



COURTESY JOHN HARTMAN

John Hartman's Cities series aims to find new perspectives on urban life. Above, Montreal, the Old Port and below, Montreal, the New Port.

# This land is our land

Eighty per cent of Canadians live in cities, but you wouldn't know it from our art collections. From the Group of Seven in the east to Emily Carr in the west, the canon depicts our land as one of wilderness and farms, not freeways. It's this absence of the pictured urban, in part, that makes John Hartman's Cities series so affecting: It shows we can have beautiful paintings of Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto, rather than just the parks adjacent to them. Yet Hartman doesn't rehash clichéd, neon-flashed, bass-thumping visions of urban life. Rather, he portrays cities as organic entities. Leah Sandals spoke to Hartman at his Lafontaine, Ont., abode.

**Q** You live in the countryside and have painted that for many years. Why change to painting cities?

**A** Well, it was a gradual shift; even when I was painting more landscape-based work it always involved communities and stories about people living in communities. I started to make work about the small cities around Georgian Bay, and it expanded as I got into paintings about larger centres.

**Q** It's quite a range of cities represented: Calgary, Glasgow, Halifax, Hamilton, London, Montreal, New York, Owen Sound, Parry Sound, Port Severn, St. John's, Toronto and Vancouver. How did you choose them?

**A** Well, instead of saying, "This city would make an interesting painting", I started with cities I had actually been to, talking about things that were moving for me. One city that was important for me was Hamilton [where Hartman attended art school]. I wanted to paint it from the Burlington Skyway that I had driven over when I saw it for the first time 30 years ago. When I went to revisit it, it wasn't as spectacular as I had remembered, so I had to operate on the 30-year-old memory of how beautiful it was. Other cities I was visiting because I was showing there.

**Q** These cities differ considerably in type and scale. Yet here, Halifax looks as behemoth-like as New York. Is there an equalizing process going on?

**A** Yes. Each city has a different quality and I always want to get that into a painting. But there are some things that repeat themselves from one to another, like the road system and the railroad system and the bridges, which I paint larger than they would be in a photograph. And the colour palette is sometimes the same for New York as it is for smaller cities, because it's used mainly to create a sense of light and space.

**Q** In some paintings, it looks like there are outstretched bodies in the landscape.



**A** Yes. It's very deliberate in some, subconscious in others. In the Parry Sound painting the decision to paint the landscape that fleshy pink colour was very deliberate. I painted it after walking around the town on a warm May day and everyone was out in T-shirts and there was all this pink flesh around. In other paintings, roads and railroads look like blood vessels or coiled innards.

**Q** In these paintings, you can also see where you've been in a city or where you might even be standing at that moment.

**A** Yes, people do that all the time. And it's amazing, because what they're looking at is something quite abstract. Like, if you get six to 12 inches away from the canvas, it just

looks like paint. But people will look at a specific point up close and say this is the area of the town I grew up in, or this is where this road meets that road, when it's really an idea of a place they're looking at.

**Q** You've said you see cities as a natural entity. Could you explain that a bit?

**A** Well, I'm not very comfortable with this idea of distinction between cities and wilderness and urban and rural areas. To me it's all part of a continuum. And I always paint the human overlay on a place; when I painted less populated areas I was still always putting in little houses and marinas. I see us, humans, as part of the natural world.

**Q** Even if we make smog?

**A** Well, that's not good. But we've taken a curious attitude of saying we're separate from the world, and we've started to identify a bunch of things that we are doing that are bad.

But a lot of species behave the same way. When a bear goes through the woods it tears a trail right through there; it tips over plenty of trees and rocks. It definitely doesn't leave things pristine.

**■ John Hartman: Cities continues at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ont., to June 17 (www.tomthomson.org) and Projets Art 45, Montreal, to June 2 (www.metivier-gallery.com).**