LIVING WITH PAINTING

An Interview with Landon Mackenzie

by Robert Enright

Landon Mackenzie, *Oaxaca (Curtain, pink stripe)*, 2024, gouache and gesso on Arches hot press paper, 26 × 38 centimetres. Private collection. All images courtesy the artist.

In the following interview, Vancouver-based artist Landon Mackenzie was reflecting on her early years when she was "just trying to figure out how to use paint and to make images that matter to me." Forty years later, there is ample evidence that she has figured out how to use paint and is continuing to make paintings that personally matter to her. She means "matter" in a conceptual and aesthetic way, but she also uses the word for its material density. Paintings matter to her because they are so much matter. There is, in this observation, some aesthetic tail-eating, a kind of painterly ouroboros.

Mackenzie's is a life lived in the glow of art. One of the earliest pieces of advice she was given by her parents was to pay attention to what artists told her. Mackenzie took it as gospel, and throughout a painting career now in its fifth decade, she remains one of this country's most attentive artists. She has acutely developed painterly instincts; drawing on art history and art practice, she seizes on those things that are most useful in advancing her painting. From her childhood, through her education at NSCAD (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) in Halifax and Concordia in Montreal, she has paid close attention to what she was told by the teachers and artists she encountered, including Harold Town, Guido Molinari, Joyce Wieland and Irene Whittome. No less influential have been the artists she has looked to as a way of learning what to do and what not to do; these include everyone from Emily Carr to Vancouver photo-based artists like Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham.

She has named an entire series of paintings "Time Machine," after the 1961 painting of the same name by Joyce Wieland, and when she began to include writing on the surfaces of her paintings, she was following a model set by Constance DeJong, who was a visiting artist at NSCAD during Mackenzie's undergraduate year. In her massive "Saskatchewan Paintings," the writing led to what she characterized as "a lot of blurring of fact and fiction texts." Mackenzie has retained an attitude towards experimentation learned at NSCAD, and, as a result, she is open to unconventional ways of making a painting. Employing different compositional strategies, she has used everything from rule-based, third-party collaboration in her "Time Machine" paintings, to accepting natural elements as contributors in her "Weather Pattern" series.

Mackenzie thinks big. Once she focuses on an idea and determines a direction, she goes all in. Nowhere is that inclination more evident than in her "Mapping Trilogy," 21 large paintings in three separate bodies of work. Each series uses cartography as a trope for the operation of an expansive imagination. By the time she completed them, she had shifted the map as a projection of the physical world to an interior scan that took the viewer inside the space of human consciousness. Her ambition was determined by the coupling of a capacious and inventive imagination and an unstoppable work ethic. It also involved an understanding of the politics of gender in the art world: "I still couldn't do a simple, elegant work like Jack Bush and get away with it. The reaction would be, 'Who the fuck does she think she is?'" To avoid that criticism she needed to "go over the top" and work on a number of paintings at the same time.

She describes her process as toggling back and forth between an intellectual assessment of what is necessary and an intuitive move that responds to the effect of that assessment. She is prepared to use what she understands as her madness to take the painting to the point where she feels it is done. She thinks of a painting as a responsive thing; when she does something to one part of the surface, it "wakes up" other parts: "You're always looking at a painting to see 'Who's awake? Who's asleep?'" She also realizes that her tendency is to do more than is necessary, which means that the end of the process involves toning down what she has done. "In all my best paintings, I'm reaching for a new bag of tricks to figure out how I can correct something that I overdid." At that point, she is waiting for the painting to tell her, "I'm here. I'm all here."

Landon Mackenzie is one of our best all-here painters. From winning the III Quebec City Biennale in 1981 for her "Lost River Series" (she was still in graduate school), she has not stopped making significant work. Her instincts continue to move her towards scale and numbers. In the last 10 years, she has completed several different painting series, most recently "Hummingbird," 2024–ongoing, and the "Weather Pattern," 2021–ongoing. Their range is just right, a set of paintings inspired by an exquisitely delicate flying thing, coupled with paintings that are soaked in shallow tide water and left out in the open air.

There is something elemental about Mackenzie's practice. She is a woman's version of Antaeus, the mythological figure who was invincible as long as he remained in contact with the ground. Mackenzie functions in the same way. She uses landscape to ground everything with gravity, so that even when her paintings are most abstract, they still need to come to Earth.

The following interview was conducted by phone to the artist's studio in Vancouver, British Columbia, on June 11, 2025.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You grew up in a house that was filled with art and artists and there are generations of painters in your family. It's as if

1. *Hummingbird (Yellow)*, 2025, synthetic polymer on linen, 200 × 290 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

2. *Weather Pattern #6 (Stripes+Tides)*, 2023, synthetic polymer on linen, 218 × 384 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

