

CANADIANART

Done. Not Done. Might Be Done...

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Elizabeth McIntosh doesn't believe in pat endings. On this March morning, the Vancouver artist is addressing the need to finish off a new body of work for a solo exhibition at Toronto's Diaz Contemporary in May. She's working on several canvases concurrently, paintings that to a casual observer look ready to go. But they already bear several undercoats of skilfully wrought imagery and might assume several more before they are dubbed finished.

"This one is done," she pronounces, gesturing toward a huge canvas of yellow stripes swimming in a blue sea. "That one isn't done," she says next, pointing to a canvas of finely calibrated coloured squares. "And that one," she adds, pointing to a third canvas, "that one *might* be done."

The question of resolution lies at the heart of McIntosh's work. The idea of a predetermined end point is antithetical to her method. "I know it's finished when I sense there's something new to me," she says. "It has to be a bit of a surprise, but be compositionally resolved and balanced." It's an explanation that allows for an infinite number of possible conclusions.

McIntosh often begins a piece by priming the canvas with a base coat of white or occasionally black gesso, then progressively fills it in with coloured shapes, though every work is different and there is no set process. For one recent painting, she let the canvas lie fallow for a week or more between coats, so that the paint could dry and cure, and so she could reflect on how to proceed. It was a complex and lengthy process, drawn out even further by her frequent pauses to figure out as she went along what hue she should next apply, or reapply, and at what precise angle.

In some compositions she inserts floating rectangles that effectively create additional "paintings within a painting." For her, the purpose of such a gesture is not to make a statement but to make it ambiguous where the bottom of the painting lies. Once again she's muddying up the idea of resolution.

She works in oils, which are better suited to conveying depth and gradation of tone than the all-or-nothing opaque plasticity of acrylics. When the canvas is covered, she'll return to the starting point, and recommence a slow path around the composition, overpainting all the shapes she so carefully rendered the previous week. What she ends up with are stratified paintings, several coats deep, that project sporadic and sometimes ghostly traces of their subcutaneous layers. In this corner, a silvery white looks like a scrim over a shadowy form; in that corner, a pinkish-brown hue brushed roughly over an indigo square reads like a miniature of the northern lights.

The paintings bulge with disarming, intriguing geodesic patterns. Most of them exude not the sharp regularity of hard-edge modernism, but a kind of soft and slightly wonky quality. You think of a handmade quilt, or, as one blogger enthused, crystalline candy.

"What is really intriguing about Elizabeth's work is the way it blurs this boundary between abstraction and representation," says Christina Ritchie, director of the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver. "There's always this sense of permeation going on." For an upcoming exhibition at the CAG, McIntosh will present a selection of paintings in one large room, and use the other as an architectural container for a huge wall collage. The collage will become both the space and a representation of the space.

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Tanya Leighton

This boundary-blurring characterizes her paintings as well. In her studio is a work called *Untitled (Table)*, a 2005 oil on canvas that portrays, or so it seems, a table. Specifically, it is a view of a table's foreshortened underside as you'd see it when lying splayed out on the kitchen floor after a Saturday night gone awry. Or, from a different mental perspective, it is a purely abstract arrangement of coloured trapezoids and rectangular bands. McIntosh had the concept of a table in mind as she created this painting, though if it started to look too representational to her, she would refine it until it reached a Janus-faced balance, equally figurative and abstract. Some of her friends warned her it was starting to look too much like a table, that she should nudge the work toward pure abstraction, a notion she resists.

"Abstraction is a term that's outdated," says McIntosh. "It's a hundred years old: what does that mean now? I don't care that they're 'pure' forms in the modernist sense, or whether they have referents. The forms can flip back and forth"—between abstract and figurative evocations—"and it doesn't matter."

McIntosh is accumulating a critical mass of attention this year. Her spring show at Diaz will be followed up by one at the Contemporary Art Gallery in November. A monograph from Emily Carr University Press has just been published. The National Gallery of Canada and, more recently, the Art Gallery of Ontario have both acquired her work for their permanent collections. (And, for good measure, so has Belinda Stronach.)

McIntosh has been exhibiting with Diaz Contemporary since its establishment in 2005, but she has been based in Vancouver since [Emily Carr University of Art and Design](#) offered her a tenure-track teaching position a few years ago. Her studio is in an industrial neighbourhood not far from the glossy new Olympic Village built for the 2010 Winter Games, and is shared with the artists [Elspeth Pratt](#) and Allyson Clay. It's here that most of the contents of her upcoming exhibitions stand, stored behind walls or hanging and waiting for their next iteration. On this balmy March morning, she is preparing to rework a vast canvas that will be part of the Diaz show.

