

don't look at me like thst

And Other Imperatives
of Recent Abstract Painting

by Gary Michael Dault

"One of the things about painting is that you can look backwards as readily as you can look forwards; there's an openness to it, an intangible quality that defies summarization." — DAVID URBAN

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO (can it be?) I wrote an article for this magazine called "Paint: from rapture to rancour, an anatomy of the medium." The degree to which this rhapsodically-titled piece was scarcely an anatomy of anything at all need not detain us. I mention it only because in the humbling course of leafing through it again, I was struck by the degree to which all the painters examined there looked to pigment as a source of an innocent and almost corporeal pleasure. ("I don't believe anyone really likes paint," commented Harold Town, "unless he's tempted to eat it"). The article began like this: "Considering the sublunary nature of pigment, its essential ordinariness as a substance, the indisputable fact that all of it comes from the earth itself, you'd think painters would get used to it. They don't. They talk about paint as lyrically as Cyrano de Bergerac talked about the moon."

It might reasonably be expected, sixteen years later—which is enough time to produce and process several generations of new painters—that, as a language for painting, lunatic lyricism might well have given way, by now,



LEFT: David Blatherwick *One Second* 1998 Oil on canvas
1.4 x 1.4 m Photo courtesy Pari Nadimi Gallery

RIGHT: Jordan Broadworth *Untitled (Appointment)* 1999
Oil on canvas 61.0 x 61.0 cm Photo courtesy Pari Nadimi Gallery

to a drier, more measured, semiologically-tinctured, post-structuralistically-powered species of discourse, and as a result, have assisted into being a sober, perhaps subversive, trenchantly critical kind of painting. As it turns out, it has and it hasn't. Rapture has not, for example, entirely left the field. And what is so absorbing about this, is the degree to which some of the most inventive and committed young painters working in this country right now are falling to Earth, meteorically, right at this juncture, right on this yes/no pivotal plateau, where painting's past touches its present (and grows wistful about its future), where art history rubs up against a militant, critical contemporaneity, where the intensely personal reaches out to join tradition. This is an age, in painterly terms, of trying to have your aesthetic cake and eat it too.

Ron Shuebrook sums up the situation well in his essay for an exhibition called, "Contingency and Continuity: Negotiating New Abstraction," held last winter at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ontario. Of the six artists making up that exhibition (Jordan Broadworth, Cora Cluett, Gina Rorai, Monica Tap, Denyse Thomasos and David Urban), Shuebrook notes that: "They have embraced the practice of painting in all of its layered resonance. Although certainly aware of the earlier phenomenologically-oriented formalism and the transcendent aspirations of modernism, they seem to be committed to abstraction as a vehicle for the interpretation of this unstable moment in history." Their abstractionist "interpretation of this unstable moment in history" appears to focus, as Shuebrook sees it, precisely where the "historical and social contexts of their practices" and the "important roles that their individual temperaments, talents, and motivations may have in their production" come together. Which is the same as it has always been, I suppose, for all artists.

But there is an added knowingness, a rich self-consciousness,

that colours the progress of these younger painters and others tilling similar kinds of aesthetic soil. The recent appearance of "Jonathan Lasker: Selective Identity, Paintings from the 1990s" at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, served conveniently to foreground the attitudes and procedures of a number of these younger painters, for the simple reason that many of them inevitably (even Oedipally) saw the Lasker paintings as touchstones for the positioning of their own practices. Lasker's usefulness in this regard is crystallized early in his catalogue essay, "On Jonathan Lasker's Method," by the exhibition's curator, David Moos. He writes: "Lasker methodically arrays the essential ingredients of painting: color, line, form and texture. This concise grammar governs the logic of each composition that strives to invigorate abstraction with a regimented aplomb."

A regimented aplomb, yes. Or, as Hans-Michael Herzog puts it (in an earlier Lasker catalogue essay quoted by Moos), "frozen spontaneity." Locked within these handy oxymorons is an entire arsenal of concerns informing the new abstraction.

The paintings of Montreal-based David Blatherwick, for example, proceed by means of an intoxicating pile-up of ropey, interlaced nets of pure pigment laid across his square, modestly-scaled canvases. But Blatherwick's paintings, like those of many of his contemporaries, are simultaneously hectic and carefully controlled: "The nets come from the modernist, minimalist grid," he says, "and in particular from the paintings of Agnes Martin, who has been a huge influence—though she is," he adds with a charming sense of understatement, "more austere than I am."

