This land is our land

Eighty per cent of Canadians live in cities, but you wouldn’t know it from our art exhibits. From the Group of Seven in the west to Emily Carr in the east, the scene depicts our land as one of wilderness and forests, not freeways. It’s this absence of the pleated urban, in part, that makes John Hartman’s Cities series so appealing: it shows us how beautiful paintings of Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto, rather than just the parks adjacent to them. Yet Hartman doesn’t shirk cliched, moon- gloved, brooding images of urban life. Rather, he portrays cities as organic entities. Leah Sandals spoke to Hartman at his Lodestarr, Otd... ah...

You live in the countryside and Anne painted a lot for many years. Why change in painting style?

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 centers.

It’s quite a range of cities represented: Calgary, Guelph, Oakville, London, Montréal, New York, New Brunswick, Dartmouth, Port Credit, St John’s, Toronto and Vancouver. How did you choose them?

I started with a list of cities I thought 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 Burlingtonypass 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, as 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.

These cities differ considerably in type and scale. How were the influences on Hartman’s work from these cities?

Cities, streets, buildings, streetscapes. Like Hamilton, there is a different quality and it’s always going to get into that in 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 entire palette is sometimes the same for New York as it is for smaller cities, because it’s used smoothly to create a sense of light and space.

In some paintings, it looks like there are natural and man-made elements of the landscape.

Yes, it’s very different in some, ochreous-ashy in others. In the Pinery I was painting the decision to paint the landscape that forest this entire time was very difficult. I pointed it out in the painting. If you look at the May 28 and everyone was out in the Tamaracks and there was all this pink mush around. In other paintings, roads and railroads look like blood vessels or invaded immunes.

In these paintings, you can also see where you’ve been to a city or where you might even be standing at this moment.

Yes, people do that all the time. And it’s amazing, because what they’re looking at is something quite grotesque. Like, if you get six to 12 inches away from the canvas, it just looks like plain. But people will look at a specific point up and see this is the area of the town I grew up in, or this is where this road met the road, when it’s really an idea. You’ve seen me or it’s an outline.

You’re still close to our cities in a natural mentoring. Could you explain the idea?

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 two populated areas I was still always getting it little houses and marinas. I see us, humans, as part of the natural world.

Rom (you make sense?)

Well, that’s not good. But we’ve taken a certain 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 wrong.

But a lot of species behave the same way. When a bear goes through the woods it has a mind right through it; it is over plenty of forests and woods. It definitely doesn’t know things.

John Hartman: Cities continues at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ont., to June 7 (www.ttomthomson.org) and Pariwest Art 45, Montreal, to June 3 (www.pariwest-galler.com).