

You Are Here, 2013, oil and acrylic on jute over wood panel, 20 x 16 inches. Photograph: Eden Robbins. Courtesy the artist.

Painting's Giant Dialogue

An interview with Kim Dorland

by Robert Enright

In June of last year, Kim Dorland began a four-month-long project that culminated in “You Are Here: Kim Dorland and the Return to Painting,” an exhibition on view at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario from October 26, 2013 to January 5, 2014. While some work was borrowed from public collections, the majority of the paintings (including 40 small works and 10 medium-to-large works) were made during the McMichael’s inaugural Artists-in-Residence Program. They were a response to paintings in the Kleinburg collection by members of the Group of Seven, David Milne and Emily Carr, all artists Dorland has acknowledged as influential in his own practice. His was not a residency of presence (his way of working meant that he had to have access to his Toronto studio), but rather a residency in spirit. He was able to engage the painters he admired, foremost among them, Tom Thomson, and to respond generally to their art, as well as to specific paintings. These works were deconstructed conceptually so that Dorland could repaint them in his own way. This process of imaginative forensics resulted in paintings of remarkable intensity.

“You Are Here” represented a triumph of painterly translation. In his relationship to the source paintings, Dorland was uninterested in the appropriation gambit; his approach was determined more by appreciation than by ironic mimicry. The exhibition is deeply respectful. Dorland regards painting as an “agitation” and his intention was to produce the same degree of uncomfortableness in the looking at the paintings as he experienced in their making. “My idea was always simple,” he says in the following interview, “...make the viewer be both seduced and repulsed by the painting at the same time.”

What emerges in “You Are Here” is more seduction than repulsion. Dorland pulls out all the painterly stops, including paint so thick it has to be nailed to the surface, a palette of spectral acidity, and a conscious choice to jettison any compositional expectations. But the overall effect of these decisions is a range of inexplicable control, and the making of paintings that run from the serene to the ravishing. Dorland’s paintings shouldn’t be what they end up being. The portraits, for all their digressions, are likenesses; the landscapes, in spite of their willful improbabilities, are recognizable places. They are able to insist, simultaneously, in being pure paintings and paintings of recognizable things, places and individuals.

I don’t want to give the impression that Dorland has only sung the Canadian national anthem in his borrowings. He admires a number of painters and acknowledges their presence without prejudice. You can discern his appreciation of Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach (one of his best portraits of his wife, *Untitled*, has the parenthetical subtitle, *Lori, for FA*). The wall that he pulled out of his studio and reconstituted for the McMichael exhibition is like a mind scan of the influences available to him in the making of his work; on it you can read traces of Edvard Munch, Van Gogh, Georg Baselitz and Peter Doig, the latter trio being the artists he most admires.

In an earlier conversation, Dorland described himself as “an omnivore who doesn’t hide from my influences” and an enthusiastic participant in what he calls “the giant dialogue” with the tradition of painting. His openness to the voices that are integral to that dialogue is a particular strength, and in his intense conversation with the artists he encountered at the McMichael, and the ones he imported from the wider community of his imagination, he has found a way to make paintings that are thoroughly his own. The paintings in “You Are Here” represent the most accomplished work in his 20-year career.

The following interview was conducted in Toronto on November 29, 2013.

BORDER CROSSINGS: When did you first get involved in the landscape?

KIM DORLAND: We would spend a month or two every year in my wife's family cabin in Northern Saskatchewan. I don't go deep into the landscape, or hunt, or anything like that. But every time I was there I would take hundreds of photographs and bring back the experience with me. There's a painting from 2006 of the northern lights that is a direct experience in nature.

There's also a painting from the same year of a dilapidated trailer in the forest called *New Home*. That's my grandpa's trailer. He was a drinker and he lost his family. He moved from this very nice suburban house into this not-so-nice house. It wasn't a trailer but I called it *New Home* because I thought it was a portrait of him. It's a sad painting really—there is this starving dog in the front and beer cans everywhere.

So there is a depressed side to the landscape too, then. It's not all brightness and splendour?

Not at all. I would say that 90 percent of the landscapes I have painted have some kind of interruption or interference. For me it was always about shining a light on that. This show is an anomaly because it's about interacting with the permanent collection and I wanted to do it in a way that would pay respect to the artists.

How did it work?

There were two ways the artist-in-residence thing could have gone; I could have been on the grounds physically doing work but I wasn't so interested in that, mostly because I need access to spray paint and my airbrush machine. Also, the scale of my work and the amount of material I use made it impossible. So for me it turned into an exploration of the collection. There were some specific paintings that I wanted to respond to by Thomson and JEH Macdonald, as well as a very weird Franz Johnson. With a few David Milne paintings I thought there was a nice relationship with a show that I had done in New York that included works that paid homage to his sense of colour and space. Then afterwards we brought all my work into the gallery and Katerina Atanassova, the curator of the exhibition, picked a bunch of paintings that she thought worked with what I had done, especially in the Thomson hall.

