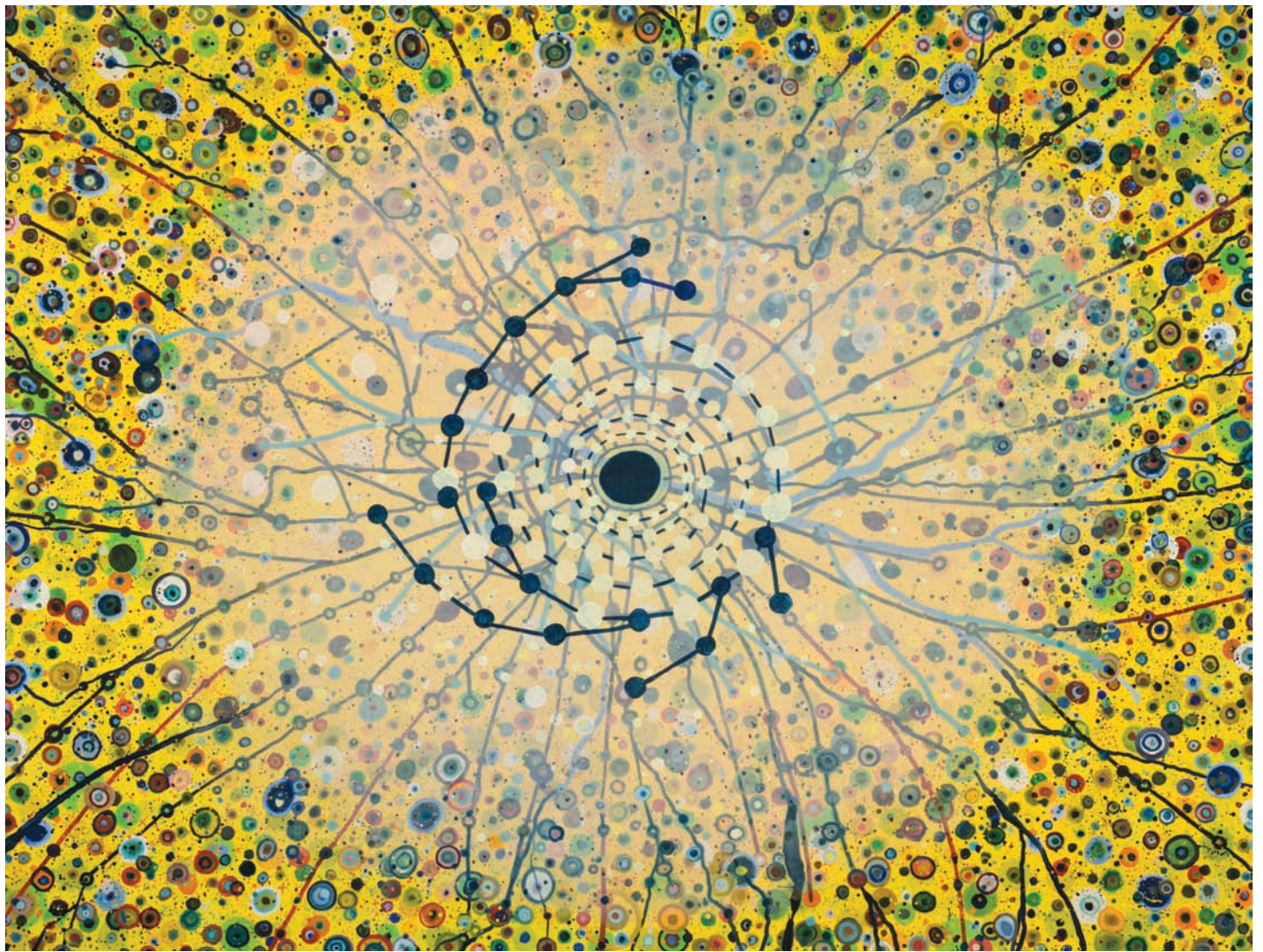




LANDON MACKENZIE

CROSSING OVER, WHY CLOUD THE WHITES



[SPIN] OTIS AND ASH 2010

210cm x 280cm. Oil on linen.