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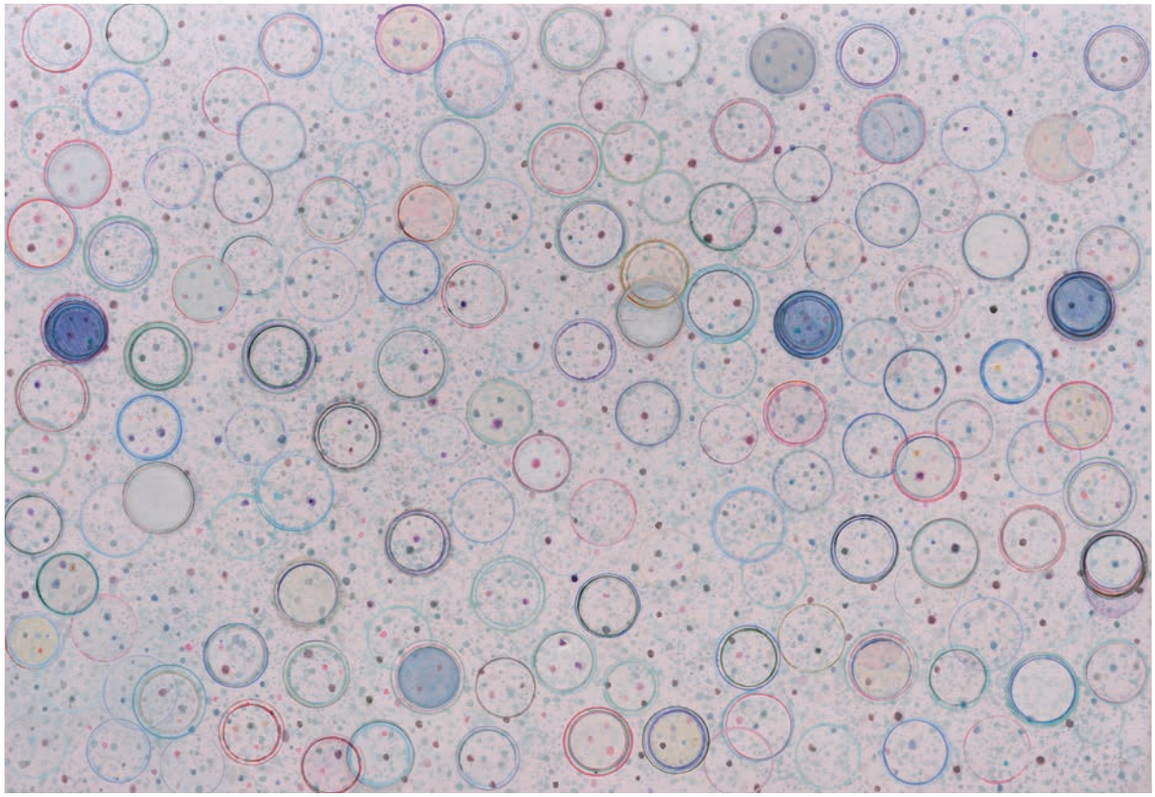

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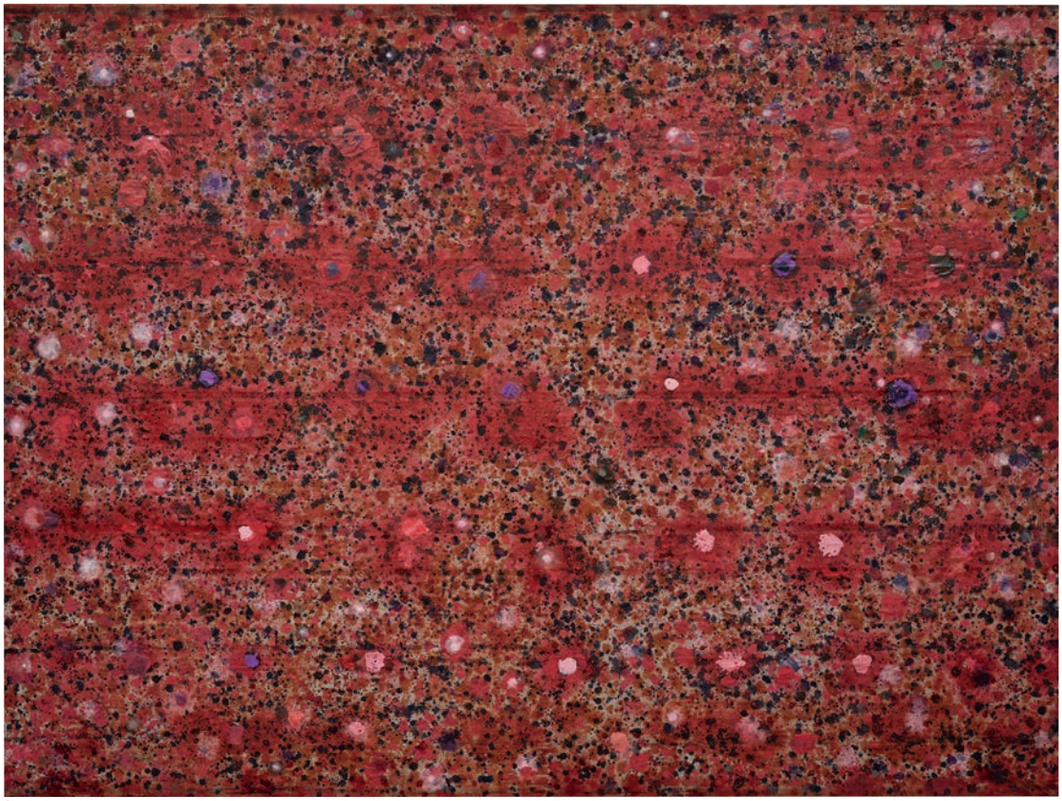
you didn't have a choice other than to be an artist. Is that the way you regard your upbringing?

