

How Kim Dorland is changing the landscape at McMichael Gallery

The Toronto painter grapples with the spectre of Tom Thomson to show that landscape painting has its place in contemporary art.

By: **Murray Whyte** Visual arts, Published on Fri Oct 18 2013



NICK KOZAK / FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Kim Dorland, photographed in his Toronto studio, plans to "let the viewer into my brain" with an expansive at the McMichael Gallery.

When the McMichael Canadian Art Collection snared Kim Dorland as the torch-bearer for their all-new artist-in-residence program, the Toronto painter had to lay down some ground rules — like, say, regarding the suggestion he spend a day painting in Tom Thomson's relocated shack on the gallery's grounds for the ogling masses.

"Right off the bat, I said 'no way,'" laughed Dorland. "I mean, as if that would happen. I wasn't interested in making it this showy thing. I wanted to show that painting, and landscape painting, can be a contemporary practice."

If that was the intention, then Dorland gets his wish, and in spades. On Oct. 26, all five of the McMichael's upper galleries will be devoted to Dorland's thoroughly contemporary take when it opens *You Are Here: Kim Dorland and the Return to Painting*. The show is the product of four feverish months of painting in the artist's Dufferin St. studio, along with select works borrowed from collectors here and abroad.

All-in, a solid two-dozen of the artist's full-sized canvases — six by eight feet is about

a standard-sized Dorland; one, a three-panel effort called *French River*, spans 18 feet in width, and eight tall — will hang in the gallery until January, along with hundreds of photographs, sketches and studies that look to illustrate his process. “It’s to let the viewer into my brain,” he says.

Even with all that, he’s not going it alone: Sprinkled throughout the galleries amid Dorland’s works will be pieces by such mainstays of the McMichael collection as David Milne, Frederick Varley, Emily Carr and, in more-than-prominent fashion, Tom Thomson.

The prospect of going face-to-face with such iconic figures was a worrisome one for Dorland, and for a whole breadth of reasons. The most daunting, perhaps, has been the McMichael’s troublesome history of being seen as a tomb of Canadian historical art left preserved in amber and beyond reproach.

Recent years have seen the museum slowly emerge from the shadow of its founders, Robert and Signe McMichael, whose disdain for contemporary art being shown alongside their beloved collection of Group of Seven paintings landed the gallery in the Supreme Court over Robert’s constant protestations.

Even so, the recovery has been slow, and the gallery still bears up under the weight of expectation, both from an art community that sits eager to dismiss it, and a constituency of members still bound to the gallery’s outdated, patriotic reverence regarding its core collection.

All of which lands Dorland, like it or not, at the crossroads of the McMichael’s path forward. “Should be interesting, that’s for sure,” says Dorland, with a mildly dubious grin. “I think we’re all going in a little bit hopeful, and a little bit nervous.”

As much a risk as the show might be for the gallery, it’s very much a calculated one. Chief curator Katerina Atanassova is as tuned in as any with a recent and ongoing reconsideration of the Group of Seven. You could call it a reclamation effort, to see the Group less as beloved patriotic artistic chestnuts, and more as full-blooded Modernist painters in sync with the early 20th century’s most trenchant aesthetic upheavals.

That point of view got its most prominent airing with the recent exhibition *Painting Canada* exhibition, mounted by London’s Dulwich Picture Gallery two years ago, which traveled to the McMichael last fall. Atanassova was a co-curator of the exhibition, and the juxtaposition of the Group with Dorland’s aggressively contemporary take on things is both knowing sacrilege and makes perfect sense.

It will, however, be a challenge for some, namely the aging cohort of McMichael devotees who like their painting served with a cup of tea and an air of reverence. Their discomfort notwithstanding, consider for a moment Dorland’s own. While the show will include works by several of the McMichael’s historical artists, Thomson figures into Dorland’s world as a painter more than any other.

Grappling, in a very public way, with the spectre of Thomson wasn't a task he took lightly. He named his son after him, for one thing, and counts him as an early influence. "There were lots of others — Georg Baselitz, Peter Doig," he says. "But Thomson was my first."

In one room, Dorland pays homage with what he calls "a Thomson shrine," with several works he painted about the woodsy painter, who died in a mysterious accident on Canoe Lake in 1917, at age 39 (coincidentally, the same age Dorland is now). For the show, he made the trip, surveying the lake that claimed Thomson with equal parts awe and dread. "It was like walking into one of his sketches," he said. "But there was also this creepy, Shining-esque vibe. It was really humbling."

He was asked to respond to specific pieces from the collection, and naturally, Thomson looms large. One, *French River*, the 18-footer, is Dorland's liberal impression of an enigmatic oil sketch by Thomson, measuring less than 2 feet square. Another, *Woodland Waterfall*, at six by eight feet, pays homage to Thomson's four-by-four canvas of the same name.

Scale isn't the only difference. As a painter, Dorland manipulates surface and texture by astounding degree. Some portions of a single painting are dead-flat, images dusted lightly on canvas by airbrush; others mound up thick clots of paint in a textural snarl that threatens to overwhelm the image itself.

In *Woodland Waterfall*, the Dorland version, thick, icy strokes of white and blue tumble forth less like liquid and more as static bars of pure colour. "When you're dealing with only the landscape, you have to tune up the material a lot to push it into an interesting, uncomfortable place," says Dorland, matter-of-fact. "I always said that if I produce something that's strictly just beautiful, I failed. My biggest fear is that my paintings go up somewhere and then become inert."

Looking at this body of work, not to mention the solid decade or so of Dorland's production, there's little danger of that. Which, really, isn't so different from Thomson himself. The winter before his death, Thomson produced what many believe to be his signature masterpiece, *The Jack Pine*. In it, a scraggly tree drapes in the foreground of a dusky lake scene, the sky built with bricks of colour — yellow and ochre, pale greens and blues.

"That's a really uncomfortable painting, in a good way," nods Dorland. And speaking of uncomfortable, there's a good and a bad. The good, in this show, will be a corridor lined with sketches, Thomson's on one side, Dorland's on the other. "It's not me versus him," he says. "It's me saying this guy is amazing and these are the works I did in response."

As for the bad, Dorland's been able to rein that in, for the most part. "They wanted to put life-sized sepia-toned photos of Thomson and me side by side, at the entrance," he says, cringing. "I flat-out refused. I don't want to be Tom junior. I want to engage with my influences, but do my own thing, too."