



The New Nature

JOHN HARTMAN

REVAMPS CANADIAN LANDSCAPE TRADITIONS

WITH HIS AERIAL URBAN VIEWS by NOAH RICHLER



THE NEW YORK CITY JUSTICE DEPARTMENT TALKING ONLY SOUNDING THE

Hafafax 2006 Oil
on linen 2.43 x 5.02 m
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY
NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

THE SKYSCRAPERS OF TORONTO are built on glacial debris deposited east of the Niagara Escarpment some two million years ago, over a bed of lime shale that dates back another four hundred and fifty million years to the Silurian period. It is the end of day, the rush hour. In my rear-view mirror, the tall buildings of the city appear like giants, huddled together on the receding plateau as if leery of just what action the streets around them might bring. The city is a delta, and today's highways are rivers depositing a new millennium's debris at the foot of the old escarpment. By Lake Ontario, the sediment gathers: buildings, cars, people.

Above the streaming traffic the sky is dark—dire black in parts. Streaks of lightning cross the sky in jagged horizontal lines without touching the ground. These shocks of electricity remind the complacent of just how menacing nature can be. The sky is a register of memory. Its dramatic display of lightning is a reminder, to those who would forget, of our small and fleeting presence upon the larger territory.

Further up the tarmac river, human settlement diminishes. The route to John

HARTMAN CONCEIVES OF CITIES NOT AS MAN-MADE ANOMALIES BUT AS LANDSCAPES

Hartman's Penetanguishene-area studio takes me through Elmvale and Wyevale and then Perkinsfield, where the long Franco-Ontarian pedigree of Simcoe County—land that was once Huron and then a spiritual battleground for Jesuit missionaries harvesting reluctant souls—announces its history in the sudden appearance of French signage. This prior incarnation of the region was one of the first preoccupations of the artist I am travelling to see, the Aboriginal and French stories as much in the ether of Hartman's world as the day's spent lightning was in mine. In Hartman's *Wendake* cycle of paintings, the parts the Jesuits and the Huron played are implied through icons that the artist appears to have sketched impulsively into the big skies that have always been a feature of his work. But they are deliberate. They are acknowledgements of *presences*—for history, in Canada, is written on the territory: it is in the air. It is spoken on reserves or in hamlets such as Lafontaine, near where Hartman lives and has a studio, and in Penetanguishene, the Franco-Ontarian community outside the industrial town of Midland, once Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, where Hartman grew up.

The fields surrounding the Hartman place were empty and quiet when I arrived. I'd come to see the artist begin a painting of Vancouver, the next of his urban landscapes as seen from on high—New York, London, Glasgow, Montreal, Toronto and Calgary were other cities in the evolving series. As I stepped out of the cocoon of the car, the rhythms of the country seemed strange and untoward, like the calm of a civilization that had flourished prior to the 21st-century urban storm. I found myself wondering to what extent Hartman's paintings were the result of the trips he'd made against the inexorable flow into Toronto—of having no choice but to acknowledge the city's furious engine.

Now 56, Hartman is a lean, silver-haired, good-looking man with a habit of peering at you above the light wire spectacles perched at the end of his nose. "Cities drive the modern economy, not the rural areas that depend on their surplus," said Hartman as he led me into the studio at the end of the drive. He was smiling. It was an obvious thought, not a troubling one—and one of the impulses behind the developing "Cities" series. The metaphysics of it had germinated between 1976 and 1981, when Hartman was living in Collins, a Native Canadian community on the CN rail line west of Armstrong and north of Thunder Bay. It was during this period that Hartman learned to conceive of cities not as man-made anomalies but as landscapes that were, in their essence and in their variety of elements, as "natural" as rocks, rivers and lakes.

"One of the things that astonished me," said Hartman, "was realizing the ways in which my Western civilization tended to regard itself as *separate* from the land, when it would have been much healthier to have conceived of the world as Aboriginals do—as a huge and constantly changing organism and ourselves as part of it. The idea that we are somehow distinct from nature is just a bizarre construct that Western civilization has created."

"Do you see your work as political, then?" I asked.

"No," said Hartman, "because although I'm interested in how the erection of cities has altered the sites on which they're built, I'm not actually attaching any *moral* value to these phenomena."

