Painted cities layered in meaning

John Hartman’s painted cities are the ones parents tell their wide-eyed children about, the astounding metropolises formed by mightily rivers and buildings that ignore gravity as they make their way to the moon. They’re Oz or Xanadu’s pleasure dome.

Of course, we’re familiar with the real place names in “Cities: John Hartman” at the University of Toronto Art Centre until March 10. They’re Toronto, New York, Glasgow, Vancouver, Port Severn, Ont. — the painter lives to the west of Midland, north of Toronto — London and Halifax.

At the heart of the entire series is Halifax (2006), commissioned by Scotiabank to herald its 175th anniversary last year. The wall-filling, oil-on-linen triptych is destined for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia following the exhibition’s extensive cross-country travels — it’s in Stratford July 13 to Sept. 7 and in Barrie between Sept. 18 and Nov. 1 — organized in part by Toronto’s Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Hartman’s dealer.

Scotiabank also sponsored the handsome exhibition catalogue, whose design conveys some sense of the vigour of the So-something painter’s approach, and the visceral quality found in the thick swatches of paint layered on at times like putty.

Yet Hartman’s cities are only unusually connected to the ones shown in atlases. They have much more in common with Saul Steinberg’s Manhattan in the famous View of the World from 9th Avenue 1976 New Yorker cover drawing — where the world beyond Manhattan is reduced to an empty little wasteland across the Hudson River — or with Italo Calvino’s mythical many-sided Venice in Invisible Cities. Indeed, a Hartman city painting is really about the essential structural elements — such as pink-tinted grey Gardiner Expressway snaking along in The Western Channel, Toronto (2006) — and the way they contribute to the city’s very atmosphere.

John Hartman’s oil on canvas Halifax recalls the day the anonymous city was blown to smithereens by a collision between the munitions ship Mont-Blanc and the steamship Imo.

Earth’s curvature — suggests California painter Wayne Thiebaud’s topy-turvy views of San Francisco’s rolling city streets: “With me there’s an awful lot of research about the cities, much that doesn’t get used,” he says. “But even if I am very familiar with the subject I let each painting develop in unusual and unexpected directions. I paint from top to bottom, leaving what I’ve finished as a kind of cinema that’s unfolding. I’m trying to make the city look like I think it looks.”

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