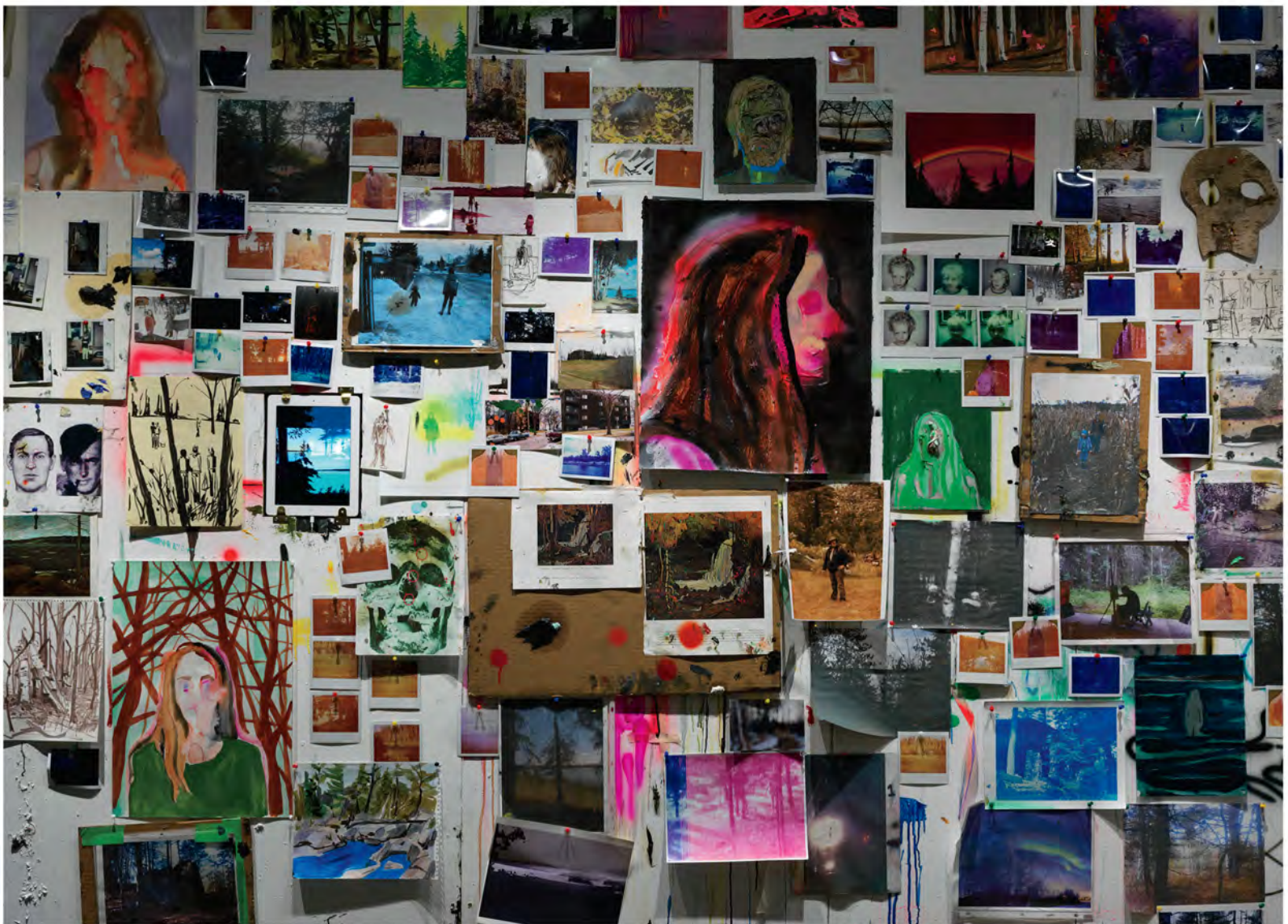
What was your reaction when you saw the large number of Tom Thomson paintings on the long hallway opposite your own small works?

My plan was always to do that room and my biggest fear was that it could become confrontational. I didn't want to go toe-to-toe with Tom Thomson for many reasons, mostly because of my utmost respect for him as a painter. I also didn't want to set myself up as this cocky person who would attempt something like that. So I walked into this hallway and all my works were on the floor on one side and all his works were on the floor on the other side. It was a very freaky moment. I'm looking at Thomson's sketches, these masterpieces, and I thought I must be crazy

1. Installation view "You Are Here: Kim Dorland and the Return to Painting," McMichael Canadian Art Collection, October 26, 2013 to January 5, 2014. From left to right: *French River*, 2013, oil and acrylic on jute over wood panels, 96 x 216 inches, *Fuck Love*, 2008, oil, acrylic, spray paint and ink on wood panel, 72 x 96 inches, *Green Tree*, *Blue Tree*, 2008, oil, acrylic and spray paint on wood panel, 60 x 60 inches. Photographs: Eden Robbins.

2. Installation view "You Are Here: Kim Dorland and the Return to Painting," McMichael Canadian Art Collection, October 26, 2013 to January 5, 2014.





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Following pages:

1. JEH MacDonald, *In November*, 1917, oil on paperboard, 53.6 x 66 cm. McMichael Collection, purchase 1972.

2. Tom Thomson, *Woodland Waterfall*, 1916–1917, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 132.5 cm. McMichael Collection, purchase 1977 with Funds Donated by The W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

3. Kim Dorland, *Zombies #3/Family*, 2013, oil and acrylic on jute over wood panel, 72 x 96 inches. Photograph: Eden Robbins.

4. Kim Dorland, *Woodland Waterfall (after Tom Thomson)*, 2013, oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas over wood panel, 72 x 96 inches. Photograph: Eden Robbins.

doing this. But once we got it set up it was okay; Thomson is generally arranged in a geometric way and we made sure that my paintings were set up in an organic way.

What is it about Thomson that you respond to in such a passionate way?

I am very attracted to his myth. He wasn't the most talented or naturally gifted member of the Group, I think Lawren Harris was more elegantly talented, but Thomson was self-taught and he was rough. He got better and better and better through the work, and that is also how I proceed. He was also a brilliant colourist and the way he used material is just perfect.

You come at his myth in two ways; in *Seconds Before*, one version has him standing in his canoe urinating before he falls and drowns.

Yes, it's a little joke. I was leading the Emma Lake Workshop when I did that painting, so I was steeped in that sort of narrative. I was able

to pick perspectives on his death and play with them. It was also the first time that I had painted *en plein air*.

In the studio wall room there is also the painting of what was purported to be his skull set against a bed of autumnal leaves.

That painting is based on the three or four ghouls who dug up his body in 1956. That was the skull they pulled up. It is such a fascinating image of debauchery: digging up a dead body and then taking pictures. There was something so garish about what they did that I had to paint it.

You paint it in such a way that there is an indentation on the surface. The hole in the skull suggests that foul play was involved in his death, so you engage another variation on the myth.

I highlighted the hole and made it the most obvious part. But I was also interested in the formal thing of altering the canvas. It was nice to be able to physically carve the hole. The leaves in

the background were in the photograph. I actually made the pilgrimage up there in the fall and those are definitely true colours.

In the same room you pair that Thanatos painting with a larger painting showing a *Playboy* centrefold pinned to a tree. You bring Eros into nature.

