

CANADIAN

# art

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TATE MODERN  
The World  
as a Stage

RAYMONDE  
APRIL  
Quebec's  
Photographic  
Treasure

TREE MUSEUM  
Ten Years  
and Counting

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SERIOUS PLAY  
From Halifax  
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SYLVAIN  
BOUTHILLETTE

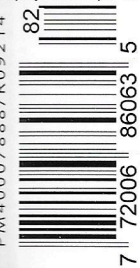
A BUDDHIST  
BURNING BRIGHT

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## PAINTING IN TONGUES

The brush-stroke language of  
**BEN REEVES**

Display until Sept. 15



# PAINTING IN

The brush-stroke language of Ben Reeves

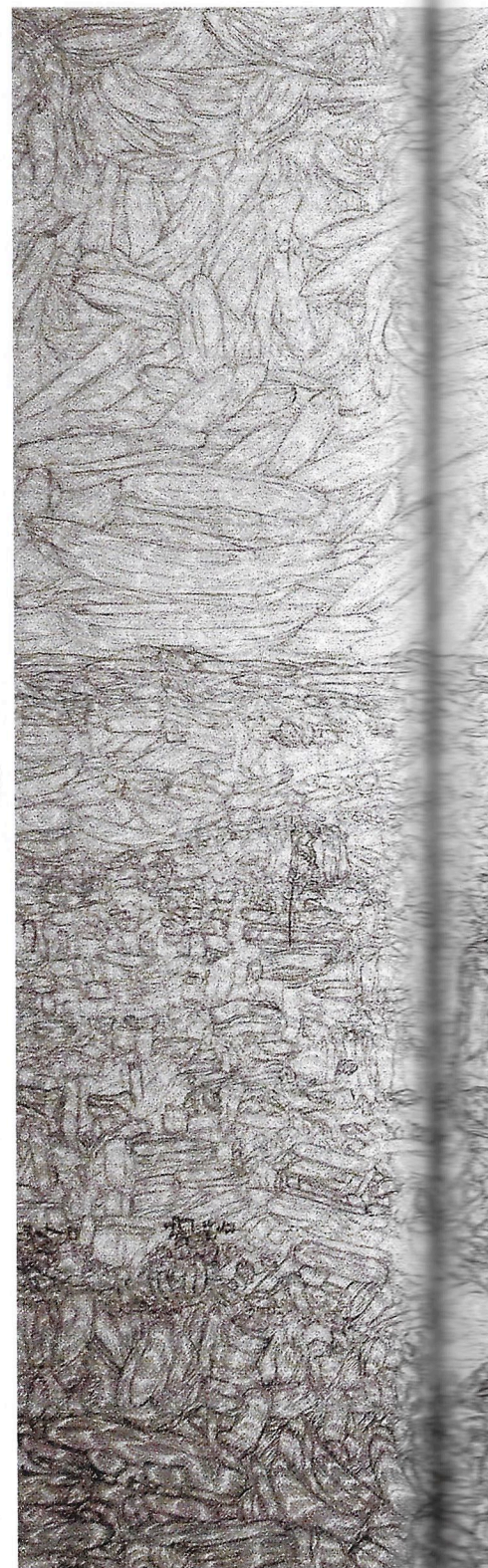
# TONGUES

by DAVID JAGER

The painting tradition seldom accommodates painting that deliberately undermines itself. Most efforts in which an artistic medium addresses its own underpinnings leave us cold. Analysis and deconstruction, after all, are interpretive acts generally applied to a completed work, not part of the creative process.

What happens then when an artist adopts such a critical stance while working, after a fashion, in the tradition of realism? Ben Reeves is a Vancouver artist who makes representational paintings that are also deliberate attempts to provoke and unsettle our cultural assumptions about representation. He addresses the brush stroke as a signifier of assumed and potential meaning without ever fully renouncing the claims or even the pleasures of traditional representation. He raises questions about the authenticity of imagery and the semantics of representation and perception. Most importantly, he examines the transformation of paint from inert matter to image. Reeves's process is an ongoing attempt to convey the essence of painting through painting.

The result is a growing body of work that is actively engaged with the theory of painting while remaining deceptively traditional. At first glance, many of his works appear to borrow generously from 19th-century realism. Yet they are often meticulously conceptual. Reeves is evidently fascinated by the objects and people he paints, and he paints them very well, but in examining his practice we see that his true fascination is with the meaning and





*The Tower of Babel* 2003  
Charcoal on primed  
canvas 1.82 x 2.43 m  
COLLECTION MUSÉE D'ART  
CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL



LEFT:  
*Smoker 3 (Girl Smoker)* 2007  
 Oil on linen 91.5 x 76 cm  
 PRIVATE COLLECTION

OPPOSITE:  
*Smoker 2 (golfer)* 2007  
 Oil on linen 91.5 x 76 cm  
 COURTESY JESSICA BRADLEY  
 ART + PROJECTS

function of painting. Reeves never forgets that painting is always about a smear of pigment on a surface, a mark that gathers all manner of meaning about itself immediately upon being made.

In an artist statement he writes:

*My work isolates and draws these marks out of their original context to explore ways that meaning precipitates around the physical substance of paint. A tension emerges between inert blobs of paint and their referents....The gestures are all the more meaningful and (as loci of such tremendous drama) all the more absurd as a result.*

For Reeves, the brush stroke is where this precipitation begins. As both a calculated and an unconscious gesture, the brush stroke bears the imprint of intention and habit. It is the starting point of a system of signification that grows to include what Reeves sees as mythologies of representation and artistry that shape the narrative of art history.

