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Liminal Space: Representations Of Modern Urbanity

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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Liminal Space: Representations Of Modern Urbanity

(Thesis format: Integrated Article)

by

Matthew Tarini

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This Master's Thesis Dossier is made up of three sections including a Case Study, a Comprehensive Artist Statement, and a Practice Documentation section. The case study analyzes George Shaw's artistic practice and explores his interest in memory and place. In the artist statement I discuss my painting practice, which explores how the structure of urban and suburban environments affect people's moods and behaviours and their social connections. I outline the art historical precedents for this type of subject matter and my work's connection with Romanticism and photography. I also include research done on urban design by Jan Gehl and Charles Montgomery and research on the effects of having contact with architecture and greenspace by Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan. Ultimately, I hope to reveal how the often unconsidered architectural spaces in urban and suburban settings subtly impact our lives. Lastly, the practice documentation section contains photographs and descriptions of some of the drawings and paintings I have completed during my MFA candidacy.

Keywords

Painting, Photography, Impressionism, Realism, Romanticism, George Shaw, Urbanization, Urban Design, Architecture, Greenspace, Neuroscience, Jan Gehl, Charles Montgomery, Eva M. Selhub, Alan C. Logan

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Introduction

This Master of Fine Arts thesis dossier is comprised of three components and it is in support of my thesis exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery from August 7th to September 12th, 2015. The three sections of this dossier include a comprehensive artist statement, a case study of the English painter George Shaw and a chronological documentation of my artwork completed during the MFA program. These three parts form the basis of the research I have conducted during my MFA candidacy, the culmination of which is manifested in the artwork I have presented in my thesis exhibition.

The comprehensive artist statement is an overview of the research for and an analysis of the paintings that I have completed during my time working on this project. I am interested in exploring, through the medium of painting, how the structure of urban and suburban environments affect people's moods and behaviours and our social connections. I begin by discussing the art historical precedence for paintings of everyday scenes including Dutch genre painting from the 17th century, and the Realist and Impressionist movements in the 19th century. Inspired by the world around them artists during these eras depicted scenes that allowed the viewer to learn, to some degree, about how the world functioned and what spaces, people or activities they deemed important enough to be recorded. The work has become a document of a place and a time that serves to portray life as it was. I hope that my work also captures a sense of the character of our everyday lives in urban centres in the 21st century.

Another part of my research is concerned with urban planning and the effects on people of being in and around greenspace. There is a growing concern for how cities are being built in terms of how they can influence how people feel, how they affect our interactions with one another and as a community, how we move through them and how they limit our contact with greenspace. Cities are more likely to be built for a nice looking design, efficiency or cars rather than trying to understand how people on foot might interact in and with the space. My paintings depict some of the spaces that I see as causing these issues including subways, parking lots, freeways, apartment buildings, suburban streets and small innocuous and transitional spaces like stairwells and hallways.

In this section, I also discuss the relationship between photography and painting and my use of Romantic art tropes. I use photography for many of my paintings as a source of information rather than inspiration. The photograph allows me freedom of choice in my subject matter and more time to cultivate feeling in the work, which is originally derived from my direct interaction with the space. When painting these spaces, I utilize the pictorial tropes that Romantic artists employed such as mist and vast space as they sought to capture the sublime in the landscape. I have inverted this goal to reveal what I perceive to be the absence of the sublime in the modern urban landscape. I hope that my work engages the viewer in an affective way similar to the manner in which these spaces influence us as we experience them. Ultimately, based on my direct experience and observations, I hope to reveal how the often unconsidered architectural spaces in urban and suburban settings subtly impact our lives.

The case study component is a summary and analysis of the work of the English painter George Shaw. In it I discuss the artist's influences, materials, process and subject matter. Shaw has painted scenes of nothing in particular in the small suburb of Tile Hill outside of Coventry, England for his whole career so far. His paintings of the everyday, ordinary and overlooked details portray the things that we tend to miss as we walk through the places we think we know best. Shaw is taking a closer look at these places and exploring the inevitability of time passing, our memories of a particular place and how a place can shape its residents and how residents shape the place. In essence, his work is an act of holding on to his past. While Shaw's work employs a more personal approach than does my own, he is also using representational painting to take a closer look at the structures and spaces of a suburban development.

Finally, the Practice Documentation section represents the studio-based research that I undertook during my MFA candidacy. It includes images of many of the paintings and drawings I have completed. Each image is accompanied by a title, list of materials, dimensions and a brief text that describes how the work was made and what decisions I made in the production of the work.

Case Study

Scenes of suburban streets, old pubs, recreation centres, closed store fronts, discarded mattresses lying on the side of the road, old garages behind row houses, portraits of trees in dense woods, and the minutiae of other suburban spaces are translated into detailed paintings by artist George Shaw. Shaw paints, in a tight representational manner, the area where he grew up in Tile Hill, England. His paintings of the everyday¹, ordinary and overlooked details portray the things that we tend to miss as we walk through the places we think we know best. For Shaw these spaces and details bring back memories and ask questions. The paintings involve a strong sense of time, place, memory and personal and collective history. Through his painting practice he is taking a closer look at these places and exploring the inevitability of time passing, our memories of a particular place and how that place can shape its residents.

Born in 1966 George Shaw grew up in Tile Hill, which is a suburban district of Coventry in England. This area was built as a post-war estate after World War II and was a predominantly white and poor working class region². The area is mostly residential with some industry and is known for machine tool production³. Shaw says that,

It was – there's no other way to put it – a nice place to grow up. A postwar council estate on the edge of Coventry, with trees, grass and loads of woodland just beyond.⁴

George Shaw studied painting at the Sheffield polytechnic and received a BA in fine arts in the 1980's. After graduating he gave up on making paintings completely⁵. Instead he

¹ The “everyday” is a broad topic that touches upon the importance of our everyday experience, including the environments that we occupy on a daily basis and the smaller quotidian and ordinary aspects of them. Art made using the everyday as its source can transform it or act as a document of it. In the case of Shaw’s work, I believe he is documenting these sites in order to bring these overlooked aspects of our surroundings into visibility for consideration by the viewer.

² Popov, “Memories of a Ghost Town”.

³ Witkowski, “George Shaw”.

⁴ O’Hagan, “George Shaw”.

