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Steve Driscoll + Finn O'Hara: Size Matters

The McMichael Gallery – home to the acclaimed Group of Seven collection – bridges the stark boundary between the natural and man-made worlds. It was the Group's mandate to establish a distinct Canadian cultural identity by bringing the wonders of the country's landscapes to the galleries. Many Canadian artists have used this for their own inspiration, and Steve Driscoll and Finn O'Hara advance it even further through *Size Matters*: a collaborative exhibition combining Driscoll's unique "alchemist" paintings and the magnificent atmospheric photography of O'Hara. Although technology progresses society towards urbanization, Millennials are increasingly allured back to nature. Driscoll and O'Hara strive to insert vibrant and naturalistic scenes back into the concrete jungles. Brilliant images of lakes, rivers, and forests are planted into impromptu cityscapes and outdoor areas.



Finn O'Hara & Steve Driscoll, *For a Moment*, 2014, Digital Chromogenic Print, 45" x 60"

Driscoll's painting is unique; they are by no means paintings in traditional understanding. Rather than resort to classic oil, acrylic, or watercolor mediums on ordinary canvas, he blends colored pigments with urethane chemicals, which gives the works a luminous sheen. His style is much more animated and dynamic, with explosions and streams of color flooding the styrene surface (a compound commonly used for credit cards).



Steve Driscoll, *Snow Covered Morning*, 2016, Urethane on plastic panel, 108" x 80"

Moreover, the pieces are sizably large, often dividing into multiple panels. In doing so, this establishes a monumental sense of scale that surrounds the viewer. As only example, *What Myth* consists of three huge panels, covering an entire corner of the

gallery space. It depicts the aurora borealis with mixture of vibrant colors that is then illuminated with gallery lights. Standing between the panels gives the feeling of being surrounded by the Northern Lights, and the harmony of colors leaves much for the viewer to explore. Appropriate to the gallery setting, Driscoll owes much of his inspiration to the Group of Seven, having traveled out into the Canadian wilderness himself, seeking original ways in bringing its awe and wonder to urban galleries.



Installation view with Steve Driscoll, *What Myth*, 2016, Urethane on three plastic panels

With these landscapes, O'Hara then introduces them to settings "foreign to the production and even subject matter of the paintings themselves." His history of photography strives for cinematic effect and strong visual storytelling.



Finn O'Hara & Steve Driscoll, *Some Roads Were Not Made For Such Journeys*, 2017, Digital Chromogenic Print, 59" x 79"

The depiction of the aurora borealis now appears in the on a busy Toronto intersection; an image of a rising sun peering through towering trees stands in contrast to a darkened forest shrouded in fog; and a painting of a sun-bathed shoreline is now being playfully held by an exuberant Steve Driscoll standing in a river.



Finn O'Hara & Steve Driscoll, *A River Can Grant You Visions*, 2014, Digital Cromogenic Print, 45" x 60"

O'Hara's photographs range from dramatic and deeply contemplative moments to ones that are more witty and candid. Like Driscoll, he offers plenty to explore, even beyond the inserted paintings. The sheer detail and quality of these works encourage viewers to study the scenes closely and absorb as much of the laden stories as possible.



Finn O'Hara & Steve Driscoll, *Safely Through the World of Dreams*, 2016, Digital Cromogenic Print, 45" x 60"

Size Matters delivers on its promise of scale. Aside from the works themselves being large in size, the landscapes they represent are sprawling and bustling with activity. The combination of Driscoll's vivacious colors and sheer energy with O'Hara's astute attention to detail and captivating narratives offers a strong visual experience with plenty to see and explore.

Text and photo: Simon Termine

*Exhibition information: March 11 – August 20, 2017, part of Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, A Primary Exhibition organized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 10365 Islington Ave, Kleinburg, ON. Gallery hours: Mon – Sun, 10 am – 5 pm.