



Scotiabank commissioned Ontario artist John Hartman to paint Halifax, in a three-panelled aerial view, for Hartman's nationally touring exhibit *Cities* and for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Hartman, whose vivid colours and loose, sinewy style are influenced by Neo-Expression, gives a tour today, 2:30 p.m., followed by a book signing, at the AGNS. He also exhibits at Studio 21 to March 14.

(TED PRITCHARD / Staff)

Painting the town red

Hartman's bird's eye view of Halifax includes personal, historical references

By ELISSA BARNARD
Arts Reporter

John Hartman was "totally petrified" by painting his largest canvas ever — an aerial view of Halifax.

"It had to be a great painting. If I was going to flop, it would be a great obvious flop."

However, cheers and sustained applause greeted the unveiling of Hartman's 16.5-foot long, eight-foot tall, oil on linen triptych called *Halifax* at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia on Monday. Scotiabank, celebrating its 175th anniversary, commissioned Hartman to create *Halifax* for the AGNS. The exhibit *Cities: John Hartman*, circulated by the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, opens its 13-city tour at the AGNS.

Hartman, an Ontario expressionist painter who piles up paint in pink mud, ribbons of red and intense blues for mythic, jubilant jumbles of land, water and urban architecture, only paints bird's eye views of port cities when he is inspired by a specific moment.

"I was coming to Halifax for my niece's wedding. I came over the Macdonald Bridge and I looked at the Narrows leading into the harbour and the Narrows leading into the Bedford Basin." He was so excited that he sent his family off to explore and walked across the bridge "and I thought, oh, I'm going to make a painting of this place."

"I came here last spring. It was no longer sunny, it was overcast and I spent a week walking through the city beginning to understand how it was shaped."

This massive, richly textured paint-

ing reflecting on 175 years of Halifax's history includes a sketchy Second World War convoy of ships massing in the Bedford Basin, references to the Halifax Explosion in 1917 and to the far right an airplane in reference to the crash of Swiss Air Flight 111.

Compositionally, Hartman frames the centre of the painting by two blood-red arteries of road that snake off the Macdonald and MacKay Bridges to form a loose triangle topped by the mushroom-like cloud of the Explosion. In that cloud Hartman paints an engine room from a corvette in honour of his father.

"I want a sense of the place. I want people who live here to be able to recognize it, I want people to say this is my house, but I also want to include historical events and personal history," says Hartman. His father served on corvettes during the Second World War as a stoker in the engine room.

"I think places and people create each other," says the former landscape painter. "I'm trying to recreate a sense of these are places where people live, that have stories."

It's more important to Hartman that people get a sense of history than interpret his often sketchy and obscure references to personal and local events. However, he's not trying to hide anything. He will tell registrars, curators and viewers exactly what they are seeing.

Born in 1950 in Midland, Ont., a port town on the Southern Georgian Bay, Hartman lives on a farm just outside the town in Lafontaine and is part of the 1980s emergence of Neo-Expressionism. He studied fine art at McMaster University where there was a large collection of Expression-



The RC Cemetery, Harbour, NL, 1999, an oil on linen painting by John Hartman, is on exhibit at Studio 21, 1223 Lower Water St., in the show *John Hartman: Rivers & Cities* to March 14.

(Contributed)

ist prints. "I spent a lot of time in Denmark associated with the Danish version of Neo-Expressionism," he says. "My love of colour comes from the fact I probably have more colour cones. I see things in colour."

As riveting as the pulsating red is in the painting *Halifax*, Hartman started out with a green and blue pastel drawing. When he loaded up the oil paint on his brush, "I went from left to right and it just got redder. This is a painting that was a little bit out of control. It raced ahead of me."

Hartman has two exhibits in Halifax now. *Cities: John Hartman*, with a companion show of work Hartman has donated to the gallery, includes

pen and ink and watercolour sketches and giant aerial paintings with deep space and the curve of the earth of London, England, Vancouver, Manhattan, St. John's, Toronto and Hamilton. It is at the AGNS to April 22.

He is also exhibiting at Studio 21 where his painting, *Halterm Container Port*, in cherry reds and sky blues, sold for \$14,000. This exhibit includes paintings from Newfoundland and Ontario in Hartman's characteristic colours and with lots of idiosyncratic personal and local historical material including a large pink nude woman placed in the land in a way that she escapes observation at first.

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