case I'm combining a lot of painterly applications on a singular surface, working between thick and thin, matte and gloss, and opacity and transparency," explains Lynch. For Lynch the landscape symbolizes "time, eternity, change, impermanence, life and death. All of the things that are bigger than you and I." A genuine and prophetic statement and piece of wisdom from Lynch that truly resonates in his canvases.



TUSSLE: There are visual dualities with digital technologies vs painting technologies in your work, it looks like you are sometimes emulating layered photographs of ground coverings and contrasts in figurative and abstract forms. The silhouette collage-like objects and nondescript figures. Can you introduce us to your process while painting your landscapes? What types of aids do you use etc.?

GAVIN LYNCH: I hear this quite a bit from viewers, that my work presents some parallels between the digital and analog realms, although I've always thought of my process in relation to collage, and the act of combining various pictorial elements on a single picture plane. In my case I'm combining a lot of painterly applications on a singular surface, working between thick and thin, matte and gloss, and opacity and transparency. A lot of people ask if the paint itself has been somehow dried, cut and adhered to the surface, but it's just paint applied through a variety of masks and stencils. Most gestures and marks made with brushes or palette knives are generally truncated by the beginning and end points of the stencils and are thus contained in a weird way ~ I think this is where some people are inclined to speak to the intersection with digital technologies, at least on an aesthetic level.

TUSSLE: Who are the figures in your work?

GAVIN LYNCH: For the most part they've been historical figures or my family, although they're generally, as you mentioned, nondescript. In the case of *The Pass*, which was a painting installation displayed at Carleton University Art Gallery in 2015, the figures therein were historical people who had inhabited or traversed the Yellowhead Pass between the years 1830 and 1945 and again, my family. That piece was meant to operate as a non-linear history painting and as such the same figures appeared in many different manifestations and contexts, reflecting the varying histories and stories of that region that had been passed onto me through my research. Generally my figures are emptied out of a lot of visual information and are meant to operate in more of a narrative manner.

TUSSLE: Have you witnessed the Canadian landscape physically change in your lifetime? If yes, how? Do environmental concerns impact how you view and ultimately paint the Canadian landscape?

GAVIN LYNCH: Growing up in northern British Columbia, I witnessed physical changes to the landscape from a young age; I have memories of camping on clear cut logging blocks, of watching the forest across from my childhood house gradually disappear, of seeing the devastation of forest fires. All of which seemed pretty normal, growing up in a remote logging community. Probably more worrisome than the physical and visual reminders of our presence in nature are the undeniable changes in climate ~ the fiercely cold and long winters of my childhood are no longer a reality, the forest fire seasons have intensified with droughts, and flash floods and washouts have become springtime norms. Sometimes it feels as though we are living near the end of our time on the planet, to say this isn't something that occupies my psychic space would be a lie. Although my current exhibition is dealing with imagined landscapes (and the destruction thereof), my next show is thematically rooted in the Yukon and will definitely have an aspect that represents our human impact on the landscape.

TUSSLE: What does the landscape symbolize to you?

GAVIN LYNCH: Time, eternity, change, impermanence, life and death. All of the things that are bigger than you and I.

TUSSLE: For your recent exhibition, "Total Eclipse of My Heart", at Angell Gallery in Toronto, you are moving away from the Canadian viewpoint and into a more tropical one. For example, Henri Rousseau painted "imaginary" landscapes as he had never actually traveled to these places. Where is your tropical imagery filtering from?

GAVIN LYNCH: Yes, I've definitely been spending some quality time with Henri Rousseau! Originally I had planned to travel abroad to somewhere tropical to do some research and start collecting imagery for the studio, however, upon some serious consideration I decided against it: historically there's a really bad track record of privileged white western male painters going abroad and painting the "exotic". Heavy quotes there, historically speaking. It seemed a lot more ethical, not to mention interesting, to begin from a painterly place that resisted this historical position and thus the imaginary landscape became my starting point. As painters often do, I try to cultivate a rich inner world, why not use that as my departure point? My tropical imagery came from a variety of places: my imagination, Rousseau's paintings (his red sun makes many appearances in the show), botanical gardens, my wife Genevieve and I's collection of tropical house plants (some of which are in the exhibition), the internet (in particular jungle themed Instagram accounts) and of course from other painters. There are bits and pieces of Hockney, Gauguin and Matisse lurking around in these paintings. I may have stolen a palm tree or two from Silke Otto-Knapp. Same for Comte de Clarac. Rousseau cobbled together his jungles from a variety of sources so it seemed befitting to follow suit.

TUSSLE: How does your exhibition title "Total Eclipse of My Heart" tie into these tropical landscapes?

GAVIN LYNCH: The show as a narrative revolves/orbits around the celestial event of an eclipse, the blacking out of both Rousseau's sun and my imaginary landscapes, after which the jungle is set ablaze and presumably destroyed, although we never see the aftermath. As such, I suppose the title is a playful nod to both endings and new beginnings (both in my art practice and in relation to nature itself) through the eternal genius of Bonnie Tyler. (laughing) I especially love the line in the song "...forever is going to start tonight," which, taken in the context of the exhibition (and in relation to our place on the planet), could speak more to our own annihilation than affairs of the heart.

TUSSLE: Do you ever consider that you are re-imagining the convention of landscape painting compared to historical Canadian Landscape painters or your contemporaries?

GAVIN LYNCH: To be honest it'd probably be really unhealthy as a painter to compare myself to others working within the genre, although I do hope to challenge my own conventions and practice. Of course if someone someday thought I'd challenged the conventions of the genre I'd be flattered! I'm increasingly interested in the genre's narrative capacity to tell stories, including our own, especially when the human figure is absent. The painted mystical landscape is something that has always fascinated me, historically speaking there are so many exemplary examples: Burchfield, Munch, O'Keefe, Carr, etc. There are a lot of fine examples of contemporary painters working in this sort of psychological zone right now as well: Matthew F. Fischer, Ryan Schneider, Kim Dorland.

TUSSLE: Can you share your top three books that have influenced you in your life?

GAVIN LYNCH: James Elkins' *What Painting Is*, W.J.T Mitchell's *Landscape and Power*, and Neal Stephenson's *The Baroque Cycle*, a beautiful mix of history, fiction, adventure, comedy, science, economics and romance, even.

TUSSLE: What has been a seminal experience in your artistic career and how did it change the way you make art?

GAVIN LYNCH: Meeting my future/current wife, artist/researcher/educator Genevieve Cloutier at Emily Carr, whose critical eye has kept watch and guided me ever since; she's a huge part of my daily practice. She's very good at letting me know when things are good, but not good enough. I came to painting quite late and without her support I'm not sure I would have kept at it during our early years as students and parents.