The original idea for that room was to bring my studio into the gallery, which viewers don't often get to see. When I read a biography of an artist my favourite parts are always the photos of the detritus lying around the studio. The centrefold painting was based on an actual experience where I was walking through the woods alone, happily dreaming, and when I looked to my left there were these porn magazines strewn about the forest floor. Suddenly I wasn't alone any more; I was in the presence of this sinister very male thing.

Your centrefold does something that isn't much evident in the *Group of Seven* and that is the introduction of a human presence. In your work that presence is always comprised of you, your wife Lori and your children. Your signature in the landscape is to bring yourself into the picture.

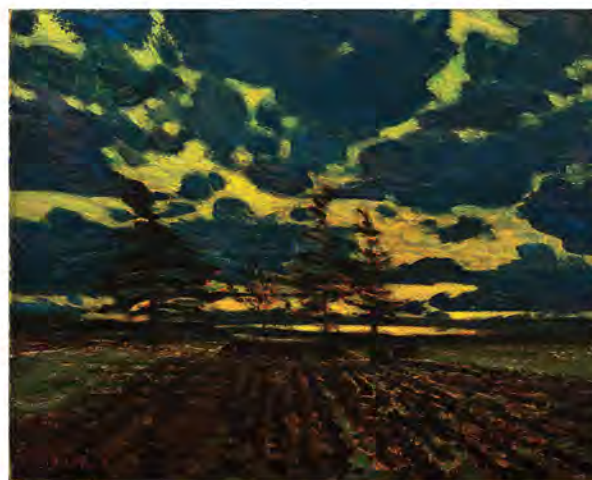
This show definitely highlights my influences but the other point of the show was to show that I'm not carrying the torch of the *Group of Seven*; I'm not Tom Junior. When I signed on that was a concern. Sometimes your decisions can pigeonhole you, so I wanted to be clear that, yes, I have my influences, but I have my own thing, too. One of those things was to take pristine nature and find ways to subvert it by bringing in that sinister edge. *Centrefold* is like that and that is why I started doing graffiti on the trees, like in *Fuck Love*. It is presence without being present—an idea that I like a lot. I think it also reflects my experience of nature, especially deep nature, where a primal kind of fear occurs. I show that through the phantoms or the Sasquatches or the graffiti.

In a previous conversation you told me that the Sasquatch is a self-portrait. Is he an aspect of you in nature?

I think so. Or the Sasquatch is equally a portrait of someone like Tom Thomson. It's something mythic that can't be pinned down. I think there is something tragically interesting about that type of figure. I mean, they're scary but they're sad and alone.

Yours is essentially a romantic view of nature. Even the painting of the zombie family is not frightening. You don't quite know what they're doing in the landscape at midnight but they're not going to cause anyone any trouble. What is also interesting is that the painting clearly takes as its point of departure JEH MacDonald's *In November* from 1917.

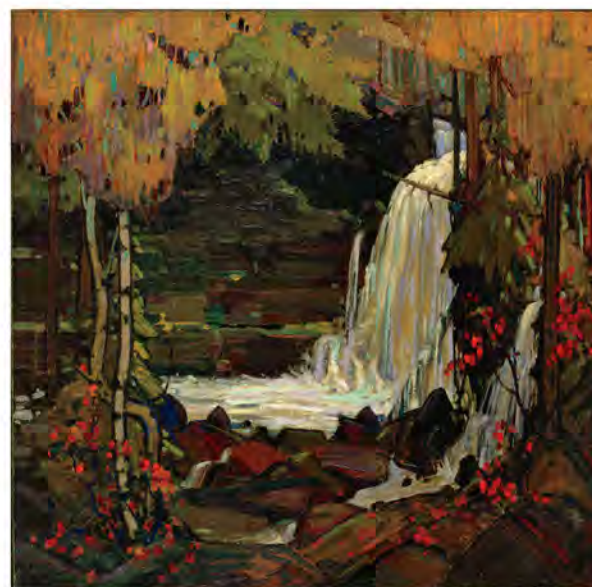
I adore my family and that painting is about being a family man. But it's also about how hard it is to be a family person. It's not only the father and mother who feel that, but the kids feel it, too. So it dealt with the whole idea of that sometime drudgery. I also liked creating a narrative that made no sense, like why are they walking into the woods so late at night?