⁵ Burn, “England, My England”.

had various jobs including working in the mortuary in a hospital, making dissection videos for students, taking identity photos for the police and teaching special needs students⁶. Later, Shaw's interest in art slowly returned. It was then that he applied and was accepted into the masters program at the Royal College of Art in London⁷. He remembered the enthusiasm he had as a young boy for making drawings and paintings⁸, when he drew everything he could from copying portraits in magazines, laying out his own designs and anything he could find around him. In an interview he shares that he remembers being "completely and utterly passionate" about his art⁹. Since graduating from the Royal College, Shaw has had a solo exhibition every year. He has shown in several countries in Europe and the United States and has sold paintings all around the world. In 2011 he was nominated for the Turner Prize, Britain's most prestigious award for contemporary artists under 50 years of age.

Since the mid 1990's on Shaw continued to explore the environment around Coventry and he has stated that he thinks that all of the paintings of Tile Hill constitute a "single painting"¹⁰. Much of Shaw's inspiration comes from popular culture, literature and music. He remarked that,

I'm a child of the classic pop song and classic sitcom... I explore within a painterly tradition what usually gets explored though TV drama or music. I've thought about this a lot and, like most things in Britain, it's to do with class. It's like when I went down to London as a teenager to visit the National Gallery or the Tate: as much as I loved a lot of the work, I never felt it reflected anything of my life back to me. But, when I went into Woolworths and listened to the latest single by the Jam or the Specials, I heard my life reflected back loud and clear, and with all its tensions and uncertainties. There was always this opposition being put up: art was not about my life, whereas pop culture was. And, I didn't like that opposition, still don't, even though in a way I still work out of it¹¹.

⁶ Burn, "England, My England".

⁷ O'Hagan, "George Shaw".

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sillars, *In Between Days*, 9.

¹¹ O'Hagan, "George Shaw".

During the talk he gave at the BALTIC gallery speaker series for all the Turner Prize nominees Shaw played records and read quotes from literature for the crowd to create a sense of what has influenced his thinking around his work¹². Many of the artists that Shaw is influenced by are also dealing with their contemporary world and their everyday experience. Writers he looks to for inspiration are the old English and romantic poet, John Donne, Philip Larkin, George Orwell and James Joyce. Philip Larkin, who is also from Coventry, wrote poetry that reflected the dreariness of post war England¹³. George Orwell wrote *Coming up for Air*, which is a story that navigates the mixed feelings around things that were changing in England before World War II. Like James Joyce, Shaw also stated that he wanted to paint an epic like Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and chose to do it in small pieces¹⁴. Joyce's book is made up of small dream-like sequences without a conventional linear narrative. Similar in Shaw's paintings there is a sense that all of these paintings could be the scenes in a book, but in no particular order or story. They also have a lyrical visual language that is both soothing and unnerving.

Shaw references certain television programs that specifically explore the working class. One such program is the sitcom about two working class men, *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* and bands that he listens to are The Specials and The Smiths. These sorts of TV shows and bands speak to monotony and struggles of contemporary life¹⁵. Some of the paintings that Shaw has pointed to as influences include the late landscapes of John Everett Millais (Fig 1) for his melancholic and bleak landscapes and his attention to details and L. S. Lowry whose work includes English urban scenes with many figures and industrial wastelands. In particular Shaw has referenced the paintings *An Island* (Fig 2) and *The Lake* by Lowry as inspiration¹⁶. Shaw is also influenced by 19th century

¹² BALTIC Archive, "George Shaw".

¹³ "Philip Larkin: Biography". *Poetry Foundation*. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/philip-larkin>.

¹⁴ BALTIC Archive, "George Shaw"

¹⁵ Wilkinson Gallery, "George Shaw".

¹⁶ Ibid.

Realist art movement in the way that he is painting the contemporary environment faithfully, including all the ugliness that may come with it.

As for other painters, I think Shaw is also an interesting mix of the “Kitchen Sink School” of painters from Britain in the 1950’s and 60’s and the early Romantic German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich. John Bratby, the founder of the Kitchen Sink School of painters, took garbage and other everyday objects as subjects of his work¹⁷. He would often paint scenes of mundane and ordinary aspects of domestic life of the working class British population (Fig 3)¹⁸. Shaw’s work shows a clear connection to this work in that he is portraying such everyday, ordinary things, but has expanded to show the architectural elements that surround us as well. On the other hand, Friedrich’s work revolved around man’s insignificance before nature and god, the contemplation of the sublime grandeur of the natural world and our place within the overall scheme of existence¹⁹. Both Friedrich and Shaw address themes of national identity²⁰ and mortality. Certain aspects of Friedrich’s works, upon which Shaw develops, are his meticulous naturalism, the gloomy grey skies and solemn scenes, which both artists use in an effort to emphasize the melancholic feeling in their work (Fig 4). Instead of the vast sublime landscape connected deeply to religious beliefs, however, Shaw has made paintings of the banal suburban environment. For instance, he painted a field of dirt with suburban row houses behind (Fig 5). Shaw shows us the boring and the commonplace and perhaps is asking us who or what is our god now.

Shaw’s paintings emphasize their materiality. He exclusively uses Humbrol enamel paints in his work, which lend a unique look to his paintings. These paints are normally used for painting portions of radiators and are also used by children to paint models of cars and airplanes. This choice of material can be viewed as a nostalgic gesture

¹⁷ Smith, “John Bratby is Dead”.

¹⁸ Chilvers, *Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, 101-102.

¹⁹ Brown, *Romanticism*, 139, 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

although Shaw claims to have had no prior thinking to his decision to use these paints²¹. In any case, the paints were designed for something other than painting landscapes. They bring to mind industry rather than nature and perhaps craft, but certainly not fine art. Though other painters have used enamel as a medium before, including Pablo Picasso²² and Sidney Nolan²³, this is Shaw's main element of conceptualism in that the materials bring another dimension to his work. In the history of art oil painting was used to depict grand themes such as religion and war propaganda. Instead Shaw's choice of material brings a nostalgic and autobiographical element to the work and it also makes it common and everyday much like the subject matter.

Time also plays a role in the decision to use enamel paints and the viewer's interpretation of it. Laurence Sillars, the chief curator at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in the UK, describes the enamel as

...highly seductive, transmitting colour luxuriously, and it sinks into the grains and grooves of its wooden support so that it can flit and glitter like sunlight bouncing off water – a disruption that creates a push/pull between a sense of reality and representation²⁴.

