

JOANNE TOD
SLIPSTREAM



Above: *Serpentine Fire*, 2015, oil on canvas, 72 x 54 inches
Front Cover: *Liquidity*, 2015 (detail), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 inches



Above: *Palimpsest*, 2014, oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches
Inside front cover: *Magnetic Field*, 2015, oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches



JOANNE TOD: *SLIPSTREAM*

TOM SMART

What is it about Joanne Tod's silence-drenched paintings of institutional hallways, meeting rooms and display windows? They look as though they could be entirely known in a single viewing. Painterly, her canvases show how the imagery on their surfaces is made and with what materials. Well composed, her pictorial essays have a comforting sense of completeness and stability. A visual proposition has been set down and resolved. Still, we sense that something is awry.

Certainly the work is beautiful, but in ways that veer away from what is represented. The play of sunlight on the surface of a mosaic tile floor is so dazzling that it causes us to squint. There is her technical audacity at making the tiles appear to melt into a richly coloured phthalo blue puddle of oil pigments. Her descriptions of things – electric guitars, children's clothing – seen through glass and reflecting on its surfaces are uncanny lessons about how absence and presence can coexist in a single visual statement.

It is as if there are several narratives happening simultaneously in each painting. The explicit subject matter provides an allusive point of departure for meanings that extend well beyond what is putatively being depicted. It also gives Tod an armature to display a prodigious talent at making the matter of oil paint transform into something else altogether – a medium harnessing a variety of light qualities, and appearing to become the very substances it describes.

In this respect the recent series of paintings comprising *Slipstream* advances Tod's interests in exploring the limits and frontiers of Realism. Over a national and international exhibiting career spanning three decades, Tod has evolved her interests in Pop art and documentary photography to explore how social critique can be expressed in a number of painterly modes blending abstract formalism with high realism inflected with irony and satire. Through subjects often encompassing women and interiors of rooms, she has wryly commented on the ephemeral nature of glamour, power relationships, and how singular images can convey a multitude of meanings. Her 2002 series *Vanity Fair*, featured portraits of individuals from the Toronto art community posing as contemporary representatives of characters from a nineteenth-century William Thackeray novel. The 2009 exhibition *Kingdom Come*, examined notions of proprietary and moral rights in relationship to antiquities and museum holdings. Her elegiac project *Oh, Canada – A Lament* comprised an intimately scaled series of portraits of every Canadian soldier who was killed in the Afghanistan war between 2007 and 2011. These panels were interspersed with others arranged to resemble a fragmented Canadian flag.

Her recent work is often devoid of figures and ironic overtones, which she felt were distractions from a main interest in constructing pictorial space alone. To advance this theme in her new series of paintings, Tod puts our mind and eye at loggerheads with what we are seeing. There are options in how we view the art. We can focus on the process-based painterly effects or situate ourselves in the imagined interiors. Where we might suppose there is mimetic accuracy, we are disabused of this notion by the flourish of a brushstroke that calls attention, first to itself, not the subject it resolves into from a distant perspective.

As we experience these paintings we are drawn into – slip into – the illusory spaces involuntarily. The strong perceptual pull is deliberately set down as a quality of the paintings' various scales and is made stronger by the device of open foregrounds. Seeing is akin to falling into imagined dimensions or being propelled across the thresholds of the picture planes to populate the painterly worlds, as would an invisible presence. Her works are intended to be painted slipstreams, a slipstream meaning the drawing effect behind a moving object that occurs

when a wake of displaced air or water is moving at the same speed as the object. For Tod, the slipstream encapsulates the idea she is expressing in these paintings: visual momentums meant to lure us farther and farther into the compositions.

Digital photography has provided Tod with stylistic and subject references. The images, captured by a cellphone camera, betray the technology of their sources characterized by closely cropped compositions, seemingly random, non-picturesque subjects, and a colour spectrum that references a laser and ink-jet printing palette. Tod borrows from this contemporary pictorial vocabulary. She also wants to give the sense that these pictures were taken by someone on the move.

There is an element of depicting the unconscious in these paintings as well. Even though they lay claim to some external referent, they are weighted by projections from a place below consciousness. Tod still leaves room for chance and automatist impulses as important aspects of image selection and description. Reality is defined by both what is seen and by what is felt and intuited.

Folded into this series is the phenomenon of referred pain – ghost sensations felt in a part of the body other than its actual source. Although the paintings claim to represent actual places, their meaning resides in another dimension. Tod's purpose is to conceive and set down in paint, wide-spectrum metaphors made all the more allusive by the device of poetic indirection. A room, a hallway, a corridor or an array of mirage-like reflections in glass – all are elaborate silent stand-ins for cross-sensory impulses and emotional states.

While the interiors are intended to be read as anonymous and not place-specific, a viewer who knows Toronto buildings associated with academe is quick to realize that they interpret actual places. Tod carefully blends the particular with the generic in paintings of her former studio, a staircase at a music conservatory, a boardroom of a contemporary art gallery and a hospital ward. The effect is a feeling that something else is going on or has occurred that overshadows the usual functions and meanings of these rooms and hallways.

Slipstream continues Tod's exploration of a kind of Gothic face of Toronto. The architecture of some of the interiors, defined by pointed arches and wooden details, reflects a revival movement in the city of an earlier century. Light fills several interiors that are distressed in some way. They reflect their ancestry signifying a harking back to earlier times and different uses.

