

BYRON HODGINS

In the words of Byron Hodgins, his artistic vision has led him to “experience the common place as transformational, an opportunity to be present and focus on the self”. That is clear when viewing his work, with canvases covered in pure abstraction, transporting you to another world. Hodgins nods to nature, drawing attention to his wispy sweeps and colourful symbolism. This London, Ontario, native has held solo exhibits across the country, with ever-growing popularity. Today, he continues to paint and share his work at exhibits.

www.byronhodgins.com

When did you realize you wanted to pursue being an artist 24/7?

I’ve always wanted to be an artist since I was a kid, grade 4 or 5.

What about Toronto inspires your work?

Because I’m a plein air painter I’m always working outside - the Lakeshore, The Humber Valley, High Park. Toronto has a long history with the group of 7, JEH MacDonald painting High Park and teaching at OCAD. There’s a deep tradition of these artists not only working locally but then travelling to the north country, which is something I’ve been doing as well. So I feel a kinship with artists in Toronto’s history.

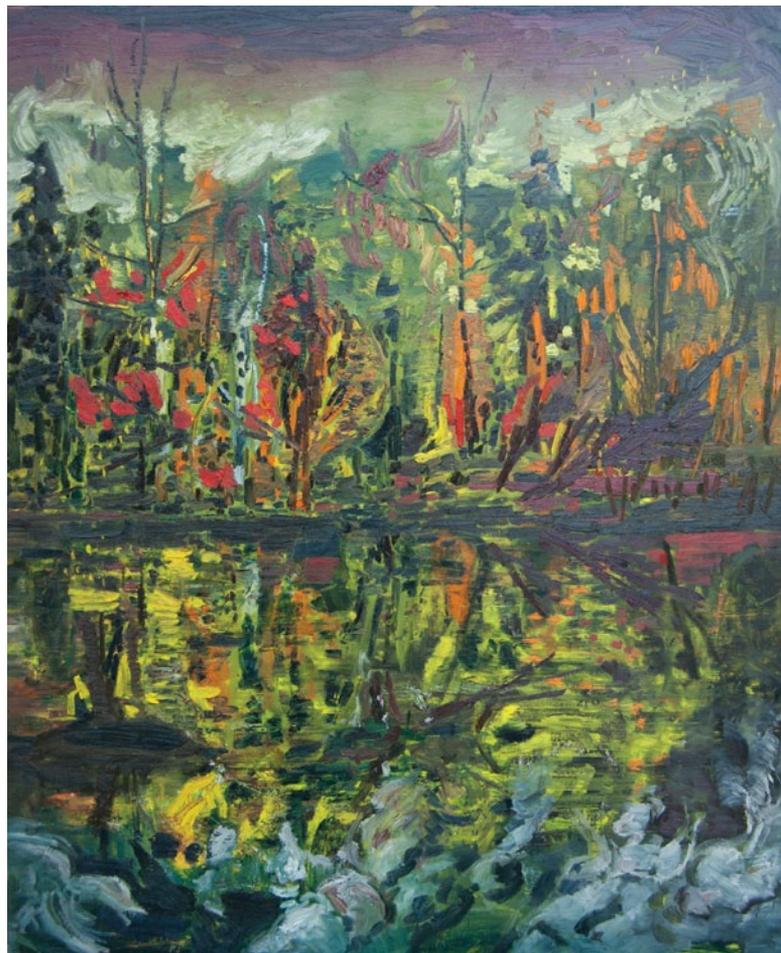
How would you describe your particular style?

My style is loose, energetic, abstracted from representation, but still rooted with a sense of place, and gravity.

What was your first solo exhibit like?

It was both terrifying but also extremely exciting. On the one hand I was already used to seeing the work in the best format outside, where it was made under natural light. Later, they go into storage for a while, and from there curated into a gallery; it’s in the gallery that I’ll see them with each other, and you start seeing relationships between pieces. A curious equation between paintings begins and from there new work starts to form.

Wild Fire





Night Animal

Your work is pure abstract painting, what gravitated you towards this form?

I'm definitely not interested in painting what I see completely, since that has been taken over by photography. There's no point in executing a map of a visual field. I like the thinking of Hans Hoffmann, where you go outside to paint and have a sense of energies and forces that are inspired by the natural environment, but are not held to them in terms of painting a tree to look like a tree. Instead a tree is a representation for a series of inspirations. The paintings are not completely non-objective, the colours are rooted in a spatial relationship to where I am at that time and place.

I would also say that every painting is abstract at its initial stages, and paintings that move towards representation are one aspect of my work. There's another pull of working the paint to the point where the paint suggests its own form and subject, and there's always a tension between the two realms, but they exist on a continuum.

How important is it, in your opinion, to factor in nature in conjunction with creating art?

For me the core project is to be situated in a real place and be forced within a constrained period of time to make a painting that's rooted in a real experience of nature; whether it's my own nature as a creative person and those aesthetic associations that I have to deal with, or looking out to the field and drawing upon various forms.

Is there any medium you haven't worked with yet, but would like to in the future?

