



NEIL McCLELLAND: APPERCEPTION

VERNON PUBLIC ART GALLERY

NEIL McCLELLAND

APPERCEPTION

Vernon Public Art Gallery

January 8 - March 10, 2015

Vernon Public Art Gallery

3228 - 31st Avenue, Vernon BC, V1T 2H3

www.vernonpublicartgallery.com

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FOREWORD

Apperception, a critical look at how we view art, is the work of Victoria based artist Neil McClelland. It is our pleasure to present this solo exhibition where, through his work, McClelland challenges us to actively consider our viewing approaches whether we are viewing it in a more traditional gallery space or through one of our many modern on-screen media devices. What does it mean to the artwork, its surroundings, and ultimately the viewer?

With a Master of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) from the University of Victoria, Bachelor of Education from the University of Toronto, and Bachelor of Arts (Honours Music) from the University of Ottawa, along with his extensive exhibition record and professional experience as an art educator, McClelland was able to approach this work from a broad perspective making his work accessible to a large audience. We hope this catalogue will provide you with an insight into the creation of *Apperception* and inspire a dialogue surrounding the contextual interpretations we make when approaching art through various presentation methods.

I'd like to thank Lubos Culen, our Curator, for his work on this exhibition as well as his introductory essay which is included in this publication. Thank you also to Joanne Salé, our Preparator, and Laura Ashton, our Marketing and Public Programming Coordinator, for their contributions to this project as well.

We are pleased to have Toby Lawrence participate in this publication as our guest writer. Lawrence is an independent curator currently holding a post as the Assistant Curator for the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Her writings regularly appear in art publications, exhibition catalogues, and online magazines.

Thank you to the British Columbia Arts Council, the Regional District of the North Okanagan, and the Province of British Columbia for their ongoing support of the Vernon Public Art Gallery, enabling us to produce quality exhibitions and publications for our audience. Local support from our members, donors, and community supporters is instrumental in our success as well.

Dauna Kennedy
Executive Director
Vernon Public Art Gallery



Approaching Rembrandt I (detail), 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 56.5 x 48 inches

NEIL MCCLELLAND: APPERCEPTION

by Lubos Culen

Neil McClelland's exhibition titled *Apperception* is an inquiry into and a commentary on the changing modes of apprehending and viewing works of art in the digital age. The works in the exhibition – ten encaustic and watercolour paintings on panels and a polyptych comprised of a grid of seventy 8 x 16 inch oil paintings on steel plates – create a ground for the viewers' associative approach to viewing paintings both in a real gallery space and virtually aided by the Internet.

Derived from images of historical art and virtual tours available on the Internet, McClelland produced paintings which contain reductive reproductions of sixteenth and seventeenth century masters' paintings installed in gallery spaces of the world's most prestigious art institutions. By choosing this conceptual approach, McClelland created paintings which exemplify the changing modes of apprehending works of art. His source images were mediated by virtual tours of the galleries presenting the historical works and hence his paintings capture both the gallery space and the works of art they contain. McClelland's paintings presented at the Vernon Public Art Gallery are about his (and other viewers) experience and digital mediation of looking at works of art in galleries, but their shifting subject matter is about 'looking at looking at the paintings' reiterated in a concrete physical form.

McClelland's work also brings forth the question about the authenticity of the viewer's experience when apprehending a work of art. As he points out in his proposal statement for the exhibition, his aim is not to give preference to view the works of art installed in the actual spaces of institutions or, on the other hand, viewing the works in a virtual space. What matters is the quality of experience and its cumulative effect on experiencing a work of art with varying cross-references both in real space and virtually. An argument can be advanced that when viewing a presentation where the image of the work of art is projected on a large screen, the viewer's experience is equally informative because of the minutia of details captured, as opposed to viewing the actual original of diminutive size in real space.

McClelland's paintings capture the phenomenon referencing different 'vintages' of the 'image' presentation and their multiple reiterations following the original setting. The fact that McClelland's works are based on the views of original paintings installed in a physical gallery space, then digitized and made available on the Internet, then in turn serving as the source images for his compositions, and finally, presented again as physical paintings, represents a third generation of images derived from viewing the originals digitally mediated.