LANDON MACKENZIE: It was not quite that straight a line. One signal I did get quite early is that artists are important people. Very few kids get that. And we grew up in Toronto close to the Isaacs and Carmen Lamanna galleries and to the artist Harold Town, who was a close friend of my parents and lived across the street from my grandparents. There was one night where I was serving Scotch to Harold and the art historian David Silcox at one of my mother's parties at our house in Rosedale. Just to be clear, it was an old 1880s house that hadn't been renovated and was in poor shape, so I always say, "Think boarders, not butlers." My parents were part of the somewhat bohemian intellectual elite that was involved with the movement to make Toronto a vibrant and modern city, and their love of abstract art was a big part of that. I was about 12 and I'm handing drinks to these old guys who are sitting on the stairs where they would argue until dawn. And they said, "You should be an artist. But you know what? You're too well adjusted." And I remember saying in my brain, "I'll show you! I can be an artist." One of the keys is that I already knew I can't be like Harold Town, this charismatic wild man who is engaged in a conversation with the world. And I also knew I can't be like Joyce Wieland because she is eccentric, and what I'm picking up is that as a girl you'll get put down because you're not as good as the boys.

You skipped grade 13 and went to NSCAD in 1972 when you were only 17?

Yes. My Uncle Hugh (Whey), who was an artist, and Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow had just come back from doing prints at the lithography workshop there and they each said to me in separate conversations, "There's something happening down there. You should go." I also thought if I stayed at home one more year, I would kill my mother. I was that kind of rebellious teenager who knows it's better to get on that train. I had begun to internalize a lot of personal difficulties. When parents separate, as mine did, in a devastatingly acrimonious manner, everyone more or less abandons the children because they're so turned into their pain. Or their excitement. It's the mid-'60s, feminism and the pill had come, the mothers were reading Simone de Beauvoir and their generation was blowing up everything. They went through a tornado. I understand it in retrospect, but it was very difficult as a kid. Later my mother, Sheila, was asked if she always knew I would be an artist. And she said, "Oh no! Of my four children, Landon is by far the least creative." Then she reflected: "But she's the only one who needed to be." At the time, I thought she was being really mean, but I came to completely understand what she meant. As a small child, I hadn't used art. You use it when you're going through adolescence; you turn to music or the guitar or poetry, but I turned to drawing. When I applied to NSCAD I got the Projects class list mailed to me, and it had 125 projects from which you had to choose three. They didn't want a regular portfolio. In First Year, you had to take photography and drawing. Whatever else didn't matter. My uncle taught drawing at OCA (Ontario College of Art), and he and



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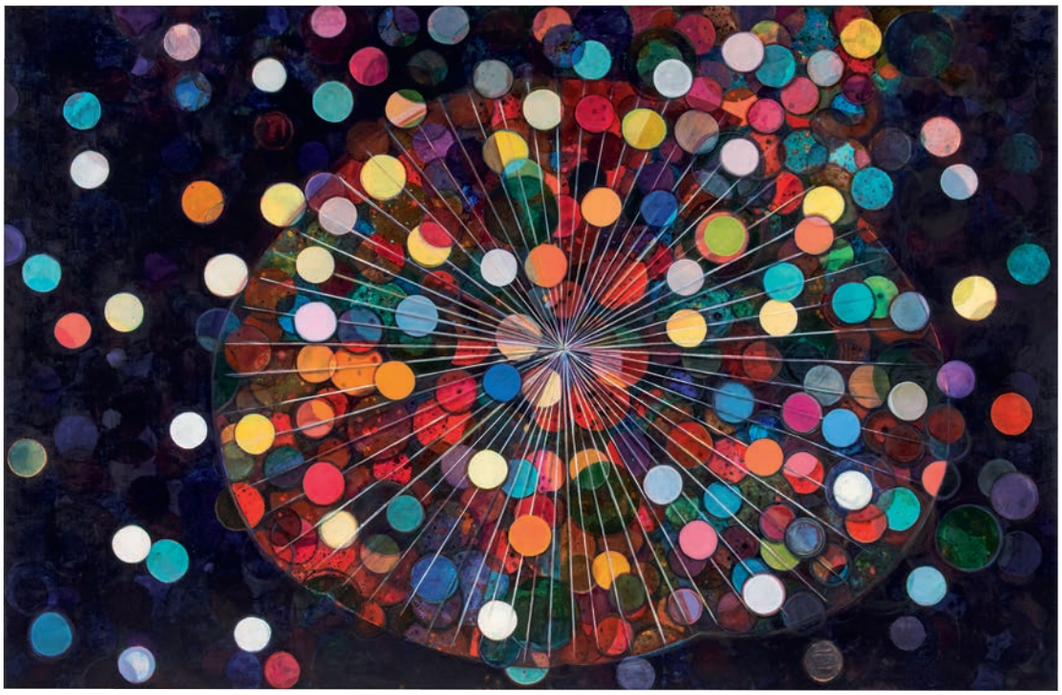
1. *Pale Pink Room*, 2025, synthetic polymer on linen, 200 × 290 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