Various qualities of light bathe these interiors in warm hues of gamboge, flesh-toned pinks, faint violets and pale greens to such an extent that they take on a kind of human tincture. As anthropomorphized spaces, they seem to vibrate in the glare and in the diffused light that animates them. As transitional zones, they are to be travelled through imaginatively and conceptually. Tod probes the conceit of passing through a room as a form of interior journey to good advantage in these paintings. Her purpose is to create a different kind of emptiness.

Beyond their painterly forms and imagery, these paintings reveal themselves over time. Meaning is exposed as if the works are sophisticated artistic palimpsests where one layer amplifies the impact of another that rests on top of it. Paint gives way to imagery; pictorialism points to movement; light dissolves substance; visual balance signifies calm and silence; and gesture and hue point to emotion. In this, Tod intends a form of synesthesia: the seen is heard, the empty evokes cacophony and hue anticipates taste.

Tod reminds us that we have the capacity to see and feel intensely. Looking at her paintings, we are propelled along as if in the wake of that intensity.



Above: *Semaphore*, 2014, oil on canvas, 72 x 54 inches



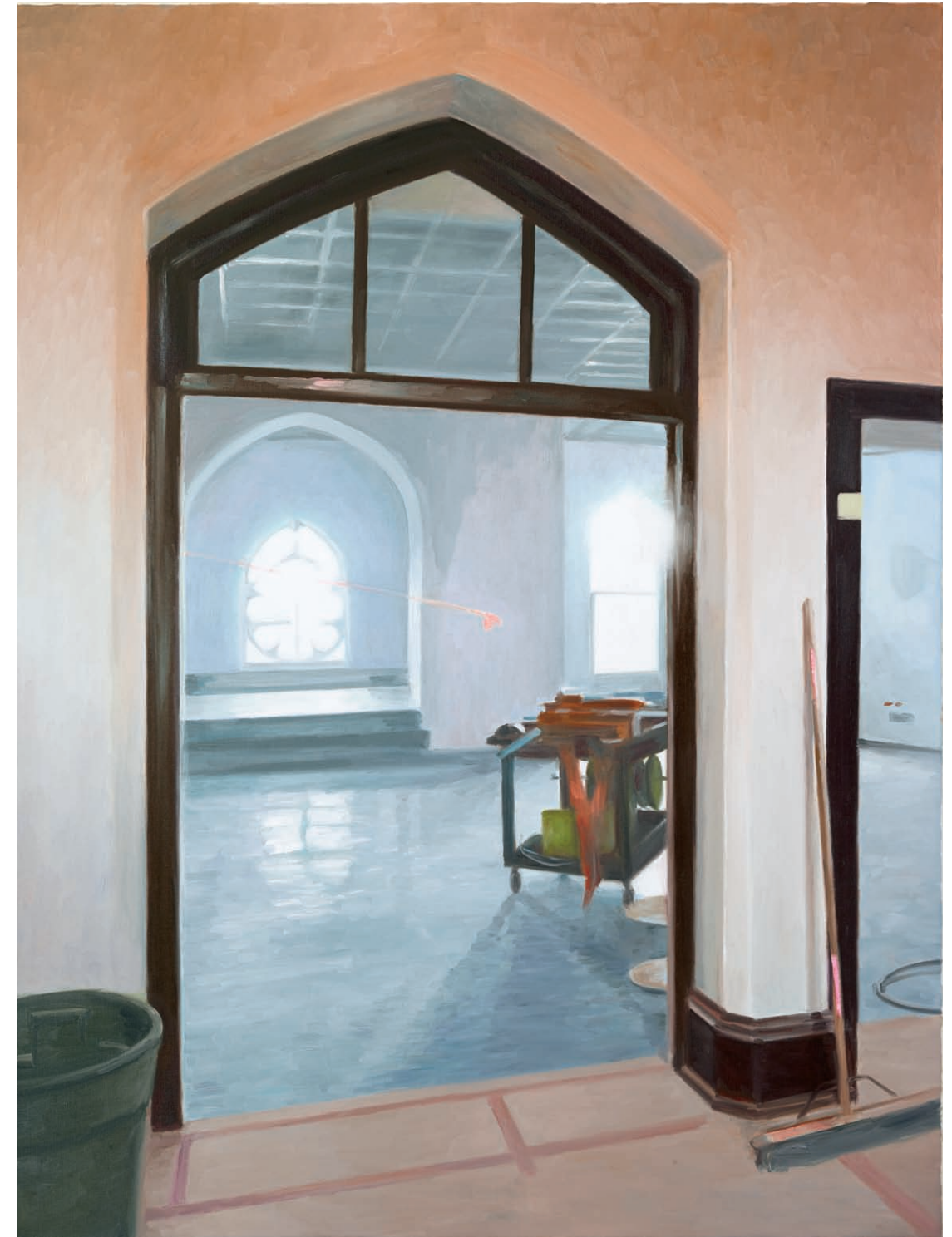
Top: *Gig*, 2014, oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches



Above: *Venturi Effect*, 2014, oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches



Cadmium Hall, 2014, oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches



Denude, 2015, oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches



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Slipstream, 2015, oil on linen, 48 x 36 inches