While the ten encaustic and watercolor paintings on panel capture the gallery spaces and historical works of art they contain, in the polyptych titled *Babel: Bruegel Gigapainted* (2013 – 2014) McClelland takes advantage of the extreme zoom-in possibilities of the image of *The Tower of Babel* (1563, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder) available on the Internet. McClelland's focus in this work shifts towards portrayal of the minutia of multiple scenes portraying 'workers' and executed in loose brush strokes while maintaining the integrity of the original scenes. By choosing to focus on the details contained in the original Bruegel's work, McClelland deconstructs the notion of the mythical 'tower of Babel' in favor of highlighting the individual details which in fact become the subject matter of the 70 plates comprising the single work.

While thinking about the context within which the works comprising the exhibition *Apperception* were produced, the viewer is asked to examine the relationships between his/her actual experience in a gallery space on the one hand and the digitally mediated experience of looking at art on the other hand. McClelland's subject matter is about the works of old masters which he appropriated and used for his artistic intent, yet they were digitally accessed and 're-represented' in a mode far removed from the original works. It is undeniable that accessing images of works of art digitally via the Internet does not replace looking at an original in a gallery space, but at the same time, the digitally mediated images are directly and epistemologically connected to viewer's experiences through the modality of 'possible worlds' which may not exist physically, but can be experienced on virtual levels. From this point of view, McClelland's exhibition challenges the established notion of the 'originality' of an image and whether the virtual space is less real for a viewer than the physical space. Derived from digital/virtual space and reproduced into physical material objects, McClelland crosses this boundary in favor of a cumulative experience cross-referenced through virtual and direct experience sources.

Lubos Culen
Curator
Vernon Public Art Gallery



Approaching Van Dyke I (detail), 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 60 x 40.5 inches



Viewing St Sebastian, Room 24 (detail), 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 34 x 60 inches

NAVIGATING THE SCREEN: EXPERIENCING PAINTING

By Toby Lawrence

Page one of John Berger's now classic text, *Ways of Seeing*, exclaims: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."¹

What Berger's text rightfully articulates is the uniqueness of experience that precedes knowing. The museum experience lends itself to this "unsettled" nature, wherein the experience of a painting is never without mediation. Personal circumstance and context are as much a part of viewing as are established historical significance and materiality. Such mediation of experience is foundational to Neil McClelland's series of paintings in his solo exhibition *Apperception* at the Vernon Public Art Gallery. The work takes virtual gallery tours from the National Gallery, London and the Frick Collection, as well as Google's Art Project,² as points of reference to consider the ways in which the combined experience of objects in the museum in conjunction with the malleable and extensive presence of the same objects online contribute to our individual perception of art, and in McClelland's work, thinking specifically about painting.³ These unquantifiable conscious and unconscious relationships to artworks are further impacted through the specificities of epistemological and material disposition within the transformation of painting (viewed online) versus the expectation of the transformative experience of painting (viewed in person).

Challenging art historical convention and in search of new ways of looking at and thinking about painting, McClelland was captivated by the distortion in the virtual museum viewing experience that occurs while navigating through the digitally reproduced gallery spaces. His paintings, as a result, speak to the phenomenological differentiation of objects shifting in Internet space, rather than fixed in a museum. Yet this component of the online experience does call to mind aspects of real life museum visits, wherein vantage points shift continuously, perspective is affected by speed and unfocused looking in the passing by of an artwork as visitors sweep through the museum, and crowds restrict sightlines and contemplative moments. Correspondingly, McClelland's paintings are inclusive of these varied viewing positions by augmenting and exacerbating the virtual distortions, "crossing representational boundaries,"⁴ as well as working in stylistic changes that appear through the blurred imagery and skewed perspective as a result of the navigation tool.