Sillars argues that there are three different realities that unite in Shaw's paintings: the presence of the viewer in the reflection of the painting as the present, the occasion of making the work and the history of the subject matter²⁵. This would make sense with Shaw's subject matter because he is referencing the past, present and the future. Shaw has stated that while his work began as an exercise to paint the area as it was and explore his memories that his work has also changed more recently to record the same place to see how it has changed over time²⁶.

²¹ Turner, "George Shaw".

²² Collings, "The Master and His Mistresses".

²³ Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, 173.

²⁴ Sillars, *In Between Days*, 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶ Wilkinson Gallery, "George Shaw".

Shaw's paintings have a sense of longing for the past, an impending loss of the present and a fear that things will be unrecognizable in the future. He explains that,

...after all this I still cannot come to terms with the simple fact that life slips away and time is called everywhere everyday. What some may call a subject or an idea or an answer to the question what is your work about? is only an act of holding on.²⁷

To a large extent this body of work began as a sentimental journey through Shaw's childhood hometown of Tile Hill²⁸. The paintings are about holding on to his memories and about documenting different places in the town before and after they change. He started this project in school where he painted his childhood home (Fig 6). When Shaw began the series, he stated that these paintings were an attempt to go back home to a time when he was young and things were clear and less convoluted²⁹. The process of finding scenes to paint is the repetition of a similar journey. Although Shaw no longer lives there, when he goes back to visit his family he walks around and takes snapshots with a digital camera and brings those new and remembered experiences back to the studio to paint from³⁰. The aspect of walking through the town is an important part of his process. It has been argued that walking encourages in-depth thought because it is considered a method of taking in the world around us in a mindful way³¹. As if bringing us on a stroll through the town Shaw brings us on stops that you would not expect to see on the average city tour.

One painting is of the pub where he and his father had a drink³². Another is of a dirty brick wall littered with graffiti and another is a close up shot of steps. One critic

²⁷ Miller, "The Local and Universal Qualities of George Shaw's Paintings".

²⁸ O'Hagan, "George Shaw".

²⁹ "Artist George Shaw: Interview at Baltic Gates head". YouTube video. Posted by Jared Schiller. March 10 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfiGKaoRGS4>.

³⁰ Wolahan, "Hometown Unglory".

³¹ Cutler, "On Speculative Walking".

³² "Artist George Shaw: Interview at Baltic Gates head". YouTube video. Posted by "Jared Schiller". March 10 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfiGKaoRGS4>.

claimed that Shaw painted the back of a social club in Tile hill with “all the seriousness of Monet painting Rouen Cathedral...”³³. The highly naturalistic and painstaking way that Shaw paints and draws lead the viewer to believe that they are looking at something of vital importance and something that must be recorded. He paints all the dirt, decay, garbage and graffiti as importantly as he paints the forests and the houses. They may have even been the location of both important and inconsequential life events for Shaw or others, but he is not telling us either way. In either case, he is contending that these spaces should not go overlooked because they are a part of our everyday experience.

The majority of the scenes Shaw paints are depicted on grey days producing stillness upon the subject matter. It has been shown that this type of weather often produces tranquility not only in the picture, but also in the viewer, which enables contemplation³⁴. There is also a strong sense of human life though people are never present in Shaw’s works. He states that to him, "... they are teeming with human presence. The people I grew up with, family, passers-by, they are all in there somewhere, embedded in the paintings"³⁵. These spaces have been used and are still being used by people, but without adding them Shaw has allowed the viewer to think about the people who lived there abstractly and to enter and explore the space by themselves instead.

The lack of people also brings an uneasy loneliness to his pictures. This may be a reaction to our contemporary culture where technological advancements, urban and suburban design and other factors have initiated a disconnection from community³⁶ and nature³⁷. In one of his paintings, for example, there is a painting of an old swing set entitled *Scenes from the Passion: The Swing* (Fig. 7). In it, the swing set is presented on a dreary, wet day and one cannot help but ask why Shaw would paint something so commonplace in such a honourable and yet eerie way. Without its swings the swing set

³³ Burn, “England, My England”.

³⁴ Popova, “Why Cloudy Days Help Us Think More Clearly”.

³⁵ O’Hagan, “George Shaw”.

³⁶ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 126.

³⁷ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 2.

seems to be a relic from the past. Perhaps, no one uses anymore because we are all stuck inside in front of the screens we covet so much.

Shaw grew up in Britain in the 1970's and 80's when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and a time that is described as one with radical transformations of social, political and economic life³⁸. His paintings bring to mind the post war context that brought about housing developments and these back alley scenes and other buildings that he portrays. As industry grew in London and beyond there was more and more suburban dispersal. By painting these places Shaw is both remembering them and giving them a voice. The significance of these places is that they can also shape their resident's identity. New research is being done around how the designs of spaces we occupy affect how we feel and how we interact with one another³⁹ and in this way they influence who we are. Even small factors such as the configuration of our homes, the amount of garbage on the street and the size of our backyards have been shown to increase or decrease our happiness levels and can affect our relationships with other people⁴⁰. For Shaw, these small elements of our daily life should no longer go unnoticed.

George Shaw continues to paint the Tile Hill estate just outside of Coventry. It is the ordinary places and banal structures in the suburban environment that are the main subject matter of his work from which he records how time changes things. Being from this particular era, environment and class, Shaw's work becomes a way for him to tell his story about growing up in this place, about how he is trying to hold on to those memories and how his surroundings have shaped him. As Charles Baudelaire describes in his work *The Painter of Modern Life* what he found so interesting about paintings is that when he looked at works from the past he could see from the beauty, the clothing and other chosen elements of subject matter what the "moral and aesthetic feeling"⁴¹ of that time was. In the future Shaw's work will perform the same function.

³⁸ Popov, "Memories of a 'Ghost Town'".

³⁹ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 156.

⁴⁰ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 106.

⁴¹ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 2.

