

John Hartman: *From Gros Morne to Fogo*

There is a something in John Hartman's paintings that I cannot explain. "Uncanny Over-Allness" isn't exactly poetry. But it's the best I can do.

To say that Hartman's paintings are greater than the sum of their parts might suggest that the parts need bolstering. That would be a mistake. The elevated, almost cartographic views of Newfoundland's spare, vast-skyed northern coast encourage us to think about light and colour as Hartman does. Which is to say, a lot. Light and colour are the great subjects of Hartman's work, and in that sense they are the subjects of *From Gros Morne to Fogo*. They are miraculous complexities to be treated with enormous respect. I doubt there is a brushstroke here, from Mad Rocks to the Tablelands, that does not bear that responsibility.

Equally identifiable in these paintings is Hartman's fondness for journey. No sooner do I look at his *Burgeo*, or *Trout River*, or *Norris Point*, than I start following his routes: whether along the little roads and past the little houses, or from island to island, or somehow magically out, over the points and the headlands to an approaching snow squall on a horizon that is so wide and empty it curves. Hartman takes us places in his paintings – flying, so it often seems -- and even if the journey is as enormous as the Labrador coast, the details are small, no more than glints on a calm and boatless sea.

I have not been everywhere John Hartman has painted. And I am not suggesting that it matters. But I have been to a few of his subjects, *From Gros Morne to Fogo*, among them. And something I've noticed about Hartman's work (this is the part I don't know how to explain) is that he captures (somehow) an element of a place that is essential to the experience of being there. But what is that element? It's nothing I can put my finger on – unhelpfully. As I said: Uncanny

Over-Allness is the best I can do. It's as if he's painting the air – the feel of the air – and because he gets that so precisely right, his strange perspectives and map-like landscapes feel weirdly realistic. Port au Choix doesn't look like that. And yet, it does. The water between Woody Point and Norris Point wasn't so blue. And yet, it was. The light wasn't ever like that when I was in Fogo Harbour. And yet, it was. Exactly like.

So how does John Hartman do that? You tell me.

*David Macfarlane*