"I usually don't measure things," she allows, stepping up onto a plastic milk crate to assess her work-in-progress at close range. It's a patchwork grid of gemstone hues and little regularity. "I want it to be wonky but it's kind of gone too wonky. So I'm squaring part of it," she explains. "I'm making some lines perfectly straight, so the wonky ones look obviously wonky, not like they're slipping off the stretcher."

With a white pencil crayon she marks up new edge positions for some of the squares, then spends the next few hours meticulously painting over the beautifully rendered grid of colours. Square by square, the first composition vanishes under sheaths of new pigment—it's discomfiting to watch. But what begins to emerge promises to be even richer, embedded with streaks and residual brush strokes and other vestiges of the understory. And the composition will have a bedrock of regular shapes to support the irregular shapes within.

For McIntosh, art in general—and painting in particular—crept up on her from behind. Art was the family business; as a typical adolescent growing up in Simcoe, Ontario, she had no initial interest in entering it. When she was in her late teens, her mother, the artist Ellen McIntosh-Green, urged her to take a week-long painting workshop held in the surrounding countryside. She started painting and on the first day found, to her surprise, that she liked it. For the rest of the week, she painted past the scheduled finishing time, until the instructor gently and then firmly ordered her to pack up for the day. She has been painting relentlessly ever since.

As a student at Toronto's York University in the 1990s, she found that painting was marginalized and considered a near-obsolete practice. Deferring to academic fashion, she created a series of performance-art pieces. Most were language-based, but others were cacophonous audio events incorporating ghetto blasters, tape recordings of clattering typists and an assistant who would improvise a knitting job with cassette tape. She trenchantly recalls how one prominent faculty member was quick to dub McIntosh's performance art her "real work" and her painting a "sideline."

The performances were popular—York provided a ready-made audience— but McIntosh found performance art nerve-racking. "It's dependent on a venue and an audience," she points out. "But I like the solitary nature of painting. So I thought: do I want to spend the rest of my life doing this? Or return to what I really like doing: painting in my studio?" When she stopped doing performance art to concentrate on painting, two other students—the class stars, as it happened—made their disappointment known. As McIntosh puts it, "They expressed outrage. They thought my paintings were meaningless."

After York, McIntosh co-founded an artists' collective called Painting Disorders, which also included [Marc Bell](#), Angela Leach, Sally Späth, Eric Glavin and [Nestor Krüger](#). In some ways, it was a typical art collective, consisting of members with similar interests and proclivities and providing a tight knot of mutual support. But it was also something of a tongue-in-cheek manifesto, allows McIntosh. Just as something as basic and primordial as eating could be pathologized, so could painting. "We were working in an environment that wasn't seen as painter-friendly, where it was seen as a kind of disorder," she explains.

Tanya Leighton

In the mid-1990s, the master's program she entered at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, England, offered her carte blanche to explore any form of art she wanted to. With little formal structure and less pressure to conform to any one paradigm of practice, she devoted herself exclusively to painting. The artistic freedom was exhilarating, even though she had to peddle sandwiches in office towers every morning to afford the luxury of painting in the afternoons. While artistically emancipated by Chelsea, she couldn't find a way to legally stay in the country and support herself, and returned to Canada in 1998.

Back at her Vancouver studio, she opens her laptop to show me a file of aphorisms on art, zeroing in on a statement made by Donald Judd in his 1965 essay "Specific Objects": *The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it.*

McIntosh takes up the challenge. While Judd considers "actual space" to be "intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface," McIntosh does not. "My view is that the rectangle of a canvas is an indefinite expanse," she says. Like the concept of a finite universe, a fixed twodimensional space can be infinitely reworked, revisited and repopulated.

Her intuitive approach is the conceptual opposite of a research-based, heavily planned and precisely executed process. She works without a plan or script or theory, and the results exude no particular social or political exhortations. But her open-ended, literally self-effacing process comes at a price in terms of public acceptance, she feels. "People generally respect those who are really sure of what they're going to do, because that sureness makes them feel comfortable," she contends.

The scripted performance, the planned installation: these are sure things—preordained phenomena, once you've crafted the idea. But, says McIntosh in a conversation about teaching and students. "It's not that hard to have a good idea." With painting, on the other hand, "it takes years to slowly master the medium."

And even once mastered, the medium isn't conducive to broadcasting a message. "I don't even attempt that," she tells me. "Painting is a very clumsy way to go about things if you're trying to say something direct. It's not didactic. It's not direct."

Then she adds, by way of conclusion: "That's the beauty of it."