Figures for Case Study

Figure 1

Millais, John Everett. *Dew-Drenched Furze* (1881). <http://some-landscapes.blogspot.ca/2012_10_01_archive.html>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 2

Lowry, L. S. *An Island* (1942). <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/an-island-205458>>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 3

Bratby, John. *Still Life with Chip Fryer* (1954). <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/T/T00/T00104_10.jpg>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 4

Friedrich, Caspar David. *The Times of Day: The Afternoon* (1821). <<http://uploads4.wikiart.org/images/caspar-david-friedrich/wc-caspardavidfriedrich-der-nachmittag.jpg>>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 5

Shaw, George. *The New Houses* (2011). <<http://www.voltcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/aa3SHAW-The-New-Houses-2011.jpg>>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 6

Shaw, George. *No. 57*. (1996). <<http://rachelenglandart.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/george-shaw-007.jpg>>. August 29, 2014.

Figure 7

Shaw, George. *Scenes From the Passion: The Swing* (2002-3). <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/art/artist/georgeshaw/wu0816/wu0816.jpg>>. August 29, 2014.

Comprehensive Artist Statement

"First we shape cities, then they shape us." - Jan Gehl⁴²

*Liminal Space*⁴³ explores how the structure of urban and suburban environments affect the mental states and behaviours of the people who live in and move through these spaces. I will argue that our increasingly urbanized and technologically driven world simultaneously brings us closer together physically and further apart emotionally by breaking down interpersonal connections⁴⁴ and our relationship to the green environment⁴⁵. I will apply research by Gehl, Montgomery and Logan and Selhub to critically examine constructed spaces so as to better understand how they affect our physical and psychological wellbeing. Based on my direct experience and observations, I hope to reveal how the often unconsidered architectural spaces in urban and suburban settings subtly impact our lives. Using a representational style of painting and taking advantage of the pictorial tropes of Romantic art, I aim to engage the viewer in an affective, non-conscious way similar to the manner in which these spaces influence us as we experience them. For this paper I will briefly discuss research in the areas of urban planning and natural science, the art historical precedents for this type of work, and my process and motivation for painting these subjects.

⁴² Law, "Jan Gehl".

⁴³ In the context of this paper the term "liminal" relates to a transitional or in-between space. Because these spaces are transitional the person passing through them frequently processes them unconsciously. For example, subway stations and hallways are spaces that are designed to be moved through and are not destinations in and of themselves. In my work I am interested in exploring the physical and psychological impact of these connecting spaces.

⁴⁴ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 126.

⁴⁵ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 2 – When I refer to the "green environment" or to "greenspace" in this paper, I am referring to, as Selhub and Logan state, the "nonbuilt, nonsynthetic environment – sights, sounds, aromas, rivers, oceans, plants, animals, and light".

Contemporary Urban Planning and the Effects of Greenspace

The architect and urban design consultant, Jan Gehl, looks at aspects of modern urban planning in Europe and the United States. Gehl believes that a detrimental stage of architectural design was the 1960's modernist movement⁴⁶. Modernist architects put form before function⁴⁷, which led to a style of design that did not put enough emphasis on how humans would interact and function within the space. In an interview he stated that,

For many years, nobody has been taught how to care for the people. Every architect has been taught how to make the building industry, the developers, and the real estate agents happy. Neither at the architecture schools nor the planning schools is there any serious teaching about human needs and how buildings influence people's lives. And hardly any psychologists or sociologists teach in these institutions. So, architects get out of school with very technocratic views. And they don't get any instructions on the needs of people.⁴⁸

It is my contention that much of the urban and suburban space we live with today has its roots in this modernist design with its inherent problems of social isolation and loss of usable communal space. We need to focus on human needs to change or at least counteract the effects and issues of urban design such as crowding and noise. Crowding, for instance, it is argued is a problem of perception that can be readily addressed through design rather than a problem of human density⁴⁹. A large portion of the world's population already lives in urban areas and cities are continuing to grow. I believe that it is imperative that we acknowledge and find remedies for these problems to enhance present and future inhabitants health and happiness.

Recently, there has been a considerable amount of research that investigates urban planning and architecture and its affects on people. In the book *Happy City*, Charles Montgomery argues that urban planning and design can impact our quality of life to a significant degree and outlines how and why this is the case. Though this is not a new

⁴⁶ "Interview with Jan Gehl".

⁴⁷ Rowe, "The Rise and Fall of Modernist Architecture".

⁴⁸ Law, "Jan Gehl".

⁴⁹ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 126.

idea, Montgomery uses the disciplines of urban planning, sociology and subsequently neuroscience as an approach to examining the positive and negative elements of cities. He looks at cities that are designed for cars rather than people; the facades and structures of buildings; the proximity and ability to engage with other people; the accessibility of daily needs; the quality and quantity of plants and greenspace and a range of other characteristics. By building city infrastructure that is primarily designed for cars rather than people we have limited the space available for alternative, ecologically friendly forms of transportation as well as general use public space. An example of this is the suburban cul-de-sac from which the only escape is by car. In one suburb in London Ontario⁵⁰ planners did not include sidewalks, which dramatically affects how people move through that space. Ultimately good design makes us feel connected to other people without being overwhelmed and Montgomery states that good design “can prime us toward trust and empathy, so that we regard more people as worthy of care and consideration”⁵¹. City designs in the future may share features from both the suburbs and dense urban centres that balance our needs for proximity, privacy, conviviality and ample greenspace.

In addition to developments in urban design there has been an abundance of research on how contact with greenspace can affect human mental and physical well being. The authors of the book *Your Brain on Nature*, Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan, argue that our connection to the earth and its healing powers should no longer be considered a romantic notion, but instead a basic human need. Not only can contact with greenspace prevent psychological stress and rejuvenate our cognitive abilities and lower our blood pressure and decrease the production of stress hormones, it can also change our levels of empathy toward one another and the environment⁵². They argue, in particular,

⁵⁰ The street Jeffreybrook Close in London, Ontario.

⁵¹ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 158.

⁵² Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 3.

that findings from recent research into mental health and urban biodiversity should be taken into serious consideration⁵³.

Greenspace is less of a priority to urban planners in the construction of large cities where the quantity and size of parks are reduced to maximize housing and commercial development. It is important for future developers to pay attention to research that is showing that greenspace and dense green views are good antidotes to the effects of urban life, which can cause overstimulation as well as an array of detrimental health effects⁵⁴. This does not mean that someone has to move to the country to get enough exposure to greenspace. What matters most is not the quantity of greenspace but the daily exposure and proximity to it⁵⁵. To begin this process urban planners might create more parks and communal green spaces and encourage residents to “green” their own properties. Perhaps most importantly, it has been shown that nature can increase our empathy towards one another and to the environment as a whole⁵⁶. For example, when community spaces with more green space are compared to ones made mostly of concrete the green communities are happier and safer⁵⁷.

