

## Artist strips city to core

Painter Jonathan Johnson distills urban mass into black landscapes

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter | At the Galleries

NOW THAT he's moved out to the country, Jonathan Johnson is painting cities.

The artist, who grew up in Hampton outside Saint John, N.B., has made a radical shift in his painting, away from dense, coloured landscapes to spare, monochromatic depictions of cities on an empty expanse of linen-coloured canvas, treated but not painted in white gesso.

"I'm exploring ideas about how societies were built, the idea of arrival on a shore and the constructing of a city," says Johnson.

He used to live in Halifax and had a studio in the Immigration Annex by Pier 21, where the late painter Gerald Ferguson also had a studio. Now Johnson lives in Brooklyn, near Windsor, and hears birdsong instead of traffic.

"It's all farmland, cows and horses. I love it. There is a lot of space out here. I have a small studio but I feel it gives me a bit of head space, and that's why you see a shift."

In this new series at Gallery Page and Strange, he uses minimal colour as he sets a mass of black forms in the centre of a bare canvas, with drips in the foreground and an explosion of dots for the sky in the background. The thick black masses of paint replicate the dense construction and population of cities.

Interested in how people arrived on land and built cities, he literally leads the viewer into a city he's known — Toronto, Halifax, Paris or Saint John — on a waterway.

He describes Ferguson, known for black paintings on bare canvas, as his mentor.

"When he was alive I wouldn't have gone in for the black paint and canvas. Now he's gone I'm reflecting more on his work. I thought, this is an opportunity now to apply some of his principles."

He's particularly interested in Ferguson's 1990s still life paintings of black images on untreated canvas. "He was visually getting a balance there and I thought, 'This is a type of balance I want.'

"I was interested in the composition and trying to achieve something using positive and negative space and the figure/ground relationship."

While Ferguson used stencils for his images, Johnson's work is grounded in free-hand drawing. He goes through a long "editing" process, making charcoal drawings and then oil-on-paper sketches before he stands in front of the final canvas.

"I do multiples until I get it just right. Before I reach the canvas I've done so many of the

same image and pared it down to the point it becomes about shapes and gesture and really trying to nail it.

"There's a certain tension when you arrive at a canvas. You've been rehearsing the gestures and now it's show time, and you see if you can do it right in one go. It's exciting."

If he makes one wrong mark he throws the canvas out. While the gallery is showing two of his Toronto sketches, he discarded the other four.

"There is no preciousness. It's the editing process, and that's a Ferguson thing. I'm really enjoying stripping it down and stopping short of what one would normally consider a landscape painting in the Canadian canon of art."

The show at Page and Strange, 1869 Granville St., to June 17, has been very popular, with Johnson selling most of the work. There is a waiting list among his Halifax and his Toronto clientele but Johnson won't rush an image. Page and Strange is taking his work and new work by other gallery artists to Toronto on June 23 for a one-night show at the Richmond. Artists in attendance will include Johnson, Ivan Murphy, Jessica Korderas, Peter Hill, Christian McLeod and John McEwen.

Also a near sellout is Melissa Townsend's debut solo show this month of paintings of owls at Argyle Fine Art, 1559 Barrington St., Halifax.

Townsend's portraits are striking for their strong personality and animated painting style. She gives character to isolated owls' heads, which look people in the eye with their highly expressive gaze. You can feel the energy and motion in Townsend's paint with the visible swoop of brushstrokes in her monochromatic backgrounds of soft blues and greens. However, she doesn't let her style get in the way of the subject. These owls, given people's names like Ethel and Eleanor, speak directly to you whether they are quizzical, stern or cranky. Townsend is a native of Alberta who came to Halifax to go to NSCAD University.

New to Argyle Fine Art is Ontario artist Kevin Roach, who recently exhibited in The Reclaimers at the Mary E. Black Gallery. He has brought to the gallery his wooden panels of ships constructed from a wonderful myriad of found objects.

Speaking of the Mary E. Black, at 1061 Marginal Rd., Halifax, next to Pier 21, it had a crowd at its opening of Inspired, the 2011 exhibit of work by members of the Nova Scotia Designer Crafts Council.

This year the council challenged its members to visit any museum or heritage site in Nova Scotia and select an artifact, then reinterpret it through the creation of a new work of craft. A panel of jurors selected 23 works that include silk cloth evocative of a coal mine shaft, a ring echoing the hilt of a cutlass and Mi'kmaq quillwork translated into both clay and glass. The show runs to July 24.

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