



left:
SUBMERSION 1 2007

THE ART OF LINDY FYFE: Foraging for a Renewed Visual Splendour

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

Nothing but beauty and order exist there,
Opulence, peace, and sensuality.

Excerpt from *L'invitation au voyage* by Charles Baudelaire,
English translation by A. Fabo



It is possible that Lindy Fyfe's imagination lives in the Arcadian glade that Henri Matisse envisioned in his pivotal 1904 painting, *Luxe, calme et volupté*. Tellingly, the canvas was titled after a line from a visionary Baudelaire poem in his 1857 book of verse, *Les Fleurs du mal*, and was one of the first of a series of works that endeavored to picture idyllic utopias. This enticing landscape is inhabited by an increasing number of artists who forage through the colourful fields and the surrounding verdant forests of contemporary abstract painting. In spite of the growing activity, the terrain is currently fairly uncharted by either Canadian or international critics. However, playing catch-up, both *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art* magazines have recently published issues on painting but neither provided any incisive theories on the emerging aesthetics of opticality.

It wasn't always so — fifty years ago Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried were the dominant mid-twentieth century modernist critics as they attempted to articulate an art of radical opticality where retinal sensation was paramount, therefore giving intellectual substance to a phenomenon they dubbed as Post-painterly Abstraction. The renewed optical painting of today often shares characteristics with its antecedent from the 1960s and 70s but there are also crucial significant differences that are necessitated by a vastly different art-world context.

The return to opticality is trans-generational rather than a new generation's response to a preceding dominant movement. This renewed mode of painting includes seasoned artists evolving towards visual strategies that they had rebelled against early in their careers and young painters graduating from art schools with only a patchy knowledge of the aesthetic wars of the past, as well as the majority of artists, like Lindy Fyfe, who are positioned somewhere between these generational boundaries.



IMPULSION (detail), 2010



BURST 2008

The formal strategies of the renewed opticality are more diverse than those used by Post-painterly Abstractionists. It's generally considered that Post-painterly Abstractionists broke into two camps: the hard-edge painters like Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella and Guido Molinari, and the colour-field painters like Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Jack Bush, and Jules Olitski. At the time, only Kenneth Noland clouded this division by combining the two seeming polarities.

The Post-painterly Abstraction that Greenberg championed was never as reductivist as the concurrent Minimalist movement. However a similar reductive impulse was inherent in many of its assumptions, particularly among hard-edged abstractionists. Colour Field in its less rigorous states evolved into pastel-hued mediocrity and successive generations of hard-edged painters moved towards a predictable, plodding banality. More rigorous abstract artists countered this dilemma with complexity as was seen in the increasingly dense architectural images of Al Held or the wall works by Sol Lewitt that referenced Islamic ornamentation.

Accepting the challenge of complexity, the new optical painters of today freely meld the two impulses of mid-century Post-painterly Abstraction but also tap into an additional menu of formal strategies that include stenciling, air brushing, frottage, and the collaging of paint "skins" that are cultivated on external surfaces like panes of glass and plastic palettes. With never-ending resourcefulness, Lindy Fyfe uses all these techniques to augment the visual richness of her energized paintings.

To understand why it is viable for artists to return to opticality in the 21st century with a wider range of painterly applications one needs to view the barrage of assaults that battered the orthodoxies of Greenbergian modernism in retrospect. Both Feminism and the Painting & Decoration movement brought about a re-evaluation of traditional craft, decoration, as well as commonly held assumptions concerning 'mastery' in painting. Pop artists began to make a mockery of the orthodox distinctions between illustration and drawing, commercial images and acceptable genres in the 1960s. Two decades later postmodernists like Montreal painter David Elliot and the German firebrand Martin Kippenberger pushed these distinctions to near-conceptual levels in a discourse of images, signature styles and representation. In parallel, in regards to explorations of non-traditional materials, the Canadian artist Robert Youds and the recently-deceased German artist Sigmar Polke made a travesty of the reverential "truth-to-the-materials" tenet of modernism by employing debased stuff like artificial fur, glitter, toxic resins, spray paint, house enamels and patterned fabrics in lieu of canvas. Such blurring of genres, styles and hierarchies of materials have now become commonplace, neither taboo nor emblematic of rebellion in our century, but were considered outrageous when first introduced.