A study that is of particular interest to me in regards to my project is one that analyzes how viewing nature photographs versus viewing urban ones affects humans’ mental and physiological states⁵⁸. Roger S. Ulrich set out to subjectively and objectively study participants as they viewed the selected photographs. In one study, participants were asked to complete a one hour exam and then were split into two groups. One group viewed natural settings without buildings or any signs of human life and the other viewed urban settings that specifically did not have litter or graffiti. None of the pictures had any humans present. The participants who viewed the natural scenery reported having an

⁵³ Ibid., 230.

⁵⁴ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 32.

⁵⁵ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 109.

⁵⁶ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 44.

⁵⁷ Montgomery, *Happy City*, 110.

⁵⁸ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 14-16.

increase in positive affect whereas the group that viewed the urban scenes tended to primarily feel sadness⁵⁹. Ulrich then did two more studies to see how viewing these scenes may affect our physiology and brain activity. In both cases viewing the nature scenes had a positive impact in that they “fostered positive thoughts and lowered anger and aggression” even after watching a stressful video⁶⁰. Urban designers need to keep in mind that a large variety of parks and green areas in urban and suburban settings increases residents’ well being by a significant amount.

Realism: Art Historical Precedents

The depiction of everyday scenes of modern life in painting has historical precedents in Dutch genre painting of the 17th century and the Realist and Impressionist movements of the 19th century. In both instances, the everyday experiences of the artist became the main subject of their paintings. The 19th century poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire in his work *The Painter of Modern Life*, promoted the work of artists who painted and drew scenes from the people, spaces and activities that were happening around them⁶¹. For Baudelaire the role of the artist was to capture “the ephemeral, the fugitive, [and] the contingent⁶²” aspects of the modern world, and to “to distil the eternal from the transitory⁶³”. Realist artists such as Gustave Courbet, Jean-François Millet and others sought to portray unadorned representations of reality in both rural and urban life, while dispelling the idealized and historical figurative work of academic art and the exotic themes of Romantic art. Scenes of poverty and of working class individuals were depicted on a large scale with honesty and honour in an attempt to represent and understand the world around them. Impressionist painters such as Monet and Pissarro, on the other hand, changed landscape painting from scenes that were generally idealized,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁶¹ Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape*, 29.

⁶² Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 13.

⁶³ Ibid., 12.

nostalgic and timeless to paintings that were seemingly more accurate representations of sites from their direct surroundings, which included railway stations and street scenes.

Both Realist and Impressionist paintings give us a glimpse into the artists' time period, including the struggles that people endured in both rural and urban life relating to urbanization and commodity capitalism at the beginning of the industrial revolution. In his book, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape*, James H. Rubin argues that the artists associated with Impressionism were less interested in the outward signs of modernity than in the underlying forces that caused them⁶⁴. He discusses Impressionist paintings of contemporary life that point to the themes of progress, urbanization and human's transformation of the earth rather than the popular paintings of bourgeois leisure that the Impressionists are usually associated with. In these paintings, we as viewers, get a glimpse into the psychology of these artists and how they perceived the rapid social and economic change of their times.

Drawing from these art historical movements it is my aim to better understand how we live today by considering the consequences of urbanization in our contemporary society. By painting typical urban spaces like subway stations and parking lots in a historical painting tradition I am creating a social document that both records my personal experiences and depicts some of the realities of urban and suburban life in the 21st century. For this project I found my subject matter in London and Toronto, Ontario where I lived. The spaces include ones that are designed for transition such as corridors, stairwells and highways, and residential situations such as condominiums, apartment buildings, and suburban streets. This body of work encompasses a wide variety of places that people live in and move through in their everyday lives. It is my belief that physical characteristics such as materials, scale, noise and light, as well as one's ability to move in and negotiate the space are key factors in how people react to and behave in these spaces. Factors such as these have been shown to cause overstimulation and subsequently anxiety and stress⁶⁵. Cities and living environments that support the psycho social needs of its

⁶⁴ Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape*, 2.

⁶⁵ Selhub, *Your Brain on Nature*, 30.

inhabitants could alleviate much of this stress and create a healthier and more comfortable place to live.

My Painting Practice: Romanticism and Photography

It is my intention to accurately depict contemporary environments we encounter in cities and suburbia, while at the same time going beyond the mere direct representation of our social reality or the ‘slice of life’ of previous art historical movements. For this, I am borrowing a Romantic art notion that prescribes art as the best way to express and communicate emotion⁶⁶. I subscribe to what the landscape painter John Constable wrote when he stated that “painting is with me but another word for feeling”⁶⁷. Through my paintings, I strive to communicate the emotional and psychological impact of being in these spaces. While I am critical of the spaces that I paint and how they negatively impact human beings, my work functions predominantly on a level of affect. I draw on my own experience of making my way through and between Toronto and London to reveal the effect that these places have had on me. Therefore the imagery in the work is more likely to reflect a feeling, perhaps one of low lying tension or anxiety, alienation or isolation. I rely on the viewers’ past experience of these places to set this response in motion and to generate an internal dialogue about the subject based on their visceral response.

In order to capture an emotional charge in my paintings I reference the formal devices employed by the Romantic painters who attempted to capture the awe and wonder of the sublime and the connection to God in the landscape. It is the goal in my paintings to invert this expression of the sublime to reveal what I perceive to be the absence of the mystery, connectivity and beauty in the modern urban landscape⁶⁸. Rather than feelings of divine awe and wonder, my paintings aim to reveal the mediocrity and banality of tightly-packed urban buildings, deserted parking lots and seemingly never-

⁶⁶ Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 43.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Wiedmann, *Romantic Art Theories*, 43.