2. *Weather Pattern #9 (Castoff)*, 2024, synthetic polymer on linen, 183 × 244 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Harold had both said, "Drawing is more important than anything. If you can think through drawing, you'll be all right." Before I left for Halifax, I went to visit Harold at his Severn Street studio when he was doing large string paintings, and he loaded me up with as much paper as my arms could carry and he gave me a metal watercolour kit that I still have.

Were you ready for that school? Did you go and think you were going to be a painter only to find out that painting is a four-letter practice? Nobody wanted to be a painter at NSCAD in the early '70s.

That's it. The teachers were uninterested, and the painting area was absolutely dull and dead unless you were already doing fine. But let me back up for a minute because this is super-important. Neither of my parents thought it was a good idea for me to take off at 17 and go to art school. So I told them I would be an architect but that I needed one year of NSCAD. I had a big argument with my mom about it, but at the end she said, "All right, pack a nightie, a toothbrush and a sweater, we're going to New York, and I'll teach you how to look at art." A few hours later, we're on the overnight Greyhound. We get off at the Port Authority in the morning. We go find Auntie Lydia, this ancient creature living in Greenwich Village whom my mom knew when she was growing up in Chile. We checked in on Lydia, cleaned up a bit and then we went to the Museum of Modern Art. In those days the museum had a big curved staircase, and at the bottom of the stairs my mother said, "Pay attention to three things in the room. And then make a note of what's really important to you. Don't worry about the rest of it. Don't try to go inch by inch." I get to the top of the stairs where you've got *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), the clock melting on the beach by Salvador Dali, which I'd seen in an art book as a 3 x 4-inch photograph. And I'm just completely blown away that you could make a painting that small and that perfect. Then I walk into the room and see Matisse's *Dance* (1909) and I'm like, "Oh, my god." It's a hundred times bigger than that other painting; it's made with house painting brushes, and it stops your heart. And the third painting on the list was *Network of Stoppages* (1914) by Marcel Duchamp, which remains one of my favourite and most influential paintings. I would still come up with the same three paintings today. The next day we go to the Frick and my mother shows me Vermeer and the Masters. Then we go to the Russian Tea Room because it's her favourite and after that we get back on the midnight bus, which is when she gives me practical advice. She had travelled all over the world. She says, "Young women with no money travel at night on buses and trains because you can sleep, you'll be safe, and you can get tea and a piece of toast in the cafeteria, or at the Woolworth's counter attached to a station." The one thing she could give me was how to travel safely as a young woman and wish me luck. So when I went to



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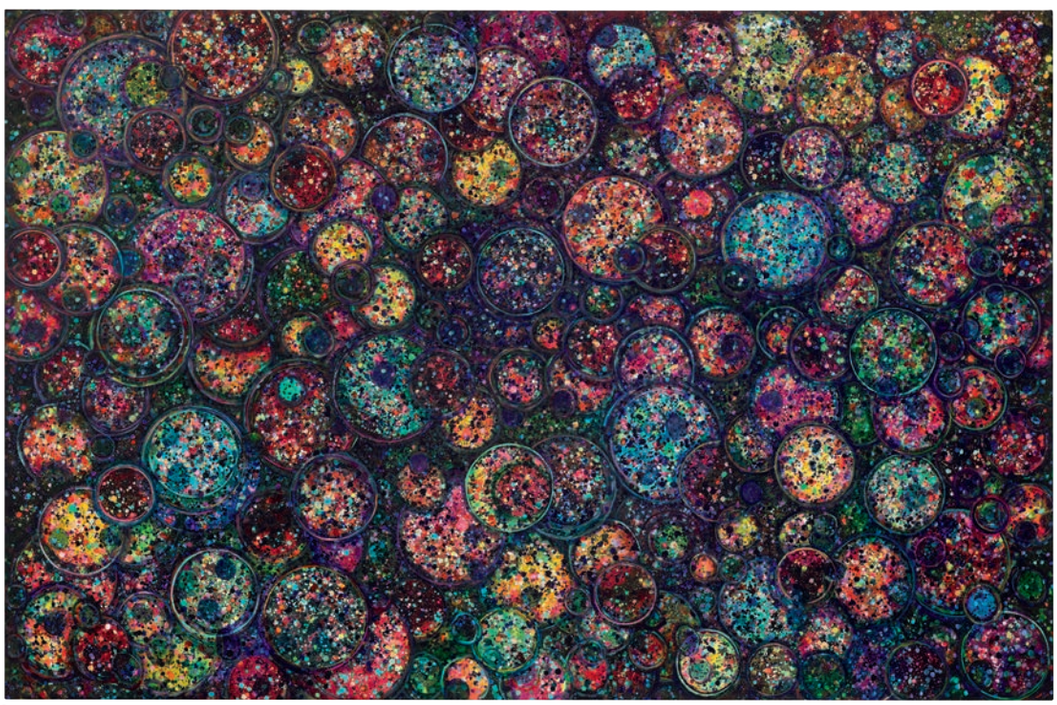

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1. *Time Machine*, 2013–2019, oil and synthetic polymer on linen, 240 × 370 centimetres. Private collection.

