

CONTEMPORARY ART

Cities reflects organic relationship

NANCY TOUSLEY
CALGARY HERALD

When you think about it, making a painting of an entire city or even part of a big one such as New York, London, Halifax or Calgary is a remarkable thing to do. Few artists have ever tried it, especially in the 21st century.

It takes a particular kind of vision and a lot of preparation, which the painter John Hartman has and does. To get a fix on Calgary, for example, he rented a little trainer Cessna at the Springbank airport and flew toward Calgary as far as the pilot was allowed to go without entering international flight paths. The pilot then flew back and forth on a north/south axis so the artist in the backseat could take digital photographs of what lay below.

To visualize a painting of a city from above, Hartman first needs a good understanding of the lay of the land, buildings, streets and rivers. So he sought other vantage points, high but closer to the ground, to sketch from: the top of the Calgary Tower, McHugh Bluff on the north side of the Bow River, Scotchman's Hill and the high point on Sarcee Trail, which looks back down the Bow toward the city. Telescoping even more, he consulted maps, postcards and other photos.

Hartman's final vision, as in all of his paintings of cities, is one that is unavailable from any other source. One reason is it's a composite image that incorporates several points of view. This gives Hartman's paintings their dynamic visual movement. Multiple viewpoints and colour, that is, colour tied to drawing, also keep the eye moving through the works in Hartman's *Cities*, a travelling exhibition of 18 paintings with watercolours, pencil sketches and sketchbooks.

The palette Hartman chose for Calgary (2005) is different from that of most of the other paintings in *Cities*. Centring on the cluster of tall buildings that rises up in the downtown, the view is beige, grey, white, several greens and lavender, with black and salmon red as accents. It is early spring and there is ice on the dark green river. The colours are close to nature, and the slightly curved horizon is lighter than the cloud-flecked lavender sky. There might be the shadow of a cloud over the city core. Somehow, you feel the volume of air above the town.

"I wanted to get a sense of this very bright light that's generated because there are so few trees and so much reflected light," Hartman says. "Usually the landscape is not green, it's some form of brown. . . . My objective was to get a sense of the light over the landscape as much as anything else. To do that I have to be more concerned with the tonal values and the light and dark arrangements. So I think I had a more restricted palette because of that."

If this Calgary is confusing at first, with landmarks seemingly in all the wrong places, it's because Hartman chose to paint the view looking east. The Rocky Mountains we've come to expect are not on the horizon. In almost every case, Hartman avoids the well-known postcard views to show the familiar in a new perspective. Not long ago, Hartman, who lives and works on Georgian Bay in the hamlet of Lafontaine, Ont. painted another Calgary view. In it, the city is rendered in vivid reds and pinks, with a dramatic storm rolling in behind it. That painting will be shown in Toronto at Nicholas Metivier Gallery in September. In Cal-

gary, Hartman shows with Paul Kuhn Gallery. He will have his first show in the States in New York in November, which will be of new city paintings.

Hartman is widely known as a painter of the rock, water and big-sky landscape of the Georgian Bay area, which he connects to mythical and everyday goings-on by drawing people and things symbolic of stories and tall tales into the sky. What these celestial vignettes say goes beyond their local or personal lore. Their presence tells us the land is deeply marked by the history, memory and presence

of the people who live there and the corollary that people are not separate from the land.

"The idea that we are somehow distinct from nature is just a bizarre construct that western civilization has created," Hartman tells Noah Richler in *Cities*, the book published on the occasion of the exhibition. Hartman learned this way of seeing things from the aboriginal view of the land as "a huge and changing organism."

Hartman turned to cities as a subject 10 years ago, roughly the same time as his last touring exhibition. The idea "started as most things do for me as a painter, with the vague idea that something might be interesting," Hartman says. That show, *Big North*, was seen here at the Nickle Arts Museum and focused on the landscape of Georgian Bay. He sees cities as part of the landscape, too, "an extraordinary overlay of human activity," as organisms with an organic relationship to the land.

Hartman's paintings are all about putting the viewer in a position to witness this relationship. The vertiginous space of the paintings makes you feel as if you are flying over the landscape, looking down, just as Hartman did in his childhood dreams of flying over the land and observing familiar places from high above. It's this overhead perspective that also makes the body of the city inseparable from the context of its environment.

Hartman places the city view at an oblique angle to the picture plane. The bottom of the image is often a straight-down view, while the ground plane rises steeply away from the viewer toward the horizon as though rushing to meet it. The whole image tilts away and comes up, as exhibition organizer Stuart Reid writes in *Cities*, "an off-kilter skew that suggests the view from the window of a plane as it banks for an approach." It is a tricky visual movement, but Hartman makes it look effortless.

He began to employ this vertiginous tilt more than 20 years ago in landscapes, but the cityscapes make it more complex. The first one he painted was *KobenHaven* (1997). He had gone to Copen-



Courtesy, Nicholas Metivier Gallery and Paul Kuhn Gallery

John Hartman, *Calgary*, 2005, oil on linen, collection of Bennett Jones LLP (Toronto).

hagen to make prints and liked the visual aspect of the city. Next he tried Georgian Bay towns, like Port Severn (2004) and Parry Sound (2003), whose peach, salmon and red terrain seems to float on a blue firmament of water and sky. Lush tapestries of different kinds of brushstrokes, these are two of this absorbing exhibition's most beautiful paintings.

The paintings of larger cities are more realistic, more tightly

painted and more earthbound. This might be a result of working with photographs to order the cityscape and it befits the dense, urban built environment. Along with Calgary, Hartman has made paintings of London, New York, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Hamilton, Halifax, Glasgow, and St. John's.

The earliest cities have storytelling figures in the sky, but Hartman began leaving them out when he felt he was repeating

himself. In Halifax (2007), he combines the city's history with its present with a ghost of the Halifax Explosion of 1917 at the centre of the work.

A sense of time is a factor in all of the paintings and here Hartman collapses it. In paintings like Halifax or New York (2005), both steeped in red and purple sunset colours, there is something messy and turbulent. Reid connects Hartman's cities, with their

arteries of rivers, expressways and streets, to the human body. Indeed, Hartman has given his cities imaginative life.

They seem alive and always changing, and thus mortal. Looking out from above Lower Manhattan in New York, you see a way off to the Narrows and ocean and sky as if gazing toward the future.

NTOUSLEY@THEHERALD.CANWEST.CIM