In his 2005 Oakville Galleries exhibit "Drawing Painting," Reeves established the methodology of his current practice. He photographed Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Tower of Babel* and then painted a small study of the Flemish masterpiece; the study became the source of two new drawings, one small and the other monumental. The wall-sized drawing, which measures nearly six by eight feet, is a strangely hybridized and magnified variation of the original work. By transposing the image from one medium to

another and faithfully copying the lines created in his studies, Reeves reduces the figurative content of the original to an overwhelming linear mass that nonetheless manages to convey the weight and grandeur of the Bruegel. Yet Reeves's meticulous translation of each brush stroke from his painted sketch into a set of individual lines in the final drawing lends an odd layer of literalism. What we are witnessing is not only a copy of a painting, but the copying of a painterly surface. The interplay of the iconic original image and the surface details of the copied copy create a new kind of representational tension.

It is no accident that the Tower of Babel would serve Reeves well as a starting point. A myth about an ancient society with an all-encompassing system of signification (a single universal language), Babel resurfaced in the 20th century as a cautionary tale about the perils of totalitarian ideologies and the necessity of interpretation. In taking apart the visual iconography of the tower, however, Reeves reduces this monument of misguided hubris to its linear components. It's just a bunch of lines, after all, he is saying, in the same way we might conclude that language is really only a string of phonemes and consonants. Yet the original outline and grandeur persist, if in transmuted form.

Reeves's method of translating a given work into another medium and then tampering with the scale has been the central focus of his practice. In the series *Canada Geese*, he translates the famously



assured and rapid brush strokes of Tom Thomson into pencil drawings. Focusing on Thomson's geese, which in the original works are virtuosic dabs of oil that probably took no more than two flicks of the painter's wrist to create, Reeves meticulously records the texture of each dab with graphite lines.

As with Bruegel, the result augments Thomson's technique into something that verges on the unrecognizable. First, Reeves highlights the opposition of painting and drawing by deliberately copying the textural surface of oil in the linear medium of graphite. He also lends a painstaking, almost obsessive time-based element to the reproduction of the work of a painter known for his confident speed. Finally, he summons the whole question of authenticity and the dynamic individual stamp—of which the brush stroke is the single most potent artifact.

Reeves's most recent work, as seen last year in the exhibition "Smoke, Flowers, Cars" at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, strikes a fine balance between the exploration of representational paradigms and the desire to destabilize them. The works hover somewhere between a vigorous realism and a flirtation with abstraction, with the desire to represent tempered by a dynamic awareness that it is indeed a medium that we are looking at.

The painting *Ice Breaker* is a good example. At first viewing, it appears to be a very skilful and energetically rendered gestural painting of an icebreaking vessel, complete with slapdash strokes that appear to echo the brisk nautical subject matter. Looking more closely, however, we find out that the canvas is actually an enlarged reproduction of a much smaller, hastily executed oil sketch of the same scene. In order to replicate his sketch authenti-



cally, Reeves projected an image of it onto the larger canvas and painstakingly copied it, using an array of brushes to faithfully render the brush strokes in their new larger scale. Reeves's original spontaneous gestures are magnified, and their reproduction seems closer to restoration than to actual painting.

This concealed disparity also plays a role in the sourcing of his imagery. Reeves's portraits depict subjects found via image searches on the Internet, not actual sitters. Once again Reeves focuses on the distance between an original image and its representation. His painting of a young skateboarder, for instance, has the dramatic sweep of a quick oil sketch by Delacroix. The black hoodie that the skater wears appears for a moment as a turn-of-the-century cape, and his posture suggests an aloof, romantic surliness, yet what we are seeing is yet another projected and re-painted copy of a small oil sketch made after an anonymous image found online.

This is what situates Reeves's practice so squarely in contemporary art. There is something about these works' convincing realism and their faux gestural bravado that is reminiscent of finding a Venetian lagoon perfectly reconstructed in Las Vegas. We believe we are looking at one thing when in fact we are looking at a magnified copy of it. Through his complex relationship to his source imagery, Reeves seems to be saying something about authenticity in contemporary aesthetics.

In his latest paintings, Reeves once again pits the materiality of paint against what it represents. The paintings show us a series of smokers exhaling great clouds of smoke. As the thickly painted smoke puffs threaten to overtake the faces, however, the work approaches something verging on abstract painting—as if Jules Olitski had done some of his trademark impasto on top of the faces of each of Reeves's sitters. One of the subjects is in fact not a smoker at all, but a face hit with a cream pie, so we know that Reeves is kidding with us, because of course what is supposed to be smoke or cream pie is in fact paint.

What does this process imply? Reeves's work is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter's squeegee-painted abstractions, in which the German artist deliberately purged expressionism of its original gestural intention while nonetheless producing a pleasing facsimile of the style. It is linked as well to the Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, who uses foodstuff and toys to create Pop-styled *trompe l'oeil* facsimiles of famous paintings and photographs. Reeves's work, however, does not come across with the calculated alienation of Richter and, unlike Muniz, he never strays into cleverness or glibness. By staying within the painterly tradition and deeply involved with the materials of painting, Reeves cultivates an approach that speaks more of dedication than calculation. He never seems to stray far from the twinned certainties that form expresses substance and substance expresses form. ■