To begin his paintings, Hartman typically charts a small plane so that he can look down upon the world from a great height. The method he uses on these reconnoitering trips—taking photographs, collecting postcards, the sketches in the concertina notebooks he keeps—suggests a literal fidelity to what he sees, though what results are vivid, exuberant pictures. Highways rush over bridges to burgeoning waterside cities and it is the suggestion of human activity as much as Hartman's altitudinal perspective that provides each picture with motion. The eye surveys the painting and follows its tracks, then looks for a place to rest—for a landing on points it might recognize. Always in Hartman's work there is this play between the truth of the landscape that he has painted and the imaginative rendering he has made of it.

"There always has to be one central characteristic about a city or where it sits that I can paint towards," said Hartman. "In Manhattan, it was the remarkable density of the buildings. In Halifax, it has to do with the incredible site that the city sits on—the power plants and docks and refineries and places for decommissioning ships and all the unusual and interesting stuff that happens around its edges. In Vancouver, it is the physical layout and sheer beauty of the place—the way the container ships come in from and out to the sea, and how in that area you have a knotted configuration of railway lines and highways, so that already I know I'll need to find the right balance between the land and the sea."

"Your work reminds me of battle paintings of the Italian Renaissance, in which an entire story is told on one canvas," I said. "You don't have the battalions of human figures, of course, but your paintings have a similar movement."

"There's a painting in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich that Albrecht Altdorfer made in the early 16th century," said Hartman, "called *The Battle of Issus*. It's a panorama of Alexander the Great's defeat of the Persian king Darius III. When I was 24, I was finally able to visit the Pinakothek, and as I walked through it, I saw a number of paintings that did not excite me. But then I turned the corner and there it was—Altdorfer's painting hit me like a lightning bolt, and I knew without question that it was where, as an artist, I wanted to go. The painting is done from on high. The battle is in the foreground, and in the sky there's a banner explaining all the action that is taking place. There are ships coming into port. In the distance are cities, mountains and the



Montreal 2005
Oil on linen 1.21 x 1.37 m

sea. The painting keeps your eye moving until you reach the horizon, where Altdorfer decides to stop and put in the sky and the sun setting above the water. It's as if Altdorfer is saying that beyond the battle's reach, life goes on."

Hartman stepped forward and added large swaths of green, purple, red and white to the area of Vancouver below False Creek.

"A change of mind?"

"No," said Hartman, "but this whole north side of the painting was developed with the same sort of touch and I feel that if I do the same thing over here then it would get monotonous. It's really not very fashionable to talk about beauty, these days, but I'm quite happy to concentrate on the *emotional* impact of a place and, frankly, just to make a beautiful painting."

The next painting on which Hartman worked—*Halifax*, a triptych commissioned by Scotiabank for the opening of his exhi-

THE IMPOSSIBLE, HUMBLING WIDTH OF THINGS IS THE OVERWHELMING FEATURE

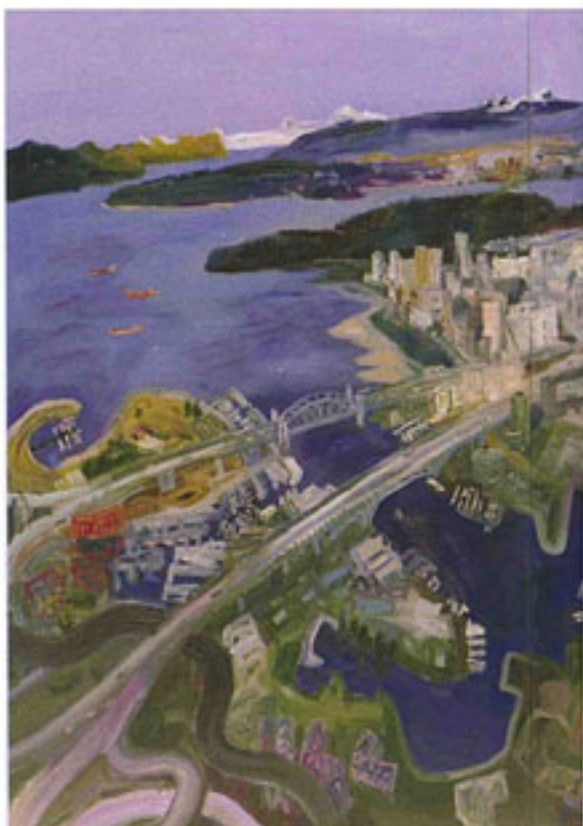
bition "John Hartman: Cities" at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in March, 2007—was one that I was able to witness in its earliest stage. Together we visited Halifax, where bad weather prevented Hartman from being able to fly above the city. He had surveyed the city, instead, mostly from ground level.

