

# NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

## **Painted cities layered in meaning**

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John Hartman's painted cities are the ones parents tell their wide-eyed children about, the astounding metropolises formed by almighty rivers and buildings that ignore gravity as they make their way to the moon. They're Oz or Xanadu's pleasure dome.

Of course, we're familiar with the real place names in "Cities: John Hartman" at the University of Toronto Art Centre until March 15. They're Toronto, New York, Glasgow, Vancouver, Port Severn, Ont. – the painter lives to the west of Midland, north of Toronto – London and Halifax.

At the heart of the entire series is Halifax (2006), commissioned by Scotiabank to herald its 175th anniversary last year. The wall-filling, oil-on-linen triptych is destined for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia following the exhibition's extensive cross-country travels – it's in Stratford July 13 to Sept. 7 and in Barrie between Sept. 18 and Nov. 1 – organized in part by Toronto's Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Hartman's dealer.

Scotiabank also sponsored the handsome exhibition catalogue, whose design conveys some sense of the vigour of the 50-something painter's approach, and the visceral quality found in the thick swatches of paint layered on at times like putty.

Yet Hartman's cities are only tenuously connected to the ones shown in atlases. They have much more in common with Saul Steinberg's Manhattan in the famous View of the World from 9th Avenue 1976 New Yorker cover drawing – where the world beyond Manhattan is reduced to an empty little wasteland across the Hudson River – or with Italo Calvino's mythical many-sided Venice in Invisible Cities.

Indeed, a Hartman city painting is really about the essential structural elements – such as pink-tinged grey Gardiner Expressway snaking along in The Western Channel, Toronto (2006) – and the way they contribute to the city's very atmosphere.

And its history. For his panoramic Halifax, Hartman painted the city from the eastern, Dartmouth side, with Halifax's two shorelines curved in a way to mould the city into a bowl-like U-shape. "About 90 per cent of downtown Halifax is squeezed out" of the painting, Hartman says during a phone call from Halifax.

Yet Halifax recalls the day the city was blasted entirely to smithereens following the Dec. 6, 1917, collision between the Mont-Blanc, a French munitions ship, and the Imo, a Norwegian steamship in the Narrows. Hartman's father's own days in the navy spent working in ship's engine room during World War II are suggested in the grey-white cloud

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placed at the very centre of Halifax.

"I may raise the viewpoint to 500 feet above where I'm doing my on-sight sketches," Hartman goes on. "I change the viewing point from the one I'm actually sitting in to one above it. The actual act of painting is really the act of seeing yourself seeing."

Art history factors into Hartman's work, too. A specific influence is German artist Albrecht Altdorfer's best-known painting, *The Battle of Issus* (1529), where landscape and weather appear to actually force ahead the drama in Alexander the Great's victory over the Persians in 333 BC. Aerial views of cityscapes favoured by 20th century Austrian-born painter Oskar Kokoschka are echoed in some of Hartman's works.

To my mind, the more extreme examples of Hartman's deliciously, sometimes almost comically skewed perspectives – in *Hamilton Harbour from Above* (2004), the city appears bent around the Earth's curvature – suggests California painter Wayne Thiebaud's topsy-turvy views of San Francisco's rolling city streets.

"With me there's an awful lot of research about the cities, much that doesn't get used," he says. "But even if I am very familiar with the subject I let each painting develop in unusual and unexpected directions. I paint from top to bottom, leaving what I've finished as a kind of cinema that's unfolding."

"I'm trying to make the city look like I think it looks."