⁶⁸ I understand the sublime as feeling of greatness and grandeur that inspires awe, which I associate with the non-built environment.

ending paved streets. I use the pictorial tropes of Romantic art, such as fog and space in an ironic way as part of eliciting an emotional response from the viewer. The effect is meant to be evocative but the content is banal at best, aversive at worst. The tension is intended to be intellectually and emotionally provocative. The work *Suburbia I* (Fig. 8) is meant to be read in this way. While the image remains naturalistic in its description of the space, I have employed a glazing technique and the dreamy emotionality of soft edges and vast space similar to the Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich to simultaneously convey beauty and repulsion in the painting. The colour palette in many of the paintings is harmonious and cool, with a general overtone of grey and blue that is common on overcast days. Painting overcast days contributes to the quiet still quality in the work allowing for contemplation from the viewer. But more than this the palette contributes to a feeling of a flat uninteresting landscape that lacks the grandeur and drama so characteristic of the Romantics. It is a tool that I have used to reveal how in the stripping away of green space with all its variety, diversity and complexity we have lost contact with the sublime at great cost to our emotional and physical wellbeing. Our urban spaces need to provide us with a great deal more than just shelter and access to services. These formal and conceptual strategies share similarities with those of George Shaw, whose work is discussed in the case study section of this dossier. The aesthetic qualities of the paintings work to capture the attention of the viewer, while the subject matter provokes a quiet anxiety and a strange feeling of alienation. The size of the canvases, the surface quality of the paint, and perspective in the paintings also play a role in the paintings' affect. The small scale of the majority of the work counteracts the larger, grand scale of many of the Romantics' paintings that aimed to envelop the viewer in their grand scale. Materially, I have used both thin and textured paint to make these works. The thin paint adds to the surreal quality of some of the paintings; whereas in others, adding thickness and texture forces me to limit the amount of detail that I can render in the painting and gives the painting an abrasive quality. The strategy of adding texture also prevents me from blending the edges too much, which makes the paintings hazy and undefined contributing to a dreamlike quality. The paintings appear detailed, but the picture quickly breaks down as the viewer gets closer. In addition, the single point perspective prevents dynamism while at the same time conveying a sense of ominous isolation.

To achieve these formal effects my painting process involves both working from direct observation and photographs. When I paint from life the work is usually small, rarely measuring more than 6 x 8 inches. I consider these small pieces to be complete works that offer a glimpse or a snapshot of elements of spaces that have been unmediated by the camera (Fig. 9). Conversely, the larger paintings, which range from 1 x 2 feet to 2 x 3 feet, are done from photographs that I have taken. The photographs allow me to capture the fleeting effects of weather and to crop and adjust the image in the studio or use several photos to construct the painting. In addition, studying the spaces first hand and then painting them from photographs gives me the time to infuse the image with the feeling the space evoked. Painting allows me to slow down the spaces for the viewer. We move through many of these spaces so quickly that we rarely see the space or appreciate its impact. Painting techniques also allow me to modulate the atmosphere and to enhance certain aspects such as isolating the image from its context, that help elucidate the thesis of this project. The use of perspective, light and composition as I have previously mentioned have also been used extensively to add emphasis.

In accordance with Jack Chambers' ideas around photography, I believe that there can be pitfalls when representational painters use the photograph before having worked extensively from life and honing their craft⁶⁹. Jack Chambers was a London, Ontario based artist who, in his later years, painted everyday, domestic scenes. Scenes such as the one in *401 Towards London No. 1* were photographed after catching his eye and then subsequently painted in a tight representational style. Using photography has its pitfalls, which include limiting the range of values in the image, distorting colours and perspective and eliminating the chance elements of lighting and shifting viewpoint that you would get when working from life. In spite of these issues however, Chambers stated that the photograph still gave a relatively good factual description of the scene and was useful simply as a source of information⁷⁰. Chambers also argued that the photograph

⁶⁹ Jack Chambers 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 93.

helped him recall of how he felt when the photograph was taken⁷¹. In that sense the photograph was not in and of itself the source of inspiration or information. It allowed him to re-experience the scene that first triggered an emotional response⁷² in a similar way to the participants in the studies discussed earlier who viewed the photographs of different spaces and had a physical reaction to seeing them, which was likely based on their prior experiences. Having previously observed the spaces I have painted, using photographs allows me to achieve a combination of detail and memory to capture an experience of the space and to pass along that feeling to the viewer.

I paint the ordinary and mundane spaces and structures that I find in my everyday experience in order to capture a glimpse at what urban and suburban life looks and feels like in the 21st century. Research in urban design and planning is pointing to the structure of spaces in cities such as roads, subways and different kinds of residences as part of the reason why people are feeling more disconnected from one another. With a focus on cars rather than people or greenspace, and speed rather than community, the infrastructure of our cities have become full of spaces to move through but few spaces to spend time in and connect with one another. Evidence has shown that urban design can lead to happy, healthier people and being in and around greenspace can increase our well being and our empathy toward one another and our environment. Using the photograph to elicit memory of the space and the pictorial tropes of Romantic paintings I have referenced and inverted the sublime landscape tradition and replaced it with a pseudo-sublime urban and suburban image to draw out an emotional response from the viewer. Focusing on various transitional and residential spaces in paintings allows viewers to spend time with them and contemplate their impact. Just because we rarely notice these spaces does not render them harmless. I hope that these paintings and research can shed some light on a few of the issues that are plaguing us in our contemporary cities.

⁷¹ Ibid., 93.

⁷² Ibid., 93.

Practice Documentation



Apartment Building I

Oil on Linen

20 x 16 inches

2013

Apartment Building I represents a building I passed by every time I walked from my home to the grocery store. In the painting I attempt to capture the evening light and contrast it, the trees and the grass to the side of this austere modernist building. Soft warm light on the side of a concrete building and a small blue door with a security camera add the peculiarity of the piece.



High Park Station

Oil on Linen

32 x 48 inches

2013

High Park Station is a depiction of the entrance to the subway station in Toronto. For this work I was interested in the figures and their relationships to one another as they make their way through this space. With the inclusion of humans I attempted to depict how they move through the space and questioned how people are supposed to interact in these spaces.



Dundas West Station

Oil on Linen

14 x 22 inches

2014

In contrast with *High Park Station*, for *Dundas West Station* I eliminated the figures to concentrate more on the space. I wanted to pay attention to and inspect how we construct spaces that are meant to be transitory. Although humans are not depicted the traced movements of people are still present in the dirt tracks on the ground.



Condominium

Oil on Linen

16 x 16 inches

2014

Condominium was a change of direction toward examining the structure of housing and considering housing as another type of transitory space. This is a painting of a condominium in the west end of Toronto between the Queen Elizabeth Way, Lakeshore Boulevard and the Queensway.