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The nets also come, he says, from African flatweaving traditions, from the rhythmically-steady diet of techno music he listens to while he paints, and from an interest in “neural networks.” It’s important to Blatherwick that once he begins to weave his nets of pigment, that they continue to “grow by themselves.” For Blatherwick, painting is “a language and an addiction too. It’s a lot like cooking,” he maintains. “I don’t have to look at anything while I’m doing it!” So who’s back of all this action (besides Agnes Martin)? De Kooning? Pollock? Mark Tobey? Ab-Ex Guston? “Philip Guston was one of the reasons I began painting,” says Blatherwick. “But the work also comes from my reading of popularizing books about chaos theory and self-organizing systems.” Here’s the unembarrassed and clearly nurturing dichotomy: food on the one hand and self-organizing systems on the other. The raw and the theoretically cooked.

Blatherwick has respectful reservations, by the way, about the Laskers—or at least about issues generated by the simultaneous exhibiting of both Lasker’s tiny doodle-like studies on paper and his final full-scale paintings. “For me, the big ones fall off,” Blatherwick tells me. “I didn’t sense any kind of struggle or transformative act in the making of the big paintings.”

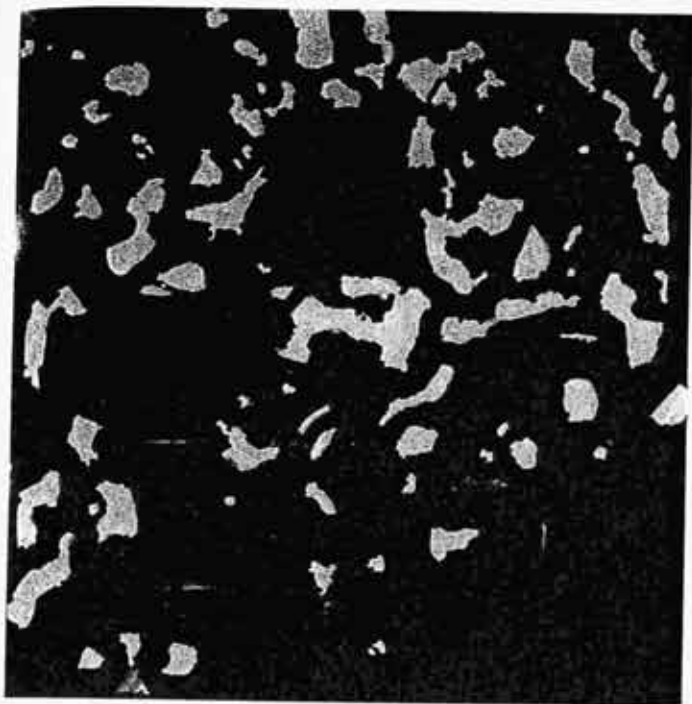
For Jordan Broadworth too, “Lasker’s studies are the paintings.” For him, the big paintings lack “staying power.” For Broadworth, the Canadian painter closest to Lasker’s sensibility (and predating it) has, in fact, been John Meredith. “Think about all those little studies he would painstakingly blow up,”



he points out, “and all that careful outlining and filling in, and his employing a similar pop-like, idiosyncratic kind of palette.”

Broadworth’s own paintings, like David Blatherwick’s, are addictive. They are also, unlike Blatherwick’s, slow, providing an opulent sensuousness without the experience of optical concussion. I should imagine that Harold Klunder lurks behind them somewhere. Broadworth’s paintings live the first life of their development as geometric abstractions which are then made to support a sum of absences consisting of fields of gesso, layers of oil paint (much of it loose and gestural), which are given a great deal of carefully-calculated drying time, followed by the attentive semi-removal, by squeegee (as a system of anti-strokes), of these dragged-out, subsequent planes of colour. Broadworth’s now almost museologically-encased drips and smears sit not on, but *within* his final surfaces. “I got tired of that conventional hierarchy of figure-on-ground,” he says. What you initially read in his paintings as figures, are actually grounds; as in the exquisite new *Untitled (Episode)* (1999), where vestigial grids and ladder-like structures the colour of dried blood ride deep in the sonorous beige-grey of the painting’s slippery outer-chromatic continuum. Broadworth’s palette—frequently made up of cold, subaqueous blues, chalky bone-whites, umbers, ochres, taupes, visceral reds—is as pulled back as his gestures. “I look at Brice Marden a lot,” says Broadworth. “Marden once stated that he was after colours that *turn in on themselves*. That made immediate sense to me.”