Babel: Bruegel Gigapointed (installation detail), 2013-2014, oil on steel, 70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)

McClelland's investigational approach further calls to mind Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Ever commonplace in art historical discourse, Benjamin's essay, nevertheless, considers precisely the impact of reproduction on experience. "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art," he writes, "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space. Its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." The long-standing institution of the museum provides a specific framework within which artworks are viewed, providing historical significance and the potential for common understanding and the shared nature of public experience. Benjamin continues, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and changeable."⁶ The particulars of changeability in relation to the encounter of artwork are undoubtedly linked to historical era, and, as such in the twenty-first century, one of the predominant media for pictorial experience is arguably via screen: (not limited to) computer, tablet or cellular phone.⁷ Therefore, the conventions of art viewing behaviour comprised within the tradition discussed by Benjamin continue to be reshaped by the widespread accessibility of art reproductions in the current era.

While the earliest art objects were embedded within animistic and religious practices, the ritualistic function of art viewing has become secularized and multiplicative as the desire to possess and/or take ownership over the experience of an artwork (to photograph or be photographed with a work of art) is conflated with the desire to be in the presence of an object that allows potential access to a basal and transformative experience. Berger also spoke to such multiplicity in 1972,

"...what happens when a painting is shown on a television screen. The painting enters each viewer's house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementos. It enters the atmosphere of his family. It becomes their talking point. It lends its meaning to their meaning. At the same time it enters a million other houses and, in each of them, is seen in a different context."⁸

As for Benjamin, the "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from a parasitic dependence on ritual" and consequently reinstating the social function to situate art within the realm of politics.⁹ Such practice within McClelland's paintings tampers with the technical "genius" bestowed upon the Renaissance, Baroque and Dutch Golden Age masters by interpreting paintings viewed virtually as fragments or with awkward cropping and perspective. Sixteenth and seventeenth century masterpieces give way to Impressionistic compositions as the blurred edges drop out of the frame, as in *Viewing Venus, Room 30* (2013) and *Lamentation, Room 30* (2013). Moreover, McClelland's work aims to deconstruct the mystification of painting to consider viewing in itself. He adapts the illusion of painted figures and scenarios that imagine worlds beyond what is depicted on the picture plane and perverts curatorial decisions to refocus the gaze of the viewer (and the subjects depicted), in effect, to portray the experience of experiencing painting.

Comprised of seventy 8 x 16 inch steel panels arranged in a grid, *Babel: Bruegel Gigapainted* (2013-14) mimics Google's Art Project¹⁰ gigapixel format through the appropriation of extensively magnified details from *The Tower of Babel* (1563) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This ambitious work, again, highlights the possibilities of mediated online looking, and furthermore, parallels Benjamin's discussion which points to the details captured by the lens that are imperceptible to the naked eye and, therefore, facilitate an experience of the artwork that could never be present in the original.¹¹ The magnification in conjunction with the shift in materials from Bruegel's oil on panel to McClelland's oil on steel functions, for McClelland, as a way to "defamiliarize the image"¹² while emphasizing not only the effects of material difference, but the social and political commentary ensconced throughout Bruegel's original. With such a drastically different form from the original, McClelland's *Babel* facilitates space to contemplate the historicity of Bruegel's painting, yet providing an entirely new experience through *Babel: Bruegel Gigapainted* (2013-14).

As McClelland explains, "The series explores connections and disconnections between historical precedents and digitally-mediated ways of looking."¹³ Based on screenshots from virtual gallery tours, the eleven works in *Apperception* ask us to consider the mechanics of viewing – whether it is in a museum or online, while, at the same time, they offer us the space, each within our present moment, to consider what we carry with us when we are viewing art.

Toby Lawrence

Toby Lawrence is a curator and writer based in Victoria, BC. She is currently the Assistant Curator at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria where her curatorial work draws from contemporary and historical art, with exhibitions such as In Another Place, And Here and Conversations with Lucie Rie. With a focus on audience engagement as an independent curator, she has produced exhibitions in unexpected places with a variety of partners and organizations. She continues to research and explore the work of Canadian artists with contributing essays for esse | arts + opinions, Open Space, Kelowna Art Gallery, and Vernon Public Art Gallery. She holds a MA in Art History & Theory from the University of British Columbia.