left to right:
RED, YELLOW, AND... 1, 2, 3 2009

A prime example of the flexible vocabulary of painterly strategies in Lindy Fyfe's oeuvre is seen in the larger work, *submersion*, of 2007. This watery palimpsest, with its process-revealing layers arguably owes more to Cy Twombly in conception than any Post-painterly Abstractionist. Fyfe uses airbrush frisket as a mask to create lozenge shapes that contain details of the painting arrested in various stages of development. There are various sorts of paint applications in these capsules — spattering, dripping, scraping, sponging. They oscillate between appearing as positive and negative space, inviting the viewer to see them as either lozenge-like objects floating in a field or as windows into a space behind the aqueous pigment that she squeegees across the canvas surface. Since that definitive work, Fyfe has moved towards a larger repertoire of painterly applications, however mostly using thinly glazed textures. As she slowly evolves towards relinquishing the use of the masking with frisket she begins to introduce hard-edged geometrical forms, alternating between rectangles and triangles. Similar to the lozenges in previous works, the geometric shapes alternate between acting as foreground elements or background to painterly gestures, sometimes within the same work. This can be seen in the 2009 series of three smaller works titled *red, yellow, and...* where the ground and figure shapeshift into a tantalizing visual dance.



ETHEREAL 1 2008



ETHEREAL 2 2008



IMPULSION (detail), 2010

One factor that contributed to the decline of Colour Field painting was its antipathy to Pop Art and its merits, especially Pop's ability to simultaneously critique and champion kitsch. Colour Field painting's primary guru, Clement Greenberg, had famously forged his early reputation with a diatribe against kitsch so it was not surprising that his disciples would follow suit in their studios. Even as the succeeding generations of Post-painterly Abstractionists introduced gaudier elements like metallics, silicon and mica dust, and sparkles into their increasingly pastel or garishly-hued works they adamantly rejected acknowledgement of the increasing level of questionable taste in their paintings. This denial disallowed any possible agency in the control of new elements of their evolving aesthetic by using kitsch for its external significance.

In contrast, painters like Lindy Fyfe, Michel Daigneault and Kim Dorland deftly insinuate kitsch elements into their work, but do so knowingly in order to colour the context and reading of their paintings. From sparkles, pom-poms and colour-saturated pipe-cleaners to the even more explicit and deliberate stretching of tasteful and tacky knits, Fyfe has been able to escalate the playfulness that has always existed in her painting, using the quotidian and debased to reference the chromatic range as it appears in the world outside the studio. She creates a discourse around colour and its meaning that escapes the purely formal terrain of Josef Albers or Ellsworth Kelly.

This tactic is exemplified by the three small paintings that make up the *ethereal* series from 2008. Paint skins peeled from autonomous surfaces are glued to relatively flat fields of pink paint in each piece. These skins are the first move towards experimentation with real, rather than ostensible, texture and she undermines our expectations of texture as being made from natural components like sand, metal dust, wood particles, etc. by imbedding glitter and sequins in the skins. With instinctual canniness, Fyfe is able to address the aesthetics of kitsch without sinking into the quicksand of superficial razzle-dazzle. These works have all the playfulness and vitality of the later Neo-Baroque work of Frank Stella or the hybrid installational work of Jessica Stockholder.

Fyfe's *Interweave* series (2009-2010) may seem a significant departure from her paintings but the underpinnings do not differ. The manipulation of the weave of the knit in the stretching provides the same play with contingency that Fyfe gets when she drips or squeegees the paints across the canvas. The impulse to locate colour in the realm of everyday experience is amplified in the serged fabric works because of the intense associations and memories that articles of clothing can bring to a viewer. Twenty years ago this stretching of fabric would have been

opposite:
INTERWEAVE 17,
TURQUOISE BLUE BANDS
(detail), 2010