This studied, self-conscious distance from painterly action is the talismanic centre of the new ironically-poised, passionately-dispassionate abstraction. For Jordan Broadworth, as for many



ABOVE: Nicole Collins: *Arrival (Departure Implied)* 1998 Oil, wax and pigment on canvas 1.4 x 1.4 m Photo Simon Glass Courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery

OPPOSITE PAGE: Monica Tap *Tuscan: sienna* 1998 Oil on canvas 1.2 x 1.2 m Photo courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery

non-representational painters of his generation, it is necessary to honour, internalize and transcend the whole trajectory of abstract painting's century-long history. "It's important to pay homage to everything that abstraction has been through," says Broadworth, "and, yes, that does involve Oedipal struggles with the great parental figures of historical abstraction. But then you can't afford to trade in the old verities either. You don't want to be a tart!"

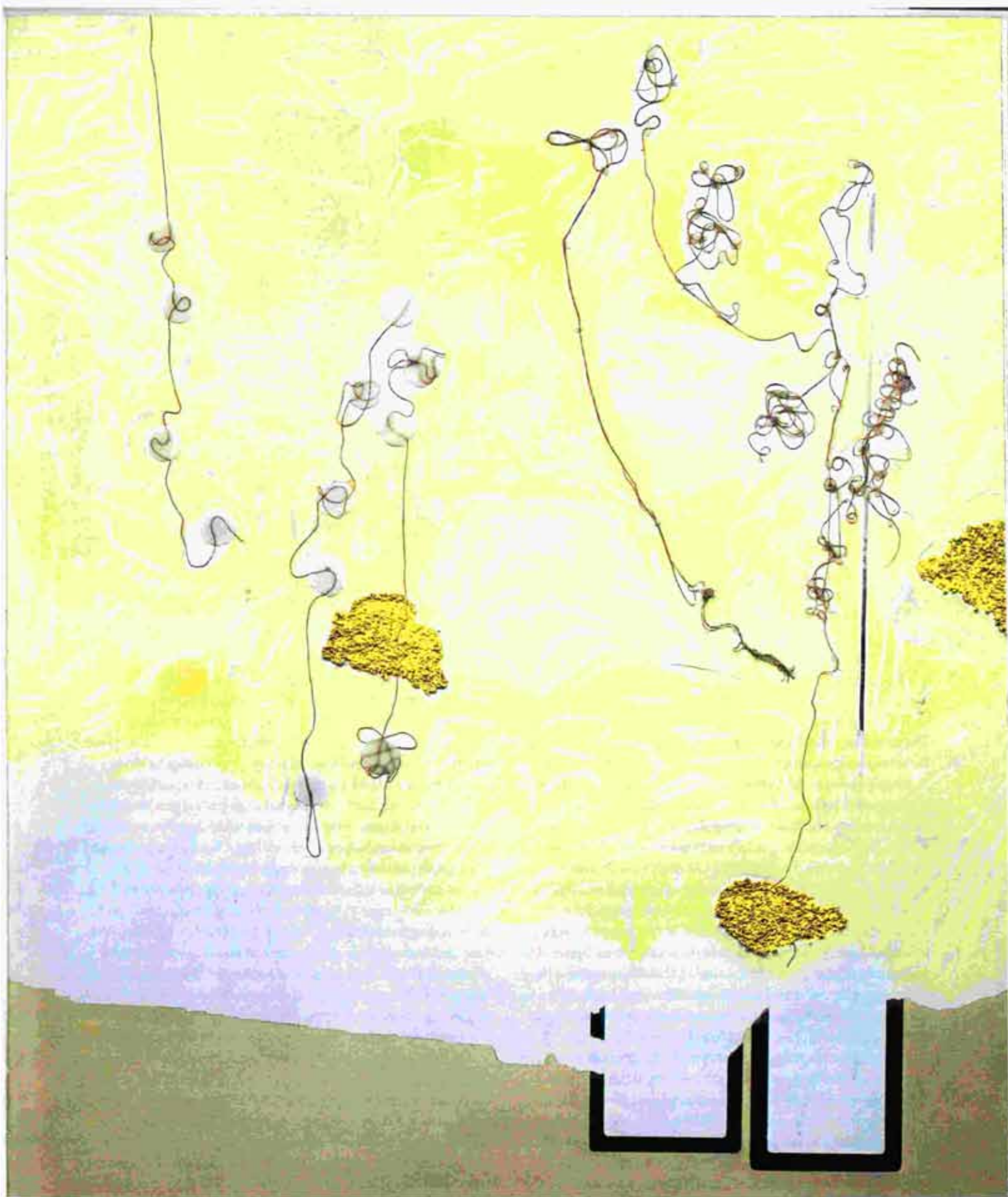
→ *Don't Look at Me Like That* is the title of a painting from 1998 by Michel Daigneault. Daigneault, who is currently teaching at the University of Lethbridge, is a highly sophisticated painter—an artist who always strikes me as being engaged in making his paintings from somewhere inside a delicately and deliberately projected carapace of personally-tempered and almost *annealed* painting ideas. "I am trying very hard to engage in a painting practice that is relevant for today," Daigneault tells me, "even down to the rather domestic colours I use—yellows, powder blues, and baby blues," (as in his strangely extraterrestrial yet hardware store-esque painting from 1998, which bears the wonderfully slapstick, Buster Keaton-like title *The Day I Felt That Something Was Going to Fall On My Head*)—and in the colourless colours provided by his signature meanders of thread, shards of tinfoil, and translucent, semen-like pools of dried glue. "This kind of colour," says Daigneault, "is loaded with information, and when linked with the painting's compositional