Endnotes

- ¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), cover.
- ² In the website overview, Google describes the *Art Project* as “a unique collaboration with some of the world’s most acclaimed art institutions to enable people to discover and view artworks online in extraordinary detail.”
<http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/about/artproject/> [accessed December 5, 2014].
- ³ Neil McClelland, in conversation with author, November 12, 2014.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Walter Benjamin, “*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*” in *Art in Modern Cultures: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, eds. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992), 298.
- ⁶ Benjamin, 300.
- ⁷ Changeability can also be considered, appropriately within this argument in relation to style, technique, and social and political trends of a specific era.
- ⁸ Berger, 12-13.
- ⁹ Benjamin, 301.
- ¹⁰ Confer reference ²
- ¹¹ Benjamin, 299.
- ¹² McClelland, in conversation with author, November 12, 2014.
- ¹³ McClelland, Artists Statement, 2014.



Babel: Bruegel Gigapointed (plate detail), 2013-2014, oil on steel, 70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)

STATEMENT

Apperception features paintings that explore connections and disconnections between the art historical tradition and contemporary, digitally-mediated visual culture. In appropriating and reinterpreting master art works of the past and how they are presented in museum spaces, I am interested in how viewing, especially viewing art, inevitably involves making connections that draw on our previous viewing and meaning-making experiences. Each viewing experience is made sense of by assimilating new experiences into an existing body of ideas. Viewing is always partial and cumulative. We cannot look at a work of art without somehow relating it to our personal history, and a network of connections that include other works of art and conventions and conversations around art. We view art at a particular point in time and within a particular social context.

In these paintings, based on screenshots from virtual gallery tours and extreme zooms, I use croppings, distortions, and loose handling of materials to defamiliarize the familiar. I seek to create tensions between the unique and stable art in the museum and the ubiquitous and malleable art accessed online. As digital visual experiences become part of almost every aspect of our viewing, new layers are added to how we look at art, for both artist and viewer.

Neil McClelland
November 2014



Babel: Bruegel Gigapointed (plate detail), 2013-2014, oil on steel, 70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)

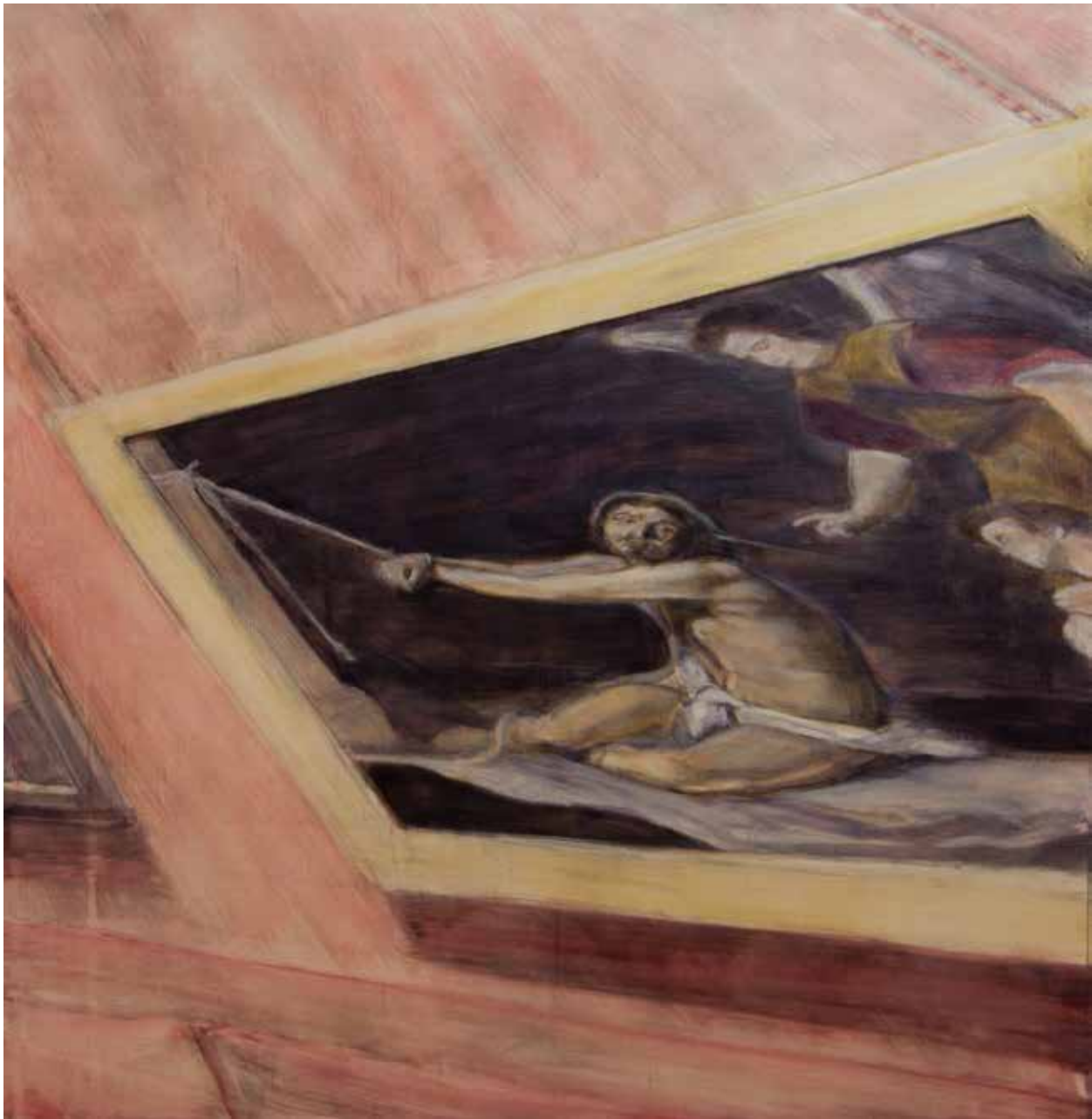
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