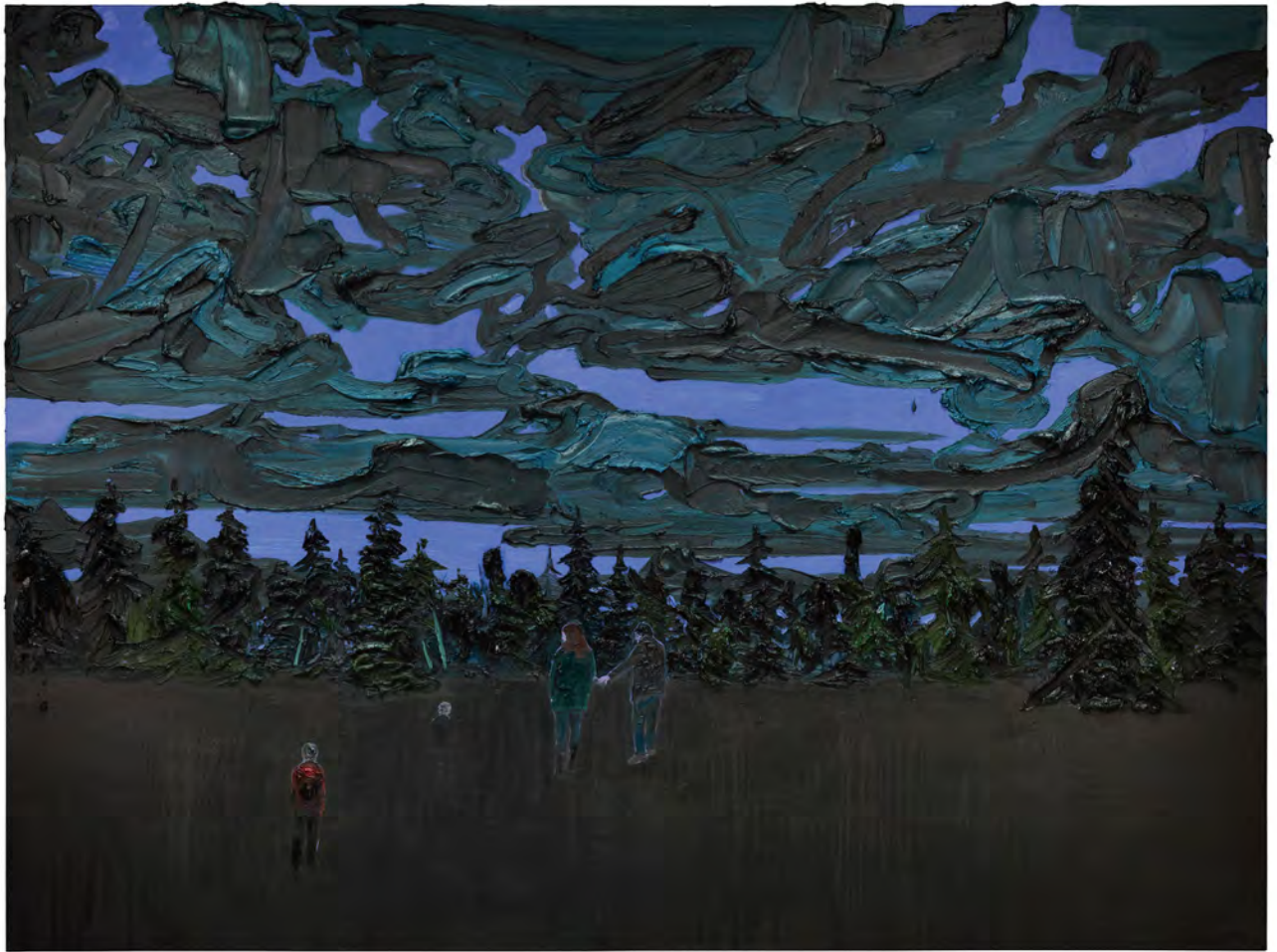
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I am very attracted to Tom Thomson's myth. He was self-taught and he was rough. He got better and better and better through the work, and that is also how I proceed.

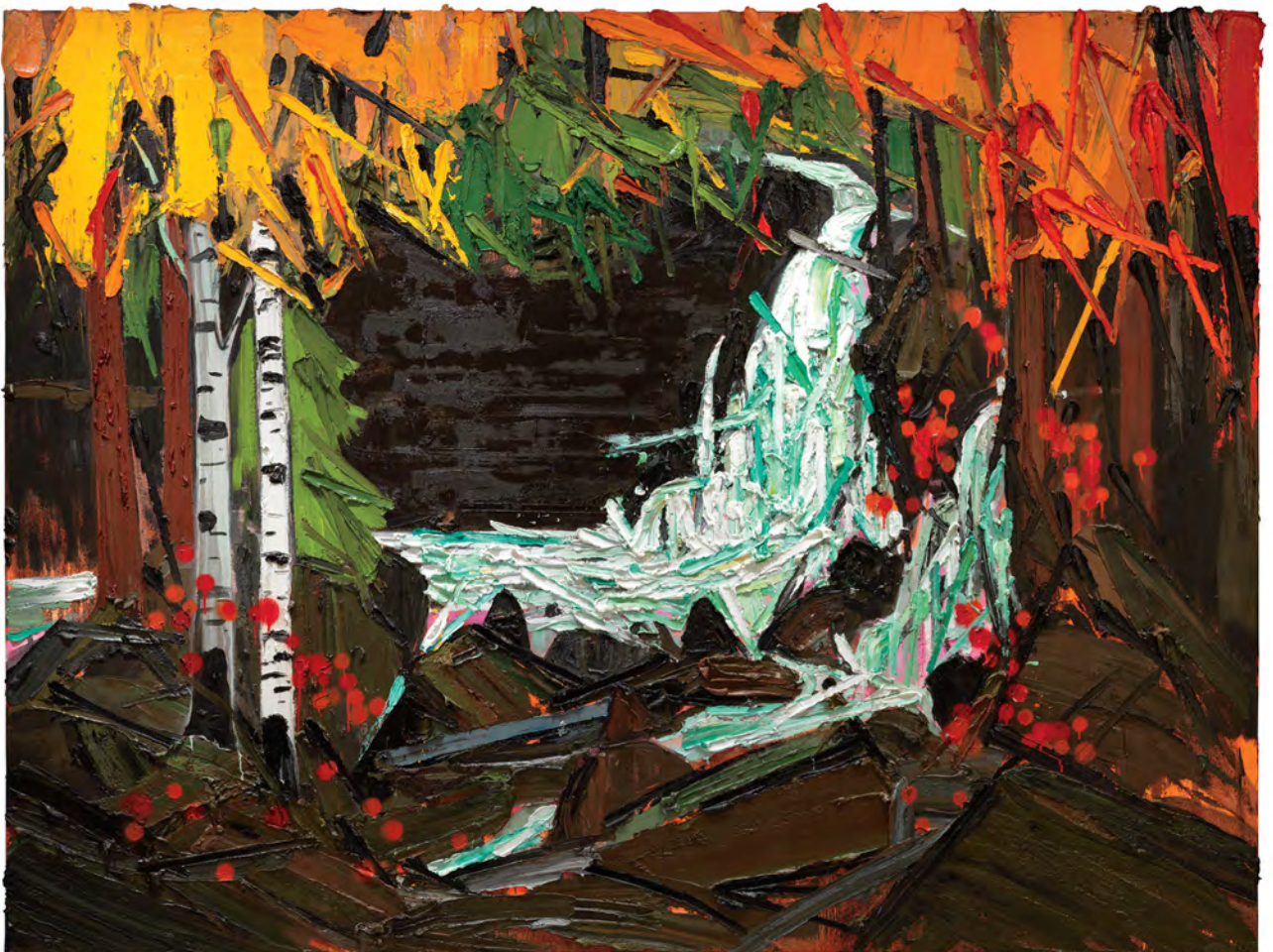
My idea was always simple: make it evident that it is a painting and make the viewer be both seduced by the painting and repulsed by it at the same time.