2. *Time Machine No. 2*, 2019–2021, oil and synthetic polymer on linen, 210 × 320 centimetres. Private collection.

Halifax by train, I had certain tools of self-reliance. I was only 17, but, in a weird way, I was prepared for the weird new world.

Good practical life wisdom is one thing, but what were your initial experiences like at NSCAD? By all historical reports, the school was a special and unusual place.

The other advice both my parents gave me was, "Pay attention. Study with the best people you can and listen to every single thing they say." In the first week, I run into Garry Kennedy in the elevator. I'm a hippie chick from Toronto. I have long, straight hair to my waist and hand-painted eyelashes and no bra, and Garry says, "Who are you and where'd you come from?" Then he tells me to turn up on Mondays for the visiting artists' talks because the students got a free beer and a cake box doughnut. I go on Monday at 4:30 and the first visiting artist is Philip Glass, but he's not Philip Glass yet. He's just some skinny guy playing this weird piano stuff. And you're listening and going, "Mm-hmm, okay." And then the next week, it's Vito Acconci. You listen to all his crazy

stories, and you go, "Mm-hmm," and you just take it all in. It was like that, week after week after week.

I want to skip ahead to what must have been—and I'm using your own language here—another "super-important" event in your still young career. You enter the Quebec City Biennale of Painting, which is a prestigious, blind jury competition, and your "Lost River Series" wins first prize in 1981. Inside the taxonomies of art history, these works would have been characterized as "New Image" paintings. Were you aware of that tradition and were you trying to plug into it?

Not really, I was just trying to figure out how to use paint and make images that mattered to me. My first studio after graduate school was on Peel Street. Lynn Hughes and David Elliott were there, too. David was a fiend for painting, really talented, and he knew Philip Guston and Leon Golub. We lost that studio after a year and I joined another on Clark Street. I would go to the paint department at Simpsons-Sears nearby on Saint Catherine to find sample strips of colours that I liked, such as blue. Then I would go back to the studio and try to mix it. At the time there was an excellent artist paintmaker in Montreal named Mike who made pure pigment with synthetic polymer (acrylic) paint that was absolutely amazing. It was like gold. It didn't have any guck and fillers, so you could just add water and change your mind quickly. I built my own stretchers and canvases, which gave some credibility. Those first paintings in 1978–79 were 7 x 8 feet in two parts. After being a printmaker for so long, I was dying to go big. I was already teaching drawing and etching part-time at Concordia and went annually to Toronto, Ottawa and New York to see shows, but the key thing happened over Christmas in 1981. Close family friends had an apartment in London, and they said, "Come! We can put you up and feed you and you can look at a lot of art in museums." I went on a 10-day intensive to London and Ireland, and I realized that my ways of painting were too elementary, too figure-driven. Not "figure" as in people but too literal. I came back from England like a slingshot. I totally understood something now. My studio mates at Clark Street—Sorel Cohen, Eva Brandl and Stephen Schofield—stole two of the paintings I made soon after this trip and hid them. They had a serious conversation with me and said, "Look, Landon, you're used to this print thing where you change your plate all the time, but with your paintings you end up going past all these amazing endings. We've taken an arbitrary ending that we think is perfect." When my friend Tom Hopkins came with his glass panel truck to pick up my pieces to deliver to the Saidye Bronfman Centre, those were the two that went.

Your trajectory was interesting because you go from Garry Neill Kennedy and the death of painting to Concordia where Guido Molinari and Irene Whittome are influential teachers.

At Montreal I wasn't registered with Molinari for my MFA because I wasn't a painter, but I went to every one of his lectures. His lectures were legendary in the mid-'70s. We would go to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and sit under a Bouguereau, and for an hour he would talk about a painting that had all kinds of angels and things in it. He would read the painting: the blues and the reds and the "glance" curves and how all the compositional structures and colours were working. He could talk about a painting without acknowledging that there was a naked person in the middle of it or someone whose head had been cut off. I was absolutely fascinated. Even though I was in Irene's section, Guido dropped by for studio visits and he'd tell me I was wasting my time being a printmaker. My number one characteristic is being stubborn, obstinate or contrary, so I refused to paint because both Guido and Harold were always after me to convert. Of course, I started painting furiously in secret the minute I left graduate school.

Your secret existence as a painter must have been blown when you won the Quebec Biennale. Tell me more about how those paintings came to be painted.

