Lesley Finlayson: The Appearance of Disappearance

Who among us in Vancouver has not at one time stood on a roof top, on a balcony or at a window, transfixed by the view? Given the grandeur of its setting, singularity of its architecture and diversity of its ecology, Vancouver is very much a city about looking. Yet the act of seeing is often relegated to a snapshot, a bill board or disembodied digital mirage; only rarely is it engaged with as something worthy of one's attention or time. In her new body of work, *The Appearance of Disappearance*, Lesley Finlayson focuses prolonged and meditative attention on the city of Vancouver as viewed daily from her apartment in Hycroft Towers. Her paintings conjure that lull in the day as it hovers between a diurnal frenzy of necessary activity and the domestic inwardness of night. The last fingers of daylight herald the approach of evening, teasing rooftops bright against the inky darkness gathering below. Reverberating with fragments of conversation and anticipation, these works trace the architecture of mental life onto the familiar structures of a favourite view.

The title for this series derives from John Berger, who argues passionately for the primacy of vision. "Because the faculty of sight is continuous," he writes, "one tends to forget that the visual is always the result of an unrepeatable, momentary en-

counter'' (146). What fortuitously appears is apprehended in the process of disappearing, a process interrupted but momentarily by painting. Photography intercepts the flow of time minimally, capturing moments in an instant, while painting unfolds slowly, deliberately, through repeated acts of looking, evaluating and recognizing what is being seen. Berger comments that drawing (and, by extension, painting) examines "the structure of appearances.'' While it only takes the blink of an eye to see something, and Berger gives the example of Vermeer's view of Delft, to paint it requires duration--an extended period of time during which the subject is "looked at.'' We experience a painting as a momentary event: brick buildings and trees reflected in the stillness of a canal; yet the experience is thickened and made meaningful by "the density per square millimetre of Vermeer's looking, with the density per square millimetre of assembled moments'' (151). For Berger, as for Finlayson, painting provides a home or shelter for the visible, a "way of safeguarding the experiences of memory and revelation . . . against that boundless space which otherwise continually threatens to separate and marginalize'' (217). Painting, and, some might argue, painting alone, provides this sense of plenitude. In the face of constant change, chaos and disappearance, it offers a respite of stillness and calm.

Berger's thoughts about painting's relationship to time and the visible are echoed by Meeka Walsh, who enumerates at least four ways in which painting incorporates time: "The time it takes to make a painting . . . the time a painting takes, that is, its insistence on actually seizing and holding the moment; the time a painting lasts; the time it creates by its presence; and the time we need to look at it'' (6). David Urban describes painting as an essential paradox, a contradiction, an entity that exists both in our minds, where it bathes in streams of memory, sensation and desire, and as a concrete, perceivable thing. He suggests "the paradoxical structure of painting may occupy a unique role in a world in which the 'real' is also increasingly contested and paradoxical'' (46). Painting mediates between our selves and the world, creating an "interpretative space'' within which our relation-

ship to the world of things can be sussed and negotiated.

Finlayson's radiant canvasses embody time and paradox in several ways. They have been painted over the course of a year; we watch the city grow and change: skeletal structures become high-rise buildings; the changing angle of the sun pricks out different forms as the succession of seasons glosses one surface with snow or clothes another in crisp new foliage. In nineteenth-century Paris, Baudelaire despaired that "the form of the city, alas, changes as quickly as the human heart" (Berger 191), an observation that applies equally to Vancouver, which literally changes "before our eyes." We sense in looking that the beaux-arts features adorning certain roofs have already fallen before the wrecker's ball, that our recollection of this lively quarter of the city is jeopardized by its voracious appetite for the new. Finlayson paints the appearance of forms and spaces she knows intimately from her daily travels through the city as well as her repeated observations from above. Like Charles de Montesquieu, who made a point of seeking out the highest point in a new city in order to get a sense of the layout and plan, a sense later confirmed and added to by his experience on the ground, these paintings embody a multitude of impressions gained from protracted, extended looking augmented by corporeal memories of the terrain. And yet, as much as the city is the "subject" of these paintings, their meaning is not exhausted by pointing to that fact. As with any great painting, the literal subject is transposed--"worried," as a dog might worry a bone--by the means of its production. Style, in the broad sense, mediates the space between the perceiver and the subject of perception, providing a nuanced modality of feeling that floods the subject with a superabundance of signs. Style makes palpable the artist's deep engagement with the world, here exemplified, but not limited, by her view.

Ultimately, the richness of these paintings arises from the artist's perceptual acuity, her familiarity with the history and language of painting and her assurance in the value of painting as a "shelter of the having-been-seen." These luminous works explore the complexity of vision and demonstrate its value as a thing-in-itself, an

index of how our mind processes the many "bytes" of data it absorbs daily from the media, our senses and everyday life. As David Urban asserts, perception is "cobbled together rather than declared" (49). Rather than diminishing the reliability of vision, such a position opens a path for viewers to enter and participate as active makers in the perception and appreciation of these works of art, interrupting the inevitability of their disappearance by affirming they appear.

Amy Gogarty, September 2007

Lesley Finlayson: *The Appearance of Disappearance*, Elissa Cristall Galleries Ltd., Vancouver, Canada, 13 September to 6 October 2007.

Image: *Appearance 3*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 107 x 107 cm.

Works Cited:

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