elements and decisions, will, hopefully, result in a gathering of metaphors that never become closed signs, but rather, remain open. Painting today has to operate both within an interplay of purely sensuous, physical perceptions—the way abstract expressionism did with its assumptions about its having purged itself of all external references—and another kind of reality. Today, the abstract sign carries around new and different kinds of luggage. I always try to use even the painting's title to help position the viewer in this different sort of experiential place."

Difference and painting's eternal return. New painters continue to keep assignations with abstract painting's past, all the while gratefully embracing a self-distancing, informed stance adjacent and anterior to it. Nicole Collins came to painting, she insists, "late" (an odd admission from such a youthful practitioner of the discipline). She spent a lot of time clinging, she says, to figuration, her first tentative forays into abstraction coming from her careful paintings of bruises on flesh—bruises which eventually, when she came upon the use of the cold-wax medium as a sort of super-impasto, billowed out into abstraction. The generative moment in this development came one day, she says, when she simply took a hot iron, and ran it over the painting's waxy surface. "It gave me a mind-blowingly smooth plane," Collins recalls, "which I experimented with continuously for the next two years." Collins' steady employment of small, square canvases (which imply neither landscapes nor portraits) is part of what she calls her vow of chastity as a painter—a vow somewhat compromised, perhaps, by her concomitant mission, as in a lush little painting like *Arrival (Departure Implied)* (1998)—to "make beauty." For Collins too, as with many other painters of her generation, titling is very important. "It's a pleasurable process," she says, "and represents an opportunity for responsibility, a desire to give the viewer more to work with."

"I'm a failed conceptual painter," Monica Tap tells me puckishly. "The times we live in demand it." Tap—whose rushes of nervous, feathery lines of paint are the hedonistic fallout from her engagement with the landscape images, often from the seventeenth century, which initially order her pictures—sets out to "reproduce" certain master drawings on her own canvases, all the while eagerly expecting not to succeed, having engineered her own defeat. "I also see myself as a failed copyist," she tells me. "I intentionally get everything wrong." In this wrongness, of course, lies the compensatory, hand-in-the-cookie-jar delight of her paintings—a painterly exhilaration which, as *Hamlet's* Polonius might have put it, has by *indirection* found directions out.

Tap sets up painterly tasks for herself and tries stridently (but not too humbly) to fulfill them. Having chosen the drawings which will inevitably free her into the frayed fate awaiting her own historically-positioned homage to them, she projects slides of the drawings onto her canvases, one at a time, often one after another. And having initially decided, before these



Michel Daigneault *Don't Look at Me Like That* 1998 Acrylic and string on canvas 1.5 x 1.2 m Photo courtesy Pari Nadimi Gallery