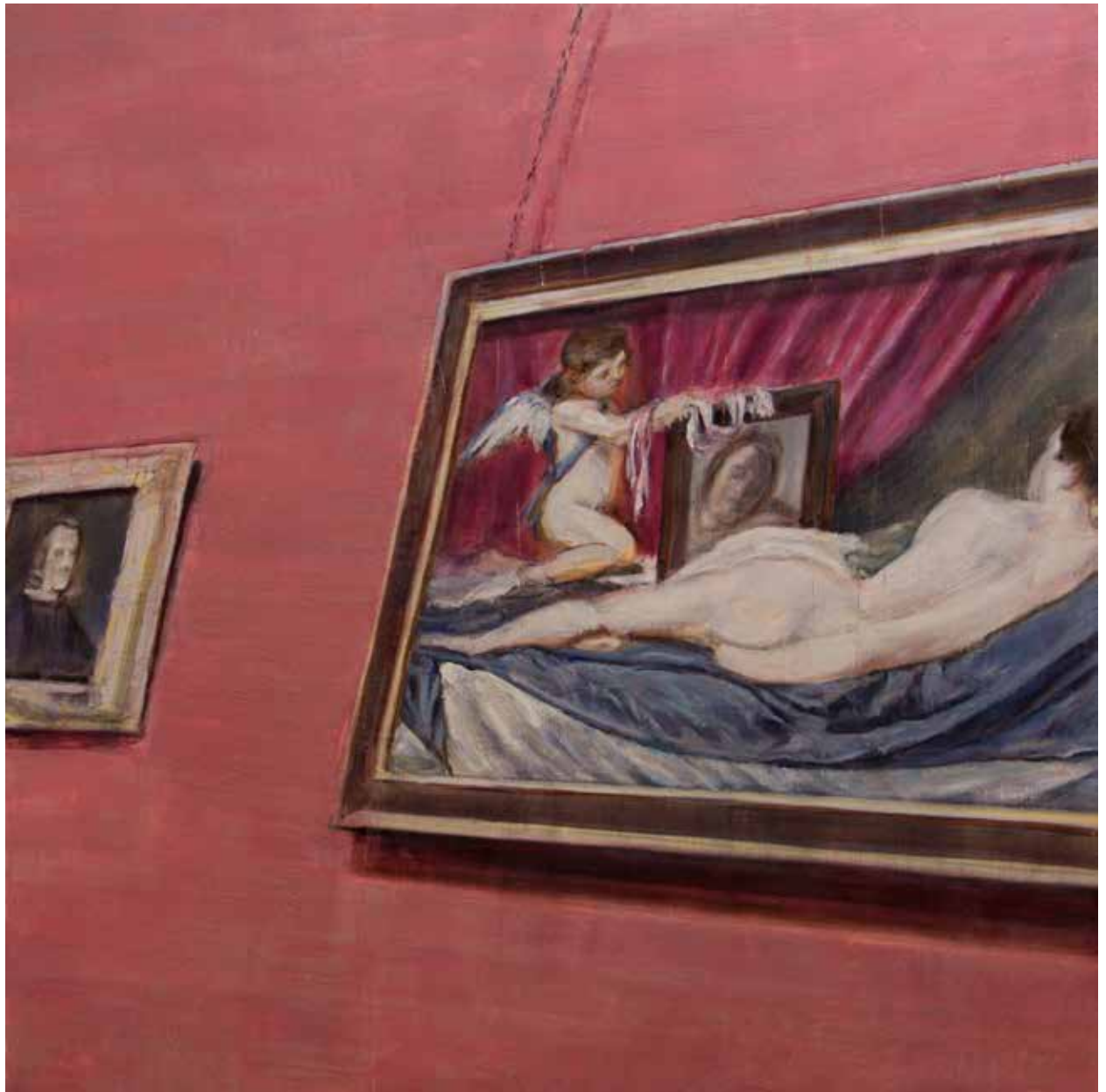
Approaching Van Dyke I, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 60 x 40.5 inches