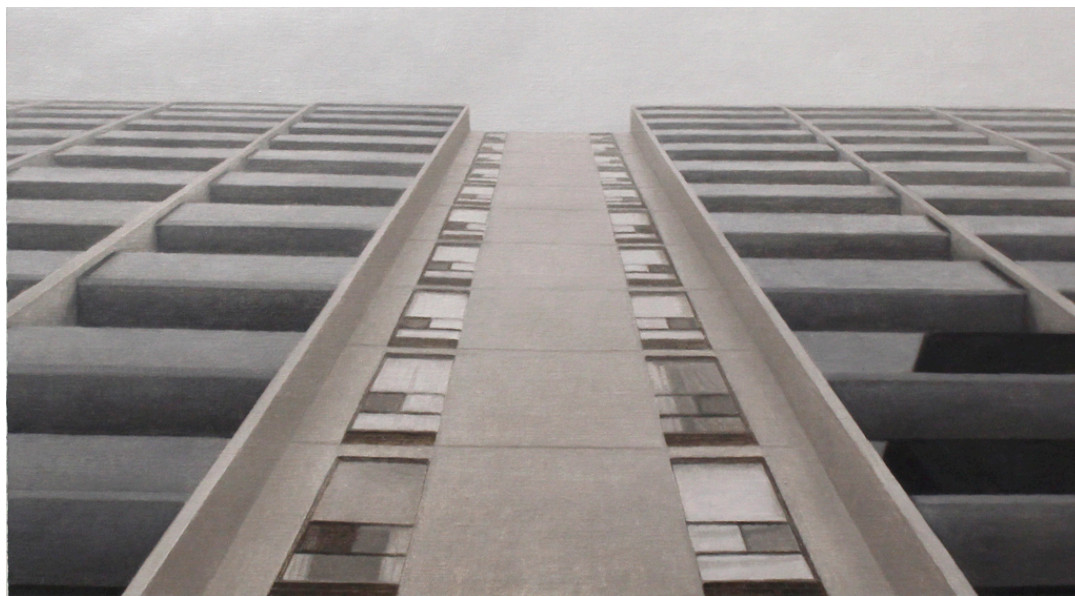
Freeway

Oil on Linen

12 x 18 inches

2014

Freeway is a depiction of another type of transitional space, one that people move through at very high speeds on their way from one place to another. The emptiness is meant to focus on the structure of the environment and present a world without cars.



Apartment Building II

Oil on Linen

12 x 22 inches

2014

Apartment Building II was based on the experience of living around numerous high rises in the west end of Toronto. The towers change and amplify effects of wind and they block sunlight and a view of the sky. Living below them in a townhouse this painting explores my relationship and a typical view of them.



New Construction

Oil on Linen

20 x 16 inches

2014

New Construction depicts a house in a suburb outside Toronto that is in the middle of being built. My interest in this building lay in the colours of the innards of the house and in the contemplation of the suburban dream.



Suburbia I

Oil on Linen

32 x 20 inches

2014

Suburbia I depicts a typical suburban street outside of Toronto. Again, the emptiness gives the opportunity to explore the structure of the space – the houses, cars, sidewalks and trees. The one point perspective along with the aid of Romantic mist is meant to exaggerate the distance and give the impression that these buildings go on forever.



Underpass

6 x 8 inches

Oil on Prepared Paper

2014

Underpass and the following image, *Suburban Street*, are two of several painting studies that I did on site in and around Toronto and London. These small paintings were completed between an hour and a half and three hours each and were meant to be a study of my direct experience of the space.



Suburban Street

Oil on Prepared Paper

5 x 8 inches

2014



View from the Freeway I

Oil on Linen

20 x 20 inches

2015

View from the Freeway was painted entirely from memory. I saw it on a few occasions out the car window as I entered downtown Toronto on the Gardiner Expressway. Painted months later, I still remembered the sight quite well and in particular the way the curtains were hanging. I subsequently created the composition as best I could from what I did remember and made up the rest of the details as I went along.



Rooftops

Oil on Linen

12 x 16 inches

2015

Rooftops continues to address concerns about housing and its proximity to roads, noise and other people. This view is from Highway 403 looking over a mound of land to what appears at first glance to be mounds of dirt, but is actually the roofs of tightly packed houses.



Escalators

Oil on Linen

9 x 16 inches

2015

Escalators was an attempt to add texture and thickness to the oil paint. To do this I added a significant amount of chalk, which gives the painting an abrasive quality. This process limited the amount of detail I could render in the image, it produced more soft edges between forms and it forced me to focus on the effects of light on forms in a different way than the more thinly painted works.



Elevators

Graphite and Charcoal on Paper

11 x 15 inches

2015

Elevators is a continuation of the examination of the spaces in which we live. In this case, the elevators are part of the journey home for apartment dwellers who may be too far away from the ground to take the stairs. The apartment building is also a space of high density, but it can still be hard to meet and interact with your neighbours. Materially, using graphite and charcoal adds starkness in the depiction of the space.



Building

Charcoal and graphite on paper

6 x 8 inches

2015

Building is a change in focus onto smaller, closer to home spaces and structures. In an attempt to capture the pseudo sublime I found that the charcoal enabled me to shift the focus using hard and soft edges more readily than in paint and the softness of it limited the amount of details that I could add. The monochrome feature of the medium also lends an eerie and lonely quality to the work.



Doorway

Oil and chalk on linen

8 x 6 inches

2015

Doorway is a depiction of the entrance to an apartment building in Toronto. For this painting and many subsequent paintings the size of the canvas has shrunk dramatically. The scenes turn to the everyday and the non-particular of our daily environment and portray them in a pseudo sublime way with both thick and thinned paint.



Stairwell

Oil and chalk on linen

7 x 5 inches

2015

Stairwell is a depiction of a tight staircase in the library on campus and a space people move through but do not pay much attention to. Although this space has a particular location I aim to find spaces that the viewer might have associations with wherever they may be from. For this painting, I was concerned with the quality of light and compositionally portraying the space as someone might experience it.



Entrance

Oil and chalk on panel

8 x 8 inches

2015

Entrance is a depiction of the front stairs and doors of a building. The Brutalist architecture makes the space ominous and intimidating. The rough quality and lack of details down the tunnel contrast with the soft light that is cast on the pillar and the right side of the wall.