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The noticeable formal quality is the build-up of thick paint in the sky. The material tribute to the MacDonald is there.

I really responded to the way he made light in that sky. The time of day and this time of year is perfect for me because everything becomes paintable, so that was my response to the melancholy nature of that painting. My idea was to take the beautiful sky and also the mid-ground trees, the middle distance, and change the colour. It is a pretty simple composition so it gives me licence to do something crazy with the clouds.

That notion of where you are as the maker, and where we are as viewers in the pieces, is interesting. In the larger overall frame of the painting, the figures are often too small; the landscape rising above them is disproportionate to their size, and because of the nature of the marks, things become almost abstract. Is that a deliberate playing around with scale and spatial relationships?

I'll use any way to make my figures and the viewer uncomfortable. I'm not interested in a compositionally correct painting. There is a painting in the studies hallway of a figure smoking and everything is wrong about it; the linen is too thick, the figure is wonky and is totally minor inside the big landscape. For me, all those components build to something that is psychologically more intense and more interesting.

Why do you want to disrupt the viewer's experience?

Even when I was doing representation with a bit of abstraction added, my idea was always simple: make it evident that it is a painting and make the viewer be both seduced by the painting and repulsed by it at the same time. I'm just realizing this, but comfort for me is almost not possible. I'm not a comfortable person and ultimately the paintings are all about me.



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So your paintings are self-portraits in that they are psychological renderings of how you don't fit in the world.

I think that's dead on. I love what I do, I love the act of making things but it's not a comfortable relationship. Painting is an agitation.

You use paint in very different ways throughout the exhibition. I'm thinking of the *Portrait of Tom Thomson*, 2009, wearing his trademark hat, which has an especially thick application of paint. How do you determine how much paint you have to layer on?

The painting always tells me. The portraits tend to work that way because they require a lot of time, and I'm trying to make the painting the sitter in a way. So it isn't just what they look like; it's what they seem like, what they feel like. Hopefully I'm capturing something of Lori or my kids when I paint them. But when it comes to other paintings in the show there is no ingredients list; I just feel this space should be more solid and for me solid is a lot of paint. It's a very intuitive process. I still need to tack the paint onto the surface. In the Tom Thomson portrait the paint is screwed in. I work the portraits in layers. I work on the painting and let it dry for six months on its back, put in some screws, and start building again.

When I first saw the Thomson portrait I thought of Glenn Brown.



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1. David Milne, *Blue Interior*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 46 cm. McMichael Collection, purchase 1972. Courtesy McMichael Collection.

2. Kim Dorland, *Dripping Dream (Emma Lake)*, 2013, oil on jute over panel, 80 x 80 inches. Photograph: Joseph Hartman.

3. Kim Dorland, *Nothern Lights*, 2006, oil and acrylic on canvas over wood panel, 60 x 72 inches. Photograph: Eden Robbins.

4. Kim Dorland, *Green Tree, Blue Tree*, 2008, oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Photograph: Eden Robbins.

He is not someone whom I actively look at but Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff were both big influences on my work. They're heavy painters.