The "Lost River Series" are partly about the Yukon as an imaginary North. Not the 'Near' North of my childhood but the 'Deep' North, and living as a bush hippie. My partner, Donald MacPherson, and I had moved to the Yukon after my BFA in the winter of 1976 and by August I was accepted unexpectedly for graduate school. So in the fall I began going back and forth, living a hybrid life. The "Lost River" paintings come out of the memories of living in that kind of twilight. Some have a tongue-in-cheek reference to the snow mountains in Lawren Harris paintings. In Montreal I was teaching in the mornings and then would go swimming at the Y across the street or do errands. By 2:00 I'd get to the studio and do anything—sweep the floor, have tea—to avoid beginning to paint. By the time I started to work, it was late afternoon, and I'd go through until after twilight. That magic half-light time is an incredible time to paint. There were 16 paintings in the series, although I destroyed a couple. As soon as I won the prize, I started showing with France Morin's gallery and the paintings went to museums and collections. I kept a few.

Here's a scenario that could have been made for a biopic. In 1986 you've become a star because you've won this important prize. You're headhunted to teach at Emily Carr College of Art and soon after, a pair of famous feminists come to Vancouver as visiting speakers, the critic Griselda Pollock and the artist Mary Kelly. Not only do they tell the audience that painting isn't possible, but any notion that you could reclaim painting for figuration as a woman, and use the woman's body as a subject, has been foreclosed. You're in the room, you're a painter, and the first thing you do is go to a studio and paint a woman into your painting.

I went to the studio to see if they were right; after all, they are theorizing and I was painting. I started by adding two naked cartoon figures to a big work called *Island*. I love that painting but concluded they were right. Two years later in 1989, I was part of an intensive week-long feminist seminar at the Vancouver Art Gallery, also led by Kelly and Pollock. When you're listening to Mary Kelly and Griselda go on and on about essentialism and you're eight months pregnant with your third child and your feet are swollen, you're thinking, hmm, I'm feeling pretty essential right now. In the studio I'd been working on a large painting with a female figure flying with the aid of mechanical wings. After the seminar, I started to obscure her with this "writing the body" idea from French feminist theory they

were going on about. That picture became *Albatross Wings for Georgia* (1989–1991) and the prototype for the "Saskatchewan Paintings."

One of the things you did in Vancouver was get involved with a group of artists, including Ian Wallace, and together you moved into a building on 188 West 3rd.
Ian and I both were teaching at Emily Carr and had senior students at 188 West 3rd, when the college rented it as temporary teaching space in 1986. We pitched it to become faculty studios and to finish the college's lease. Even though the school couldn't help us pay the rent, it was very cheap and the school assisted with admin support and still does. After students left, we took it over in December 1986 with 12 of us, and a space for visiting artists. Forty years later, Ian and I are still there and so are four others from the original group. At 82, Ian comes in every day. After I moved into this huge space, my dialogue was no longer only with painting; it was also with large-format photography and the tableaux of Ian and Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham, who were important in the city.

I want to talk about another thing that you were in conversation with and that is writing. Tell me how writing came to be something that turned up in your painting.
When I was at NSCAD, Constance DeJong, who was Sol LeWitt's girlfriend, had an influence because when you looked around there were so few women to follow and she gave a performance in Halifax that was spellbinding. She performed her writings as a script, from memory, spoken as a girl-on-a-stool. In the 1990s I turned to writing because painting became too vague. I did performance readings in front of my paintings in exhibitions or in slide talks at universities. This got me into all kinds of hot water because writing is too specific. In the "Saskatchewan Paintings" (1993–1997) there is a lot of blurring of fact and fiction texts. I continued with the "Tracking Athabasca" series (1998–2000) and with "Houbart's Hope" (2001–2005), which together form "The Mapping Trilogy." They were very labour-intensive. I still couldn't do a simple, elegant work like Jack Bush and get away with it. The reaction would be, "Who the fuck does she think she is?" Also, I like to get really involved, go over the top and have three or four paintings on the go at different stages. In earlier years, my studio being halfway between the art school on Granville Island and where I lived in East Van allowed me to sneak by to add one thing a day. I started to build the idea that fracture had to be a discipline, so if you added one thing, then you could react to it. When you make a move, that's intuitive; you come back; you analyze it, that's intellectual. You make a new move, that's intuitive. Maybe you would change one dot to orange and the next day you'd come back and see how orange affected a 7.5 x 10.5-foot painting. Molinari is in my brain saying, "Every single colour wakes up something else," and then I hear Town adding, "Watch your corners."

It's fascinating how much the conceptual framework you brought from NSCAD has stayed with you. You frame it as a Pollock versus Pollock: Griselda versus Jackson. Your painting practice has always embodied an oppositional character. You have found a way in which the conceptual and the intuitive seem to operate with equal intensity.
Yes, as long as you alternate them. I need to allow myself to go into a totally intuitive space to finish a work. When we had small kids, I made a deal with Donald that I would never come home on Friday nights. I needed one day with no deadline and no one to blame but myself. I had other days to work but they were capped by obligation. Fridays from noon till late—I could even sleep there if I wanted to—was my time until I had finished with my own madness. And I use "madness" in big quotation marks. It's that time where you're doing something really crazy, like throwing a big jar of paint on the painting you've worked on for months because it seems a good idea, and then going, "Oh, Landon, you idiot." And then you're down on your knees scrubbing it off. You need time to make a move like that and then time to make a correction. What I've learned over and over again is you have to actually go over the edge. To get to a really good painting, you have to go past an ending that's intellectual. My internalized critique of painting came from Molinari, where you just tear a painting apart formally. At NSCAD, the blood sport led by Gerry Ferguson was tearing apart the ideas of visiting artists. I had been groomed on that. And then there was the total cynicism of Harold Town. But right across the board, all those characters loved art. They dig deep because they love art. I remember the dealer Av Isaacs telling me, "Never let anything out of the studio you can't back. Take your time." I've really guarded that advice. I have to live with a painting day after day after day and not touch it. I have to wait until I hear the painting say, "I'm here. I'm here. I'm all here."