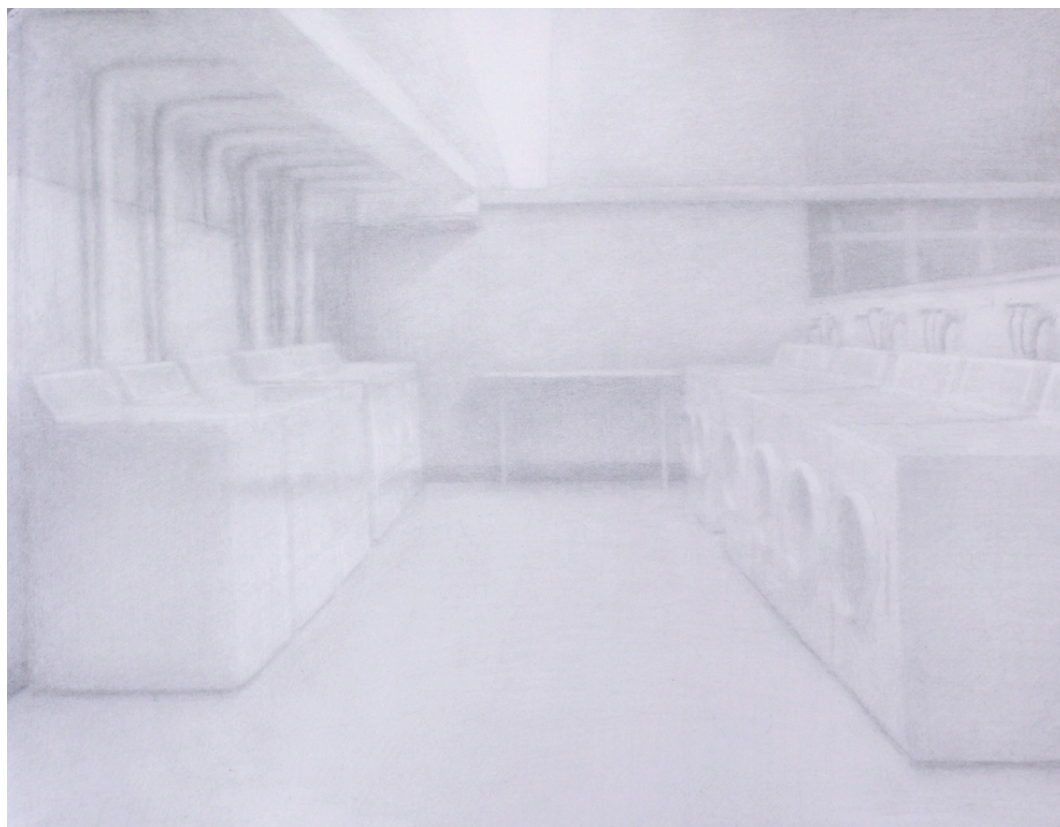
Parking Lot Sunset

Oil on linen

8 x 8 inches

2015

Parking Lot Sunset is a depiction of a parking lot in the late evening. In order to capture the soft edges and ethereal quality of the atmosphere like in the charcoal drawings rather than thickening the paint I thinned it and unfocused the majority of the edges.



Laundry Room

Graphite on paper

13 x 15 inches

2015

Laundry Room is a depiction of the laundry room that I used while I lived in London. Using only graphite I sought to depict the stark white, utilitarian space in as an ethereal way as possible.



On Ramp

Oil and Chalk on Linen

20 x 16 inches

2015

On Ramp is a depiction of traffic lined up to get onto the Gardiner in Toronto in the evening. Using thickened paint again I sought to capture the exquisite light coming from around the buildings - the drivers seem to be passing from the cold blue of reality to the warmth of the sun on the freeway as they struggle to make their way home.

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2015

Art Renewal Centre Salon, Figurative Category, Finalist
2015

Jose Barrio-Garay Bursary
University of Western Ontario
2015

The Curtlands Foundation Prize
2014

Honourable Mention Student Award
Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition
2014

Graduate Research Grant
University of Western Ontario
2013-2015

Graduate Research Travel Grant
University of Western Ontario
2013-2014

Graduate Entrance Scholarship
University of Western Ontario
2013

Top Realist Painter Award
York University
2013

The Ken Carpenter Award
York University
2012

Entrance Scholarship
York University
2009

**Related Work
Experience**

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2013-2015

Portrait Painting Workshop
Brush and Palette Club
London, Ontario
2013

Solo Exhibitions

Liminal Space
McIntosh Gallery
London, Ontario
2015

Quiet
Gallery at 129 Ossington
Toronto, Ontario
2011

In Transit
Gallery at 129 Ossington
Toronto, Ontario
2009

**Selected Group
Exhibitions**

Best-of 2014 Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition
First Canadian Place Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2015

Sum of Two and Three, One More Than Four
Art Lab Gallery
London, Ontario
2014

Fresh Paint, New Construction

Art Mûr
Montreal, Quebec
2014

Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition

Nathan Philips Square
Toronto, Ontario
2014

Painting: Jared Peters, Mike Pszczonak and Matthew Tarini

Michael Gibson Gallery
London, Ontario
2014

Portrait in Context

Project Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2013

Street Life: City as Muse

Museum of Contemporary Art
Calgary, Alberta
2012

Four Portrait Artists

Eleanor Winters Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2012

A Study of Landscape

Gales Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2012

Synthesis

Pia Bouman School For Ballet and Creative Movement
Toronto, Ontario
2011

Conference Call

Telephone Booth Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2010

Star Portraits Wrap Party Exhibition
Edward Day Gallery
Toronto, Ontario
2010

The Artist Project
Toronto, Ontario
2010

Synthesis
The Gladstone Hotel
Toronto, Ontario
2010

Publications:

Fresh Paint/New Construction, Exhibition Catalogue, Art Mûr, 2014

Montreal Gazette, *Art Mûr Exhibits Youthful Energy*, August 2014

Sum of Two and Three, One more then Four, Exhibition Catalogue, ArtLab Gallery, 2014

Canadian Art Magazine, Winter 2014, *Special Issue on Painting – 5th Annual Art Schools Smart Guide*

The Hamilton Spectator, *The Not-So-Facile World of Faces*, October 2008