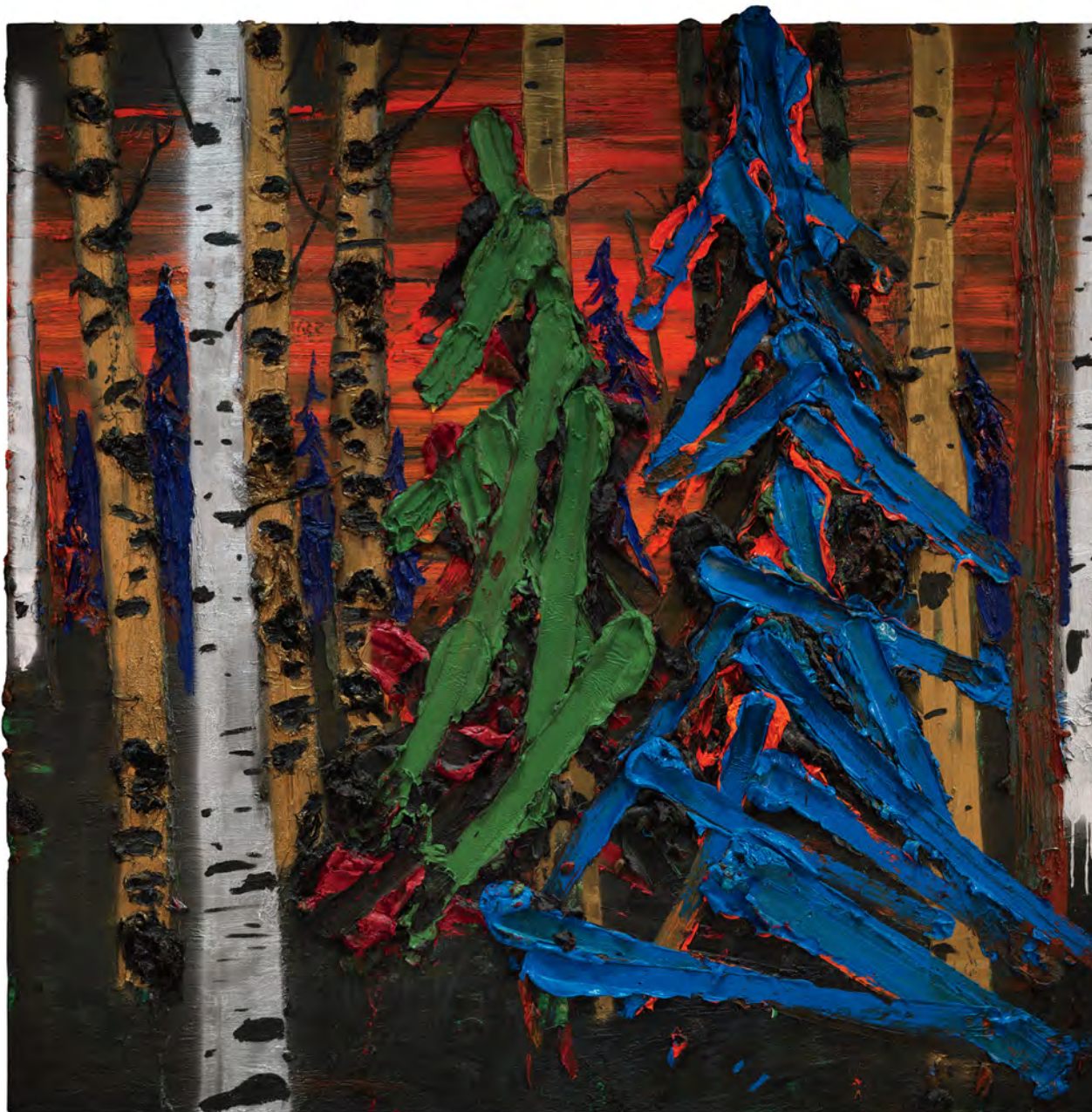


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I don't know why the Brits do portraits so well, but man they do have it with Auerbach, Kossoff and Freud. I'm an omnivore when it comes to my paintings, so this show is definitely about the influence of Thomson and the Group, but there are countless more influences. I don't hide from them.

Looking at the studio wall some of the smaller portraits of Lori are very Munch-like. He spooks your landscapes on occasion.

I'm attracted to the charge of Munch's paintings. They have so much emotion and there is something special about his ability to convey his own sense of alienation and dread. He was such an elegant colourist and had such a refined but rough line. He was full of contradictions, which usually makes for good work.



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So do your contradictions emerge naturally or do you have to cultivate them?

The contradictions are very natural. I think if you start to think too much it can kill the art. I do what interests me. A better way to answer your question is that I'm not so deliberate in my choices.

One of the intriguing things about the studio wall is that it acts like a brain scan. You use your own photographs, found images and historical photographs. Is any image grist for the pictorial mill?

Anything. Some paintings are done directly from a single photograph I've taken; others are from a number of photographs; and sometimes I'll need another piece of information. I would love to be the kind of artist who can work straight out of his head but I get lost really quickly. I started as an abstract painter but once I decided I didn't want to do that anymore, I needed the grounding of the image.

One of the things you employ in the paintings is an intense line, in the *Dripping Dream* paintings for example. When I look at those I think of Milne. You take the chair in *Blue Interior*, 1913, and set it in the landscape as part of your *en plein air* studio.

My show in New York was a love letter to Milne, or at least a letter of respect. He is one of the most sophisticated and deadpan painters I've ever seen. I think he is an amazing artist. There are three paintings in the exhibition that are directly influenced by him, certainly *Dripping Dream*, which incidentally, is my favourite. The easels in the woods are from photos I took at Emma Lake. The crazy thing is that you would go walking into the woods and you would find an easel. Somebody may have been too lazy to bring it back or forgot that they had left it there. But it created this eerie, weird feeling, especially now that the workshops are closed down.

So now the forest is literally a ghost studio?

Yes.

Because of the way I read the show I thought of the easel without a painter as another reference to Thomson. I thought of the absent painter. Then in the title piece of the exhibition you're standing at that same easel. So mixed in together are present and absent painters.

It is up to the viewer to decide which painter is absent, which generates a nice psychological tension with that painting. I was actually freaked out working *en plein air* because it is overwhelmingly hard. There is so much going on, you have to

pick points, you have to edit on the spot and you generally have just a teeny little panel because you want it to be portable. So with *Dripping Dream* and *You Are Here*, I had to psychologically place myself inside that situation and I had to do it through my own paintings.



What was it like leading the workshops at Emma Lake in 2009?

Even though I'm not an abstract painter, I happen to love that more typical work of Barnett Newman and the post-painterly abstractionists. I thought Jules Olitski was a pretty interesting painter and William Pehudoff was there. If you notice in a lot of my works the rectangle is a bit skewed, so there is a little edge of fluorescent at the top. When I led the Workshop in 2009 it was very different than it had been. The main focus was landscape painting, although there were a couple of abstract painters there who I liked a lot, including Jonathan Forrest. But I could feel the ghosts of the people who had been there. I thought it was a pretty amazing place. The landscape of Waskesiu, which is north of Emma Lake, is a little bit different, more majestic.

1. Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Heavy Beams)*, 2011, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photographs: Eden Robbins.

2. Kim Dorland, *Fuck Love*, 2008, oil, acrylic, spray paint and ink on wood panel, 72 x 96 inches.

3. Kim Dorland, *Sasquatch/Shoreline*, 2013, oil and acrylic on linen over wood panel, 11 x 14 inches.

Your paintings engage an interesting dialogue with representation. In some of the landscapes very dark trees painted in very black paint can be read quite realistically. It's almost *trompe l'oeil*. Were you deliberately evocating a certain kind of Realism?



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There are two things going on. When I make oil paint look like something it's not, when I'm carving a relief or something, I want it to represent that kind of physicality. So the trees in the background of *Dripping Dream* have that lusciousness. But there is another thing that is fun to do and that is to play with perspective, so the trees that are closest are the flattest, and the ones that are

farthest away are the thickest. It's another way to take the viewer's expectations and turn them on their head. I want to do that but in a way that isn't the first thing you notice.

You want the play because it would be boring to have the same depth across the entire surface of the painting?

It is all about what painting does best and that is grabbing the viewer and holding them. To do that everything has to be working. In my case I'm not so interested in beauty for beauty's sake, so there have to be other things going on.

One of the intriguing things about seeing the iPads encased in the studio wall is that you realize your cross-country trip gave you lots of flaring as you videotaped outside the car window. That flaring becomes a structure of light in the final paintings.

That was the initial idea and all those paintings came from that video. I was using a crappy iPhone lens—I think it was an iPhone 3—and so it kept flooding and turned into this amazing, flashing thing. It was like the sun was following you. It's a weird video and I wouldn't say it's art but it was worth showing as a piece that influenced other pieces.

What is interesting is that the light becomes structural. You think of Franz Kline, except that you're looking at whiteness.

