

Hartman's work packs powerful punch



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On Art

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The bird's-eye panoramic paintings of John Hartman project an air of confidence, a joie de vivre that is rarely deployed by the artists of Victoria. On a canvas as much as two metres square he brushes rivers of oil paint and piles on hills of pigments. New York, Seattle, Calgary, Toronto, Halifax and Vancouver are laid at our feet.

Hartman, born in 1950,

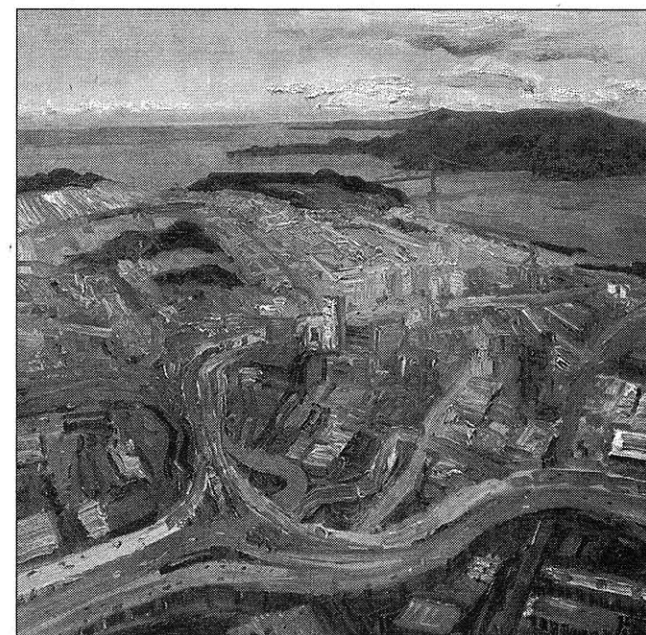
ventures out to explore the world from his rural home outside Midland, Ont., near the shores of Georgian Bay. At the moment, his paintings are the toast of the contemporary Canadian art world, but are also firmly attached to historical roots. In *Cities*, the book about his nationally touring exhibition (Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound, 2006), it is noted that Hartman found inspiration in a vast and

imagined aerial landscape, *The Battle of Issus* (1529), painted by the German Albrecht Altdorfer.

Like Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) before him, Hartman seeks out tall buildings as vantage points from which to gather his impressions and make sketches of the cities he intends to recreate. Hartman typically hires a small plane for a fly-over of the scene. Making an abundance of watercolours and photographs, he slowly develops his sense of the city. He then takes his memories and notes home and fashions his painted images. They often resemble a forbidding knot of geography encrusted with man-made accretions.

Kokoschka, famous for his view of London on the Thames (1959), was a late impressionist, capturing the shimmering look of that city in the afternoon light. Hartman, by contrast, seems less concerned with the play of light than with the form of things — the pulsing arteries of the roadways and bridges that stitch together great slabs of the built environment. His depictions of the waterfront below and the far horizon are alive with narrative incident of boats and planes and cranes.

The reality of Hartman's paintings is a far cry from the reproductions of them one sees in the book. They are huge, seething reckless action paintings, muscular and challenging like the boldest canvases of the abstract expressionists. Their arm's-reach scale and the obvious speed of their



COURTESY OF WINCHESTER GALLERY

San Francisco, painted by John Hartman in oil on canvas.

execution, not to mention the scope of Hartman's ambition, convey a physical presence familiar from Ontario artists Harold Klunder and David Craven, or Montreal masters Jean-Paul Riopelle and Paul-Emile Borduas. No West Coast artist I can think of — with the possible exception of Lance Olsen — has ever attempted this.

Close up, the paintings are studded with fascinating objects of colour. Undigested gobbets of oil paint are pasted on to the surface or rise like the surf, cresting on a rapidly plowed furrow of chromatic excess. Graphic gestures representing entire neighbourhoods are gouged into the still-wet miasma of oil. One can detect a reference to Hartman's drypoint engravings, small versions of simi-

lar subjects. Though the engravings were inspired by the techniques of David Milne, Hartman's own fidgety spontaneity is worlds away from Milne's concentrated meditation.

Though delighted by most aspects of Hartman's work, I was disappointed by his murky colours — often mauve and grey mixed on an unappetizing base of cadmium red. I wish he were sensitive to the light of day like Turner or Monet, both artists who laid out the city before us.

That said, there is much to admire, and much to be inspired by, in the modern topography as presented by John Hartman.

John Hartman: *Cities*, until Dec. 19 at Winchester Galleries, 2260 Oak Bay Ave., 250-595-2777, www.winchestergalleriesltd.com