Approaching Van Dyke II, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 60 x 40.5 inches



Contemplation, Room 30, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 48 x 46.5 inches



Viewing Venus, Room 30, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 48 x 48 inches



Approaching Rembrandt I, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 56.5 x 48 inches



Lamentation, Room 30, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 48 x 60 inches



Approaching Frans Hals, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 60 x 26.75 inches



Viewing Rembrandt II, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 60 x 32 inches



Viewing St Sebastian, Room 24, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 34 x 60 inches



Viewing Venus, Room 30, Fragment, 2013, watercolour and encaustic on panel, 48 x 25 inches



Babel: Bruegel Gigapointed (installation), 2013-2014, oil on steel, 70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)



Babel: Bruegel Gigapointed (plate details), 2013-2014, oil on steel, 70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)

CURRICULUM VITAE

Neil McClelland

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EDUCATION

2014	Master of Fine Arts, Visual Arts, University of Victoria
1991	Bachelor of Education, University of Toronto
1988	B.A. Honours Music, University of Ottawa

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2015	<i>Apperception</i> . Vernon Public Art Gallery, Vernon, BC
2015	(forthcoming). Xchanges Gallery, Victoria, BC
2014	<i>The Chair</i> . Upstairs Gallery, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
2013	<i>Apperception</i> . Audain Gallery, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
2012	<i>Variations on Five Photographs</i> . Kaasa Gallery, Edmonton, AB
2012	<i>Family Stories</i> . EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts Window Galleries, Calgary, AB
2010	<i>If You Can't Stop, Smile As You Go By</i> . Harcourt House Artist Run Centre, Edmonton, AB

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015	(forthcoming). <i>Realities Follies</i> . Open Space, Victoria, BC
2014	<i>Group Exhibition</i> . Wallack Galleries, Ottawa, ON
2014	<i>Feral</i> . Pop-up exhibition, Victoria, BC
2014	<i>Four</i> . The Collectors' Gallery, Calgary, AB
2014	<i>Microwave</i> . Fifty-Fifty Arts Collective, Victoria, BC
2014	<i>In Your Eyes: MFA Thesis Exhibition</i> . University of Victoria
2014	<i>Vues de la ville</i> . Beaux-arts des Amériques, Montreal, PQ
2013	<i>Group Exhibition</i> . Wallack Galleries, Ottawa, ON
2013	<i>Post-receptacle</i> . Audain Gallery, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
2013	<i>Offspring</i> . Upstairs Gallery, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
2013	<i>New Acquisitions I & II</i> . The Collectors' Gallery, Calgary, AB

