

The trees in your paintings often look familiar, yet I cannot quite get a sense of the specific place—either from the shape of the trees or the sky. Are you painting a specific landscape?

Yes and no. I spend a lot of time outdoors looking at the land and vegetation. But I like to visit a variety of places both near to home in Ontario and far away. I love the southwestern parts of America and the vegetation that grows in very dry areas. All of the visual information about these various places resides in my memories. There are emotional and spiritual feelings that I associate with these memories. I use my memory a lot when composing a painting. The act of painting for me is propelled by spontaneity with little rational thought about geographical specifics. This can mean that trees and landscapes emerge that may combine characteristics from disparate places.

Landscape often provides a connection to place—either familiar or exotic—that tends to define us in some way. Do you identify with the place in your paintings?

Yes. Places that resonate with me in emotional or spiritual ways form elements in how I describe myself, my life. However, my paintings are often images from no specific point of view in an actual landscape that you could visit and say, "here is where the artist sat to painting such and such a painting". My paintings are inventions that draw from many places, times and perspectives that I have experienced. These are internalized, edited by fading memories and eventually synthesized as part of a unique landscape image that while not geographically specific does present viewers with a mood or feelings that are important to me.

So if the paintings are not a portrait of place, do the trees take on particular human characteristics?

I take pleasure in seeing trees with pronounced character, vitality, resilience, unusual twists and turns and complexity. These can be seen as personality traits. So in a sense the paintings are somewhat like a portrait depicting character and prompting a response in the viewer.

From a distance the work has a photographic quality—yet close-up the marks appear to be much more spontaneous. Would you describe your process?

People have remarked on the photographic quality of my paintings. It is important to be aware that I do not paint from photographs or use digital technology to transfer images on to canvas. I think my process of painting produces an image that reminds viewers of old photos. I don't mind the effect though I do not begin with it as a goal.

Many of my paintings start on a prepared surface that is gessoed in a unique way allowing for the paint to be smeared out into thin oily sheets. My painting tools in the first stages are large flat brushes, rags and paper towels. I apply a base colour quickly using vigorous application techniques including slapping and scratching the surface repeatedly. I may begin with a certain tree or landscape vaguely in mind, or I may wait to see it emerging from the stains and smears of paint. The first hour of painting requires that I be open to any suggestion in the rubbed surface and respond to application marks by moving the paint around the surface in rapid and spontaneous strokes. Once I think I see the composition forming I begin to whittle away at the shapes by removing paint with smaller rags and towels. Because the paint is oily it allows for subtle tonal gradations during the wipe-away and lift out process. It is the light of the gessoed under-layer coming through the paint that reminds people of photographs.

Once the composition is more or less set I spend time developing the lesser shapes and edges. Rather than trying to be accurate and depict lots of detail, like a camera, I strive to suggest enough to make the viewer believe they are seeing a lot; when, in fact, it is their own mind that is creating an impression of detailed complexity. I enjoy getting a smudge or fuzzy edge to describe the form and at the same time be an expressive stroke on the painting's surface.

Your paintings at times seem symbolic—that solitary tree alludes to Christ—both vulnerable and resilient, and an other-worldly glow permeates the paintings. Is there an underlying symbolic quality in the work?

Yes, the images are highly symbolic. Trees and scrubby dry land shrubs began to appeal to me as subject before I consciously began to realize why these images engaged my vision. There is no intended reference to Christian iconography in my work. Pre-Christian pagan symbolism seems to fit better. But I make no serious effort to illustrate ideas.

The images of growth, foliage and emergent form found in my paintings are a direct visual response to my perceptions of life forces (chi) in nature. These forces are rooted in the earth, they emerge and express themselves into the air and space. Tree branches are often complex traces of this emergent energy while the foliage represents the outer most growing points of expansion. It might be right to say that these images express my sense of living forces in nature.

There is a certain melancholy quality in the overall mood of many of the paintings that create a reflective or contemplative space which aligns your work with Romantic paintings. I have read some people make references to the sublime in your work, however I don't see it. I am thinking, for example, of Edmund Burke's notion of "delightful horror". Perhaps your work even suggests a mastery of the sublime in some way. Do we worry about our

place in the universe in a way that once gave meaning to the sublime? We could think about this in relation to your philosophical position as a twenty-first century Buddhist as opposed to a nineteenth century Christian.

I like to offer images that invite viewers to slow their thinking and perhaps open their minds into a contemplative state. I'm not really trying to present the "sublime". Burke's ideas of the sublime are based in 19th century European notions of God as the ultimate point of infinite power. In his view, the sublime was about our astonishment and feelings of terror/danger before enormous power or forces and was illustrated by poets and painters who used nature to express this subject. In Buddhist terms I prefer to suggest transcendence, a passing through the image plane (maya) into a recognition of something to which we are holistically connected.

Since the medium is visual, understanding should be non-verbal, non-conceptual... a visceral dissolution of boundaries through inner experience. My trees are soft edged, dissolving into the air around them, or perhaps transforming the air into form.

In what other ways do you feel your spiritual beliefs impact your artistic practice?

My paintings begin with large loose gestural brush strokes that are only vague and suggestive of the form that will emerge. Taoist and Buddhist landscape paintings may present images that seem to emerge from mists, often there is a lot of mere suggestion rather than detailed depiction; I am influenced by these traits. Zen mind is grounded in the present moment of being. I try to be in that state when painting. I like to work spontaneously without conceptual thinking – responding to the push and pull of the paint as I work.

The tension created by the alternately dissolving and emerging forms represent our longing to capture what Marchessault called “the present moment.” In this way his paintings offer both solace and warning.

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