"Often, I think that I paint in much the way that cartographers of the 19th century created maps," said Hartman. "I find myself surveying and working around an idea and only afterwards imagining the site from on high. If I am able to rely on photographs, then my work tends to be more realistic—or at least parts of the paintings are—but for this one I'm going to need to rely on memory a lot more."

And below that well of personal memory is a deeper fount of societal reminiscences that Hartman knows to draw on. In *Halifax*, the city's atavistic memories surface in iconic, narrative elements, just as they used to do in his earlier paintings of Midland and the land around Georgian Bay. The turning point for the city, its terrible defining moment, was the Halifax Explosion of December 6, 1917, when the *Mont-Blanc*, a French munitions ship, and the *Imo*, a Norwegian vessel carrying Belgian relief supplies, collided in the narrowest part of the harbour. Most of the northern end of the city was razed. More than 1,600 people were killed, six thousand left homeless and nine thousand injured.

The Halifax Explosion was the backdrop of the Montreal writer Hugh MacLennan's first novel, *Barometer Rising* (1941), but its devastation was almost entirely unrecorded by Canadian artists then working in Halifax. A. Y. Jackson depicted the harbour and the First World War fleet that often crowded the Narrows, but not the aftermath of the explosion; Arthur Lismer made many sketches of the devastation and one known watercolour, *Sorrow*, but neither ever made it the subject of an oil painting.

"I can understand that," said Hartman. "If I had been in New York in 2001, it probably would have taken me a lot of time to be able to paint anything to do with 9/11." Lack is an explicit invitation to an artist, and in his studio, Hartman had resurrected the Halifax Explosion by commemorating it in a clever variation on the oppressive cloud that hung over the city during our days there. In the finished painting, the thick wet mist that had ruled out the airplane ride had morphed into a billowing explosion of ash and debris. Within it, and the surrounding sky, Hartman had made brusque sketches of iconic objects—brushes with memory, effectively. The action in the ash cloud and sky hangs over the city much like Altdorfer's banner, telling the story of the city just as the Renaissance painter's Latin words outlined the Battle of Issus.



"Does *Halifax* remind you of your Jesuit paintings at all?" I asked Hartman.

"Yes, although this painting is more unusual; there's a lot more drawing in it. In the earlier work, you have more parts that are purely painting. I realize, of course, that what I choose to capture reflects my own take on the place, but I know that what I also find exciting now is the possibility that someone might be able to point and say, 'This is the MacKay Bridge, and here is where I grew up—'"

"So that they are pointing into something you've imagined but seeing something real. They're pointing into an idea, really?"

"Yes. I want the painting to be a map, though obviously not the same as a map."

Later, Hartman took me on a painting excursion along the shore near his cabin, north of Byng Inlet, on Georgian Bay. The granite islands, here, are low and flat and worn. The stunted trees that do manage to grow—pine and scrub oak mostly—are wily and bend with the wind. Broad clumps of weather-beaten rock resemble the bellies of whales risen to the surface of the water and rolling on their backs to take in the sun. This is what the world will look like after a flood, I thought.



Vancouver 2006
Oil on linen 1.67 x 4.36 m

Hartman erected his easel and started painting the scene on a small piece of board. The light was brilliant, gentle and clear.

"I foolishly thought I could go on painting this region my whole life," said Hartman.

"There are enough islands," I said. "It would be obsessive, but you could."

"When I was a kid," said Hartman, "I always dreamed of flying. I had this ability to imagine the ground as a film—to see the earth as a moving picture rolling towards me at an oblique angle."

A part of John Hartman has always been in the air, I realized, observing the land from the oblique, overhead angles he finds so compelling. This land, from Huronia to Georgian Bay, is home for him. It provided Hartman with his first artist's invitation—and offers a key to understanding the clear line that can be drawn from his early landscapes to the paintings he was presently doing of cities.

The land, here, is devoid of anything high. The impossible, humbling *width* of things is the land's overwhelming feature. Merely standing, one has the sensation of being tall enough. To cross the world as Hartman does, to soar over the land to its very horizon, is the delirious, beautiful act. ■

"John Hartman: Cities" appears at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax until April 22, and at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in Owen Sound from May 4 to June 17. The exhibition then continues on a two-year national tour.