It does become physical. I have always wanted to paint light because of the difficulty. I did a whole suite of paintings in Montreal in 2011 called the "Interlight Show" that was about experimenting with different ways of making light. I maintain to this day that it was one of my strongest bodies of work.

As the painting is being made so much paint is going down, with so many variations on thickness, texture and gesture. Are you in the moment and don't think much about what you're doing?

I would say it is 50–50. Most of what happens with my painting is that I get obsessed with an idea and then a suite of paintings will revolve around that idea. I keep trying to find different ways to express it, so in the case of light there was thick light/thin light and in-between. In the act I'm not thinking so much but afterwards I'll step back and see what I've done. Then I might go back in and make different decisions. Most often I do the painting and that's it but there are a number of paintings, like *Heavy Beams*, which I had done up to a certain point and couldn't figure out how to finish. I worked on it for a few

months and eventually figured out how to finish with the taped-up part. Sometimes that happens. I still have paintings in storage that I want to finish.

One of the things that the studio wall indicates is that you do a lot of studies. Are they preparatory, or do you use them to figure something out in the process of working on a painting?

Sometimes they come after because I want to see what pencil, crayon or watercolour will offer in a more direct way. There are also occasions where it is just enjoyable to take something that is a huge idea and make it small. That wall will keep me busy for years to come. I took a lot of those Polaroids pretty recently and I'm looking forward to the show coming down so that I can start working on them again. In my studio and I have a few panels of different scales and I go with my gut. There are things you can do on a small panel that you can't do on a big painting. A particular kind of intimacy gets created. So if I want to do a portrait of my youngest son, Thomson, I wouldn't work a 6 x 8 foot portrait, I would want something small that I can make more intimate. I guess I'm getting across to you that my practice is deliberate but not so structured.

When you work on a small scale how do you develop a rhythm?

I do it by having many on the go at the same time. Generally I wouldn't put up a small panel and work on it; I would put up 10, along with all my source images and drawings and watercolours. I'll go over to one part and make a certain kind of mark, and then I'll go over and make a very different kind of mark on another one. It's basically like working on one big painting because there are so many different elements to my work, and every little painting needs a different piece of that approach. Put it this way: what I was struck by when I was doing the *French River* painting is that there was very fine airbrush work, there were huge elements of the painting that were thrown on, there were parts that were more articulated, and others that weren't. It struck me how different each part of the painting actually was. So I would take that to the smaller works and say there are parts where I can work in a refined way, or I can go really thick.

You say you use brushes a lot of the time. Do you still work directly from squeezing paint out of the tube?

I work less from the tube than you might think. Mostly it's brushes and knives. I realized I was spending thousands of dollars a year on brushes because I was too lazy to clean them, so I forced myself to buy very expensive brushes which I now clean.

One of the most viscerally powerful paintings is *Green Tree, Blue Tree #2*. It's more about painting than it is a depiction of a landscape.

Yes, it's edging towards non-representation. I did a number of those paintings. I use a one-and-a-half-inch palette knife so that you can pile the paint up and then drag it, and then go over it again and again and again until you get the smoosh. It's faster than you'd think. They look slow and sluggish but that painting probably only took a day or two. The trees were the final decisions and they would have taken only a couple of hours to make. I did everything else and then thought I have to do something interesting with the palette knife to change the reading of this painting.

In a similar way, *Lavender Lori* is more about painting than portraiture.

Everybody knows how much I love Lori but I'm also fascinated with her, so I'm searching something out in those paintings. That is a pretty ghastly, tough painting. I did a whole Lori portrait show in New York and I was accused of flaying her to pieces. I can see why that reading is there, but it means nothing to me. For me, they're loving portraits.

When you mix paints how do you decide what the mix should be?

It's mostly intuitive. Generally speaking with the backgrounds I'll use acrylic, especially with the fluorescent. In the last couple of years I've introduced airbrush as a drawing tool. It's quick and easy to erase. Now, more than ever, the oil painting comes last for structural reasons.

So the painting talks to you while it's being made?

It's a conversation. Of course it would be lovely to do everything in acrylic because then you don't have drying issues. But I love oil paint. I like the smell and now that I'm getting older, I've got the catalogue in my head and I know so many different brands and how they react to different mediums. It's a very, very intelligent medium and it takes a long time to get to know it well, and I'm just getting there. So it is impossible to set that much knowledge aside and work in video or something. I've been painting with oil for 22 years now and until you physically experience it, it's knowledge that is not available to you.

You talk about disruptions but those disruptions can be very funny. Do you think of the paintings as being funny?

Sometimes they are ridiculous. I feel I have a pretty dark sense of humour. Socially, humour is a very powerful tool in helping you cope with terrible things. There are little moments in the painting,

1. Kim Dorland, *Self, Lake Rosseau*, 2013, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 8 x 10 inches. Photographs: Eden Robbins.

2. Kim Dorland, *Seconds Before*, 2009, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.



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like Tom Thomson peeing off the canoe, or the little Adidas turn in *Twilight*, or the Sasquatch standing at the edge of the water, that are meant to be funny. There is something about that little Sasquatch that I really connect with. But it is an odd choice. Beyond painting, one of my great loves is stand-up comedy. I'm a huge fan of Louis CK and Sarah Silverman. I think the way they work is similar to painting; it is creating something out of nothing by observing what is going on around you and admitting your own failures. Louis CK is a genius; look at what he's talking about; at the way he is making you uncomfortable so that you'll question things. And Silverman is beautiful and charming. She's like Ross Bleckner. Very elegant.

Early in our conversation you mentioned seduction. Is seduction part of the strategy?

Yes, because oil paint is inherently beautiful and paintings have to operate with some element of beauty. I don't want to go all the way because then you end up with something that is inert.

Have you worked through the Group?