2012 *Conversations*. Common Sense Gallery, Edmonton, AB
 2012 *Black & White*. The Collectors' Gallery, Calgary, AB
 2012 *Group Exhibition*. Wallack Galleries, Ottawa, ON
 2011 *Ten to the Power of 10*. Jackson Power & Electric, Edmonton, AB
 2011 *Energize*. Visual Arts Alberta Gallery, Edmonton, AB
 2011 *Group Exhibition*. Wallack Galleries, Ottawa, ON
 2011 *Group Exhibition*. The Collectors' Gallery, Calgary, AB
 2009 *Double Take*. Profiles Public Art Gallery, St. Albert, AB
 2009 *Summer Daze*. The Collectors' Gallery, Calgary, AB
 2008 Trio. *Double Take*. The Fringe Gallery, Edmonton, AB

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

2014 Instructor, drawing and painting, Vancouver Island School of Art, Victoria, BC
 2013 Sessional Instructor, Drawing 201/202, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
 2012-13 Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Contemporary Art - ART 151, Contemporary Art Theory: Practice and Criticism - ART 150, and Creative Being – FA 101, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
 2010-13 Visual Arts Editor, *Journal of Integrated Studies*, Athabasca University
 2009-12 Instructor, painting & drawing, Harcourt House Artist Run Centre, Edmonton, AB
 2009-12 Instructor, drop-in painting workshops, NorQuest College, Edmonton, AB
 2009-10 Artist in Residence, Harcourt House Artist Run Centre, Edmonton, AB
 2008-09 Art Educator, Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, AB

PUBLICATIONS/REVIEWS

Lawrence, Toby. *Musings on Feral with Collected Speech*. 2014.
 Jacques, Michelle. "Introductory Essay." *In Your Eyes: MFA Exhibition Catalogue*. Victoria: University of Victoria, 2014.
 McClelland, Neil. "Theory and Practice: Integrated Studies and the Visual Arts." *The Journal of Integrated Studies* 5.1 (2014). (Invited).
 Cover. *The Journal of Integrated Studies* 1.3 (2012). (Juried).
 Sawyer, Jill. "Neil McClelland: Family Stories." *Galleries West* 11.1(2012): 57.
 Bradley, Ross. "Neil McClelland: Smile as You Go By." *Galleries West* 10.1 (2011): 32-34.
 Fung, Amy. "Neil McClelland, If You Can't Stop, Smile As You Go By." *Prairie Artsters.com* 28 Oct. 2010.
 "Worth a Second Look." *Saint City News* 6 Feb. 2009.
 "Look Once, Look Twice." *St. Albert Gazette* 4 Feb. 2009.
 O'Keefe, M. C. "Double Take Offers Object Lessons." *Vue Weekly* 24-30 Apr. 2008.
 Fung, Amy. "Double Take, Group Show, Fringe Gallery." *Prairie Artsters.com* 25 Apr. 2008.

LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Approaching Van Dyck I

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
60 x 40.5 inches

Approaching Van Dyck II

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
60 x 40.5 inches

Contemplation, Room 30

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
48 x 46.5

Approaching Rembrandt I

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
56.5 x 48 inches

Viewing Venus, Room 30

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
48 x 48 inches

Viewing Venus Room 30, Fragment

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
48 x 25 inches

Approaching Frans Hals

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
60 x 26.75 inches

Approaching Rembrandt II

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
60 x 32 inches

Lamentation, Room 30

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
48 x 60 inches

Viewing St Sebastian, Room 24

2013

watercolour and encaustic on panel
34 x 60 inches

Babel: Bruegel Gigapainted

2013-2014

oil on steel
70 plates (8 x 16 inches each)