You remapped Canada in 21 paintings over 15 years in the trilogy. They are an extraordinary accomplishment. Where did the ambition come from? Did you work in series because one or two paintings couldn't satisfy the questions that came up in making them, so that you had to keep the process going?
I think back to the '70s, and I realized I could spread my ideas over a bigger project and over a lot of days and not try to figure it out too quickly. In the '80s it would be more like a film: start with colour, then there's two animals and then another. Add a fourth, then a baby, and by day six, you kill the baby, and you add a lover, and you put in a mountain, and then you give it snow, and you take that out and you put in a fish, and then you put in a river. And they were the size of a 16-millimetre film screen, which was another currency around me, where people were even smarter because they were making video and experimental films. Later with "The Mapping Trilogy" I acted the same way but at a much more ambitious scale, longer timeline and weightier content.

I've always felt that you read a map closer to the way a novelist would, not as a definition of where we are but as a possibility of where we might be. It's more invention than fact.
Yes. I did a lot of research looking at 17th- to 19th-century maps, going to archives in various cities from Regina to Cambridge and pulling out original stuff that even the archivists didn't know they had. The thing about a map before aerial photography is that it's mostly make believe and I love that.

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1. *Tracking Athabasca; Short Lines (Network of Stoppages)*, 1998, synthetic polymer and appliqué on linen, 228.6 × 312.4 centimetres.

2. *Houbart's Hope (Yellow) Crimson Lake*, 2001–2004, synthetic polymer and appliqué on linen, 228.6 × 312.4 centimetres. Collection of Kelowna Art Gallery.

This is a very straightforward question, and it might simplify a very complicated practice. Do you think of yourself primarily as a landscape painter?

No. I think it's too much of an abstract endeavour. I use landscape to ground everything with gravity, meaning the-weight-has-to-come-to-Earth sort of thing. Even when the "Big Pink Sky" paintings (2015–2024) leave the floor and go on the stretcher and on the wall, they need grounding. Plus, they've all had their borders marked carefully. The edges are always specific. It's not a wraparound. It's not like those spill-and-pour guys from the prairies. Sometimes the only thing I have to do to a painting is bring the weight down. It can be as cheesy as putting little shadows underneath a whole bunch of things. Suddenly they're all coming to Earth.

Do you shift between acrylic and oil?

I use them both. I follow a thread that takes me to a good start in one or the other. Maybe I go away or something happens or I'm working on other paintings. Then I follow a new line of logic, and the painting takes another trajectory. Sometimes I switch from working in acrylic to oil, like in the "Big Pink Sky" pictures. I'm technically always keeping an eye on my material methods so it can eventually roll. Nothing big can get out of my studio without being rolled. It's another thing I learned from Molinari and from Ian Wallace: how to roll work so that you could be shown in Europe. You can get on a plane with that canvas and then restretch it when you arrive because otherwise you wouldn't be able to get out of the country.

Your idea that the landscape is a way of grounding is an intriguing idea. When you do a painting like *Ice Caps/MRI* (2005), you move into the territory of the mindscape. It is a mapping of space and the brain as well. It's not an external world that you're replicating; it's the inside of your sensibility.

All my paintings are based on things that I'm sorting out, including the vortex. When you go in for a brain scan, it starts off with beep, beep, beep, beep, and then it pounds louder and louder because the technology uses sound waves to figure out if everything's going okay in your head. Going back to Philip Glass, I just thought about staying open and experiencing an MRI test as an experimental music performance. I was curious to make a picture of the experience and the ideas of magnetic force and particles. Listening to CBC in the studio, I heard this incredible interview with a scientist talking about how we're all particles, the tree's a particle, the brush is a particle, everything. And suddenly your brain goes, "Oh my god, how would I paint that?" Another interview asked, "What does the Internet look like?" So I took down this already finished, dark blue, starry night painting and put it back on the floor. I mixed up a big vat of turquoise oil paint and I literally hurled it on top of the painting, and it worked. It could have totally ruined months of effort. I had to wait for it to dry for two weeks, and ended up rethreading little hydroelectric towers through it and waking up other parts of the painting. You're always looking at a painting to see "Who's awake? Who's asleep?" And 90% of the time, you've got to cancel something. You've got to tone it down. When I was younger, facing a black canvas was just too direct for me. I didn't have any ideas that weren't about romance. I needed process

and labour to back me up. I built a practice that relied on a lot of process diversions without worrying about results. I just spread my ideas over enough time and several images for each series. The "Weather Pattern" works are an ongoing project where I've returned to process diversions.