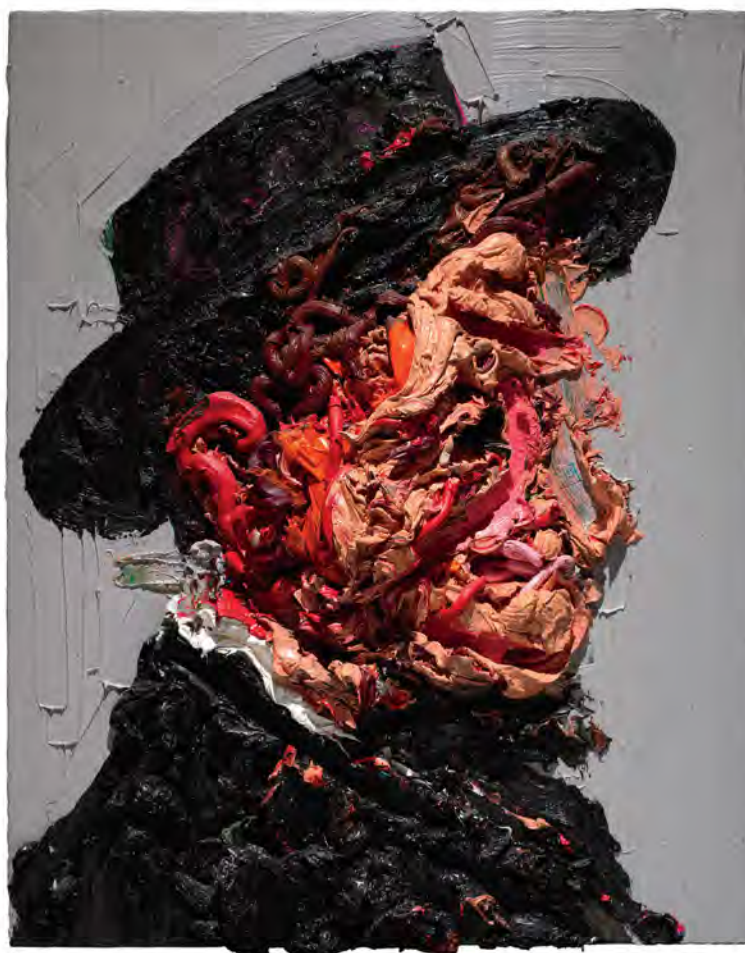
Thomson will never go away but I haven't worked through the Group because I don't love them all.

It seems quite clear that what you like about Varley is his skill as a portrait painter. He renders the portrait with such intensity and passion.

I think his *Vera* is one of our 10 best paintings ever in this country. It is stunning. It's just her and you get the connection. That's what I'm after in the portraits of Lori. I want to connect the viewer to her in some way.

You have said the painters you really admire are Thomson, Georg Baselitz and Peter Doig. You have never hidden the visual evidence of your admiration for him.

Doig is probably the best painter of mood, emotion and psychology out there. They are so poised and poetic and perfect. He challenges himself all the time and changes and moves through things. Since that is the kind of painting I admire the most, it's natural that I would be influenced by him. I'm not going to hide that. Here's a story that sums it up perfectly for me. I was having a conversation with an artist who doesn't like my work and his biggest insult was that he could see



all my influences. My response was you should see all my influences because I'm not in a white box; I'm not some genius who doesn't need to look at other things to help me make my work.

The larger question is how does influence work? Is it retinal memory; it's there and it comes out?

For me it's something that gets under your skin and you have to find a way to work with it. You can mask it and hide it and try to run from your influences, or you can face them. I have a lot of influences. I'm a huge Daniel Richter fan but I'm also a Charles Burchfield fan. Often I am more attracted to the weirdos. There is so much great painting out there and I want to find a way to speak to it. Right now I am really interested in Diebenkorn's figurative works, and in Manet and Matisse. I find it harder to look at the art of my time. I can see where my work is going and it is definitely a different direction from the one I was

1. Kim Dortland, *Tom Thomson*, 2009, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 20 x 16 inches. Photographs: Eden Robbins.

2. Kim Dortland, *Untitled (Lavender Lori)*, 2008, oil and spray paint on panel, 20 x 16 inches.



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on, which is exciting. I'm only in the vague stage but I'm definitely interested in a *zeitgeist* of disconnection that seems pervasive. People are very disconnected and I see a certain melancholy or sadness around me. I need to find a way to figure that out and to make paintings out of it.

You have talked in the past about colour as an almost magical process. Your palette is an unusual one.

It is an eccentric palette. There are some deliberate choices, so I will say this needs to be muted, or this needs to be super-keyed, but the actual colour choices seem to come from an unnatural mixing of things. I have a pretty good idea how to get to certain places with colour.

Do you make paintings that don't work?

Of course. I'm a heavy, heavy editor. I've reached the point where I'm proficient enough at the craft

that I can make paintings look convincing, but I know the soul isn't there. Those are the first to go. I would rather have a very bad painting around my studio than one that looks good, but isn't. It has taken a long time for me to cultivate respect and it is what I care about the most. What is most important is that my work is taken seriously.

I want to talk finally about the painting in the exhibition where you most literally pay attention to the source, *Woodland Waterfall (after Tom Thomson)*.

I did that on purpose. I wanted to do one complete appropriation and I thought it was a really good choice. First of all, the sketch is a typically great Thomson, whereas the big painting is problematic and odd. I don't think it is as weak as many people say, but it is a very weird painting. The space doesn't allow you a lot of room to move around. I think it has become more interesting in a more modern context. In a way, it looks like a hipster did that painting with some kind of cool detachment. When I did my version, I had both images on my large piece of cardboard in the studio room. I had to figure it out, bring it really close to Thomson, and then completely dismantle it and redo it to as my painting.

The water becomes a shape more than the representation of a natural element.

Yes. Even though it's representational, it is the most abstract painting I have ever done. I am happy with the way the weird spray paint blobs came out. Colour-wise it really challenged me because it was predominantly colours I never use. I don't even think I own earth tones, so it was fun to figure out different ways to mix them. Parts of that painting could go in a future direction and not necessarily in a pure landscape way. It has an oddness that I like. Sometimes you recognize a touch in your own painting that you would like to try and see where it ends up.

You're always on the lookout for oddness?

I can paint beautiful life-like paintings but it would be boring. De Kooning is a good example. He had more facility than anybody but he had to do something to keep himself motivated. I feel the same way. ■