Performance art; there's a performative aspect to my work because I'm painting in public spaces (and in some degrees private spaces). I'm always running into and talking to the public. That part of my painting is really interesting to me, and I'll choose places that allow me to interact with people. For instance, I'll paint a picture by the overpasses on the CNE grounds, and if I were there with a camera taking photographs of the highway, I probably wouldn't be allowed but, when the security guards drive over on their golf cart and see that I'm painting, they'll wave and smile.

That painting gets a free pass in dealing with those sorts of possibilities is really interesting; so whether I just take some of the experiences I'm having and make a performance from them, or whether I do that in a gallery, or I do that and have the public come to these spaces outside and do a performance there is quite possible.

What message do you most strive to communicate with your work?

The message of a living, breathing, palpable kind of experience; being inspired by living things. And I want the paintings to have that kind of living feeling too. I think the best paintings are the ones that have a rich energy in them, both in colour and gesture, but more than that they have a sense of gravity to them that is rooted in reality so they have a living feeling about them.



Night Rising

If you could sit down to coffee with any artist, dead or alive, who would it be and why?

Obviously someone like Van Gogh comes to mind right away, and I'd love to go back in time and sit at the fringes of Paris where the sidewalk and the roads end, where Van Gogh would be painting the fields at the edge of the city. I think that would be incredible to see, but I'd also love to talk to Arshile Gorky before he committed suicide. His work is a real source of inspiration for me.

How would you describe the art scene currently in Toronto?

It's amazing that everyone comes to Toronto at some point so it's incredibly varied and every gallery has its own approach in its relationship to its artists and to its public. Some galleries are obviously more commercial than others, and some galleries are much more academic in their concern. It's fascinating to see what artists go, where and why and how they work within the gallery system.

For me, I feel like I'm at that place right now where I'm in Toronto and where it can go from here. It's home base.

What advice would you offer young artists?

There's a lot that can be said to a young artist. Some of the advice that stuck with me was: you have to make a painting one step at a time and you have to work an awful lot; to get one or two good paintings you have to make five or six paintings. To artists in general my advice would be that you have

a voice, and it's a matter of listening to the type of words and poetry that's innate in you and learning how to use it. You can go to school to broaden your vocabulary and the type of things you want to experience, but ultimately you're going to have to contend with what you can do, what you feel you can intrinsically do, and you have to believe in yourself because you'll be in this for the long haul. Whether or not you can find a place for it, at least personally you're going to be growing and developing, and that in itself should be rewarding.

Any dream collaboration you haven't done yet?

Dream collaboration? My plan is to travel outside of the city and take my project all over, do what I do now in Toronto but in environments up north or in cities all across Canada. It's a collaboration in the sense that I'm working with a place and the people that inhabit the place. So I could go to a Nunavut diamond mine or to the tar ponds by Fort McMurray and paint not just those particular industrial sites, but the place that people live, and try to find out how they inhabit their cities and their parks, and get a sense of the relationship with the natural world and how it can be different; that's the collaboration that I think about, it's with the people who live in these places. I'm getting a sense of that in Toronto all the time, I get a sense of that when I go to Haliburton, but it would be nice to go to other places in Canada and experience that, paint those stories.

What is the proudest moment of your career so far?

I think it was the leap to large scale painting outside. Once I got outside with canvases larger than 48" x 60" and the 78" x 96" canvases outside plein air painting I knew I was doing something unique, not just for me but for the plein air community. I think it's very rare for people to paint large outside and the kind of difficulties and struggles that are supporting and working that scale is really fascinating. It feels very natural, and it's the appropriate thing to do. I think that when I did my first large scale paintings I felt like the sky was the limit after that, and I just wanted to go out and do more.

What is your creative process like?

I work everyday; I work when I don't feel like it and I work when I do feel like it. In a month I find that I make small paintings daily, then I'll do a few mid-size paintings, then I'll work a large scale painting. It's also affected by the seasons and the time of day, so it's difficult to paint large outside in the winter, but you can do things in the winter time with paint that you can't do in the summertime, so it's a fascinating relationship with the seasons and how paint can be influenced by it. I don't paint a complete field of view, I have this mental Photoshop that happens pulling from what's on my right and from what's over to my left, and then seeing the light through the trees above me; and you bring all these points of view together to create a sense of nature, but it's not rooted in a pure objective, the way a camera would see. It's a way of painting, an experience of nature.

What is the most challenging part of being an artist?

I think everyone has his or her struggles, so I do think it's related to art people make. We all have our personal backstory that we're dealing with, and that's probably the most difficult thing, but I think the art is an escape to that to a certain degree, and it's also a way of dealing with it, it's a corrective vision for the personal things that are going on. You can't divorce being an artist from your real life but your arts can be a corrective to the experience.

What is one thing most people don't know about you?

I love movies, I love film noir and the unusual characters in them. I have a real love for foreign films, for German and French New Wave. If I could dress like someone from one of Goddard's films I probably would.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

I hope to have moved out of Toronto by then, but visiting Toronto very often, driving a pick-up truck with a stack of canvases in the back. And I'd like to invite artists from Toronto to come outside up north for the first time and kind of rock their world like it did mine.

Night Vision