I want to ask about your titling. One of my favourites is *Interior Lowlands; Still the Restless Whispers Never Leave Me* (1996). That strikes me as not just being a poetic way to name a painting, but it also addresses the way your sensibility operates. There are restless whispers that are always around and that you're never going to be able to exorcize.
Perfect. You nailed it 100%. That was a period where I decided to do these long titles after I saw a show by Martin Kippenberger in New York and he had these insane titles. I came back and said, "I'm going to do some titles like that," so I came up with things like *If I Loved a Cowboy…Leaving Her Fingerprints All Over Everything She Does* (1994). I remember doing that and people would go, "Who's the cowboy? What's going on here?"

Does the naming come for you when they're done, or does the making suggest the name? You can see that a painting like *Weather Pattern # 3 (Firefly)* (2022), with its radiant outbursts, could come from the eponymous insect you name it after. Or *Weather Pattern #1 (Mouse)* (2021–2022) could be a mouse trailing across the middle of the painting. Are those notions that come to you after the painting is done?
Yes. I'm thinking, are you done? Where are you going? Are we finished? Should I do something new to you? I screwed you up last night adding this—let's say, pink. So I've got to correct that. What will I do? In all my best paintings, I'm reaching for a new bag of tricks to figure out how I can correct something that I overdid. Then the individual titles sort of emerge. Series titles, too.

When I look at *Signal (Birthday Party)*, from 2009–2011, I can't help but think of Bertram Brooker's *Sounds Assembling* (1928), which has a dynamic and explosive sense of the cosmological. I wonder if it is ever possible to make a painting that has no historical inflection. Is painting the great exploit of ongoingness, and all painters are both burdened by and also liberated by other painters?
I think so. We are working with this stupid, quite gucky material—oil paint or synthetic polymer—using what the artist Lucy Hogg calls "hairy sticks," and you're just trying to make sense of it. You're trying to form it into something, but you don't know what it looks like till you recognize it. You have to have so much admiration for past artists. I know a little bit about Bertram Brooker and I love that painting from 1928. It's the way I love a 1929 Emily Carr or a Kandinsky or a Sonia Delaunay. I'm the kind of geek who told my students when Hilma af Klint was showing at the Guggenheim in New York that I had to go because a show of that magnitude happens only once in a lifetime. Where my peers often use photographic source imagery or digital projectors, I can't because I am trying to make something we don't have a picture of yet.

Tell me about the "Weather Pattern" paintings. Their making is an elaborate process that involves you and the natural environment.
We have a cottage in Prince Edward Island that we inherited from Donald's family. I've been coming for 50 years and I built a summer studio there in 2001 while my mother-in-law was still alive. It's a spot on the Cardigan Bay where two rivers meet. In 2020 PEI imposed a quarantine on all people who arrived during the pandemic. I'd been storing a lot of good paint for years, burying it each year in the rough basement so it wouldn't freeze, so I thought, let's just go for it! No one can see me. I was using rollers, pouring things on, splattering my feet as I went, covering it with a tarp at night or not covering it so it could go through a rainstorm and a thunderstorm and lightning and a full moon. I was doing the whole witchcraft thing, even though I don't believe in any of that stuff. I was having fun and no idea whether this thing will work. I started by soaking out the sizing in shallow water, rinsing that salt out, then stapling the fabric to the weathered boards of the cottage deck. Water-drenched linen shrinks and crinkles when it dries and paint droplets soak through like a tapestry. At the end of summer, I shipped what I made to Vancouver. Ian Wallace came into my studio and looked at one of them and went, "Wow, what is that?" And I said, "Well, the linen shrinks and does all this wacky stuff and I lose a foot off each side." And he said, "That's why I never work with linen. It has too much memory." That's exactly why I love it.

The "Hummingbird" paintings (2024–2025) are remarkable. Are they made differently from others of your work? Or is it a continuation of a methodology that you have used before?
It starts with a few layers of gesso and then the splattering, the nod to Jackson Pollock. He would stand by the side and fling; mine are drip drop drip, and not much slinging. This series was connected to what's been going on in the world, the war, COVID, another war, global warming, the fires. I became obsessed with the idea that the hummingbird was this little angel that crosses these complicated borders. She crosses the Gulf of Mexico. Then I tune into the fact that the hummingbirds that visit PEI are different from the ones here in Vancouver because of the Rockies, and there's one species that doesn't go south at all. Hummingbirds fly low and seek colour. There's a little homage to Louise Bourgeois because the hummingbird goes to a spider web to find its insects, so they're co-dependent.

You tell the artist Jen Aitken that you're at your best when you feel like a brat.
I think it has to do with multiple roles of partner or wife, mother, professor, daughter. Those aren't persons who can make any art. So the best thing is to go to the studio, dress like a ragamuffin so you won't detour to somebody's opening, and get to work. And feel like that 8- to 12-year-old kid who's not self-conscious about what she's doing, and tune into her. You have to get in touch with that brat-like energy. ▮