Courtesy Art45. Photograph by Scott Massey.

AFTER GOYA, LONG AFTER: LANDON MACKENZIE'S CROSSING OVER, WHY CLOUD THE WHITES

GLEN LOWRY

Crossing Over, Why Cloud the Whites represents a significant selection of Landon Mackenzie's work from the past five years. Drawn from two series, *Neurocity* and *The Structures*, these works examine painting's currency in an age of digital obsession and low-resolution communication. Testament to Mackenzie's virtuosic command of scale, composition, and colour, these paintings provide a platform for vital conversations about twenty-first century urban life and our lived experiences of dramatic sociological and technological change. Building on her well-known *Saskatchewan Paintings*, *Houbart's Hope* and earlier *Canadian Shield and Target* series, these new works extend Mackenzie's thinking about the social function of conceptual art practice into the realm of cognitive science. Moving from geography to biology, they represent Mackenzie's research in neuropsychology and ongoing attempt to find visual or conceptual corollaries to globalization in the human body.

Mackenzie emphasizes the importance of maintaining an intuitive approach. Unlike painters who work from a clear mental image or photograph, Mackenzie enters her work with little more than a feeling for its final form. Layering, painting and unpainting, moving from acrylic to oil, from one canvas to another, Mackenzie reworks her paintings to achieve an inductive balance between creative predilection and aleatoric abstraction—between patterned memory and chaos. Taken as a whole, the paintings in this exhibition mobilize an iconography—fragmentary webs, ladders, balloons, bubbles, sails, tree branches, and leaves. This iconography knits together individual works and provides visual cues that allow us to gain insight into Mackenzie's macro-level concerns with urban communi-

cation networks and neurology. Mackenzie tells us that her large canvases are designed to counteract a proliferation of small screens; commanding attention, these works decouple viewers from a continuous stream of largely inconsequential messages and encourage us to look again. Focusing and re-focusing on the paintings, we encounter the transformative power of the artwork. Following the kinetic push-pull of dynamic compositions, such as *Sailscape* or *Neurocity Aqua Blue*, Mackenzie's paintings guide viewers through an abstract topography that stretches beyond the edges of individual works. Quantum leaping from one work to another, we move to the exhilarating limits of cognition.

Historically, Mackenzie's artworks have challenged the representational strictures of Canadian cultural nationalism. Following this drive, the paintings in *Crossing Over, Why Cloud the Whites* question the relationship between Vancouver and a host of international cities. These paintings shift focus from "the country" to "the city" (or "cities") to perform what urban geographers call a "rescaling" of critical concern away from regional-national to the local-global. Whereas an early work is informed by a desire to seek out distant contexts in which she might work with Canadian subjects to provide alternative maps capable of speaking back to the colonial archive, Mackenzie's most recent works reflect increasingly international movements or trajectories. For example, *(Spin) Otis and Ash* references the Icelandic ash cloud that grounded flights in and out of northern Europe for six days in 2010, and suggests visual links between medical imagery and subway maps, body and city as intermeshing networks.

Hearing I would travel to Madrid, Mackenzie encouraged me to see the “light Goyas upstairs in the Prado.” At the Prado, breaking away from the hordes to make my way to the second floor, I wondered how I might relate Francisco de Goya’s work to paintings I had seen in Mackenzie’s studio a few weeks earlier. What could his pictorialism have to do with her large abstract paintings? I had seen Goya’s famous *Disasters of War* (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*) and *Black Paintings* (*Pinturas Negras*) before, and



wondered what the artist who gave us *Saturn Devouring His Son* or *The Third of May 1808* might have to offer in relation to Mackenzie’s work. Goya’s drive to find ways that art might speak to contemporary political concerns and issues of social justice is inspiring, and drawn into a discussion of Mackenzie’s conceptual works might, arguably, suggest a compelling addition to debate around the political efficacy of abstract painting. However, this seemed extremely esoteric, and would have little to do with Goya’s cartoons, which he created for a series of commissioned tapestries.

Nevertheless spending time with Goya’s lighter works, I was struck by the idea that the connection to Mackenzie’s work might not be through technique, palette or figurative vocabulary. Instead, it might have to do with how we experience the space around paintings. Mackenzie’s *Circle of Willis* and *World of Knots and Troubles*, to name but two examples, speak to powerful flows of visual information

that move in and through the painting; their dynamic edges activating a space around the canvas in a manner analogous to Goya’s work. Allowing my attention to drift from the centre of Goya’s compositions, away from the revelry and debauchery of the human actors, I am transfixed by his animals, dogs in particular. Their collective gaze seems to reach out of the frame, flouting boundaries between figurative and built environments. In the lower right of *The Kite*, for example, a brown and white spaniel stares out of the painting, oblivious to the actions of the other figures. His direct gaze invites viewers into the illusionistic space of the painting, transforming the gallery into an element of the composition. To the extent that dogs have evolved to negotiate human society and thrive in hostile environments, they suggest a form of knowing that is at the limits of rationalism. Following Goya’s dogs from one panel to the next, tracing a network of sight-lines that enmesh me in the work, I realized that Mackenzie’s “crossing over” evokes a desire to look beyond the immediate, to use the painting as a transformative social medium.

If Goya’s tapestry cartoons might be read as blueprints for a contemporary art capable of activating new viewers and spaces of viewing, how might we read Mackenzie’s work? After Goya, her paintings provide another way of seeing (beyond) Vancouver and the forest of glass and steel towers blanketing the Lower Mainland. Gesturing inward and outward toward another city that is also here, her “time-based”, cinematic approach to painting provides impetus for a new narrative of urban existence, glimpses of a new Canadian city capable of supporting the very best of contemporary art. A city built around interior spaces equal to the grandiose exteriors of our empty towers.

ABOVE

CIRCLE OF WILLIS 2006

218.44cm x 330.2cm. Synthetic polymer on linen.

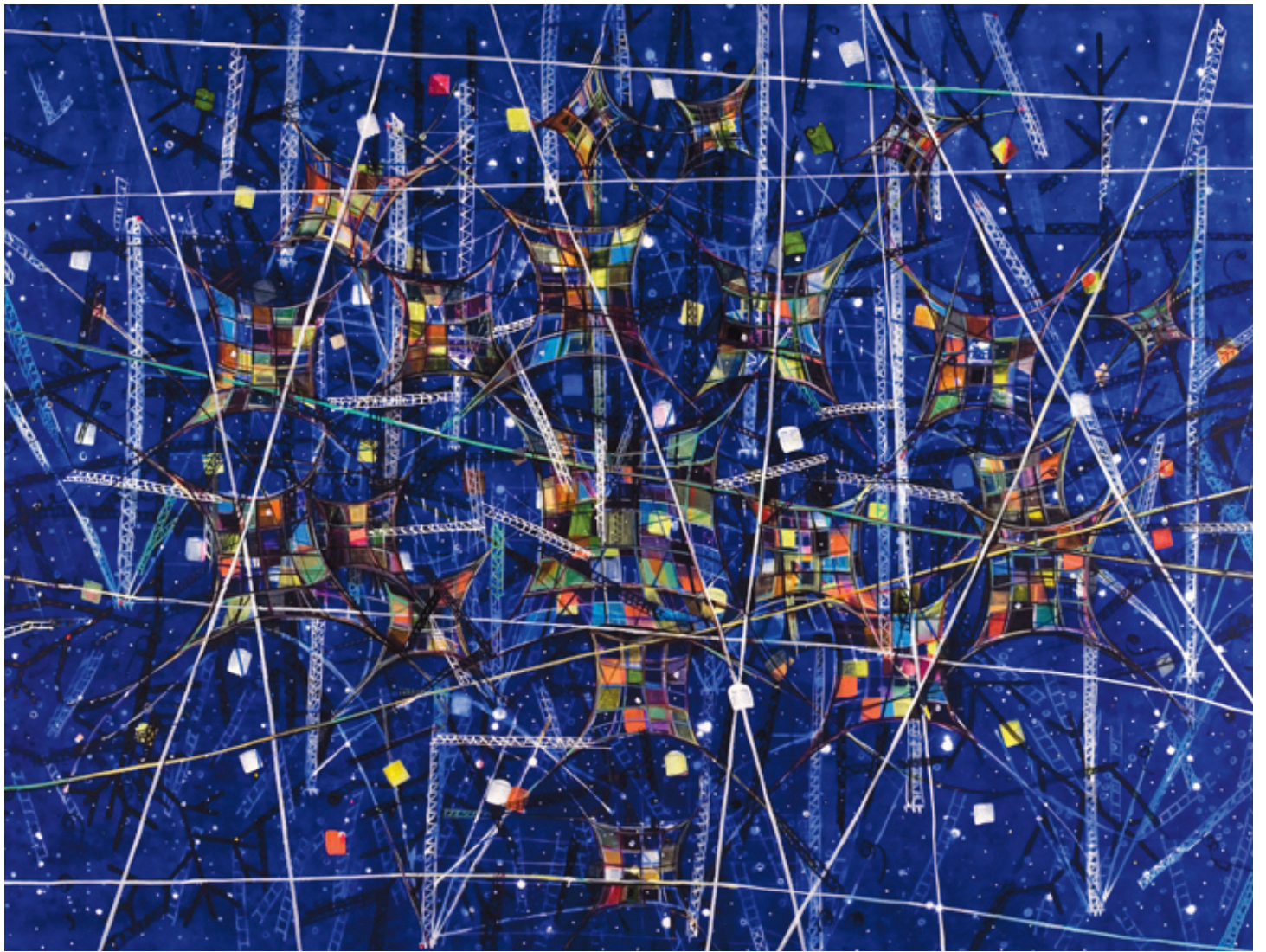
Courtesy Art45. Photograph by Scott Massey.

FRONT COVER

NEUROCITY (AQUA BLUE) 2008–2009

Detail. 218.44cm x 330.2cm. Synthetic polymer on linen.

Courtesy Art45. Photograph by Scott Massey.



SAILSCAPE 2006

Detail. 228.6cm x 312.4cm. Synthetic polymer on linen.
Courtesy Art45. Photograph by Scott Massey.

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September 10 – October 30, 2011

Opening reception Thursday September 15, 2011

Richmond Art Gallery

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Richmond, BC V6Y 1R9
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www.richmondartgallery.org

Essay: Glen Lowry

Design: Mary Castellanes

Photo credits: Scott Massey

Printed in Canada by B&L Printworks

ISBN: 978-1-926594-18-7

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We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the City of Richmond, the British Columbia Arts Council and the Province of British Columbia.

The artist acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$17.1 million in visual arts throughout Canada.

BIOGRAPHIES

Landon Mackenzie is an acclaimed Vancouver artist and passionate educator. Originally from Toronto, she has been an exhibiting painter for thirty years. As Professor in Visual Arts at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design, she has been instrumental in dialogues about painting in Canada. At 17, Mackenzie was a student of Conceptual Art at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD 1972–76). After completing an MFA at Concordia University in Montreal, she turned to painting in the late seventies. Her work has been extensively written about and she has received numerous grants and awards. Mackenzie has built an impressive body of work and is best known for her large-format paintings, which combine mapping and abstraction and which have been shown throughout Canada and internationally. The National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Musée d'art contemporain are among the museums that collect her work.

Glen Lowry is a writer, educator and editor who specializes in creative-critical collaboration and practice-based research. Lowry has a PhD in English from Simon Fraser University and has published on Canadian Literature, 20th century culture and poetics (photography, film, and television). His recent work focuses on creating platforms to link scholars, artists, and audiences across cultural and geographical distances. Lowry is a lead artist on the *Maraya* project, a public art-work linking urban waterfronts in Vancouver and Dubai, UAE. Since 2002, he has edited *West Coast Line*. In 2009, he published *Pacific Avenue*, his first book of poems. Lowry is an Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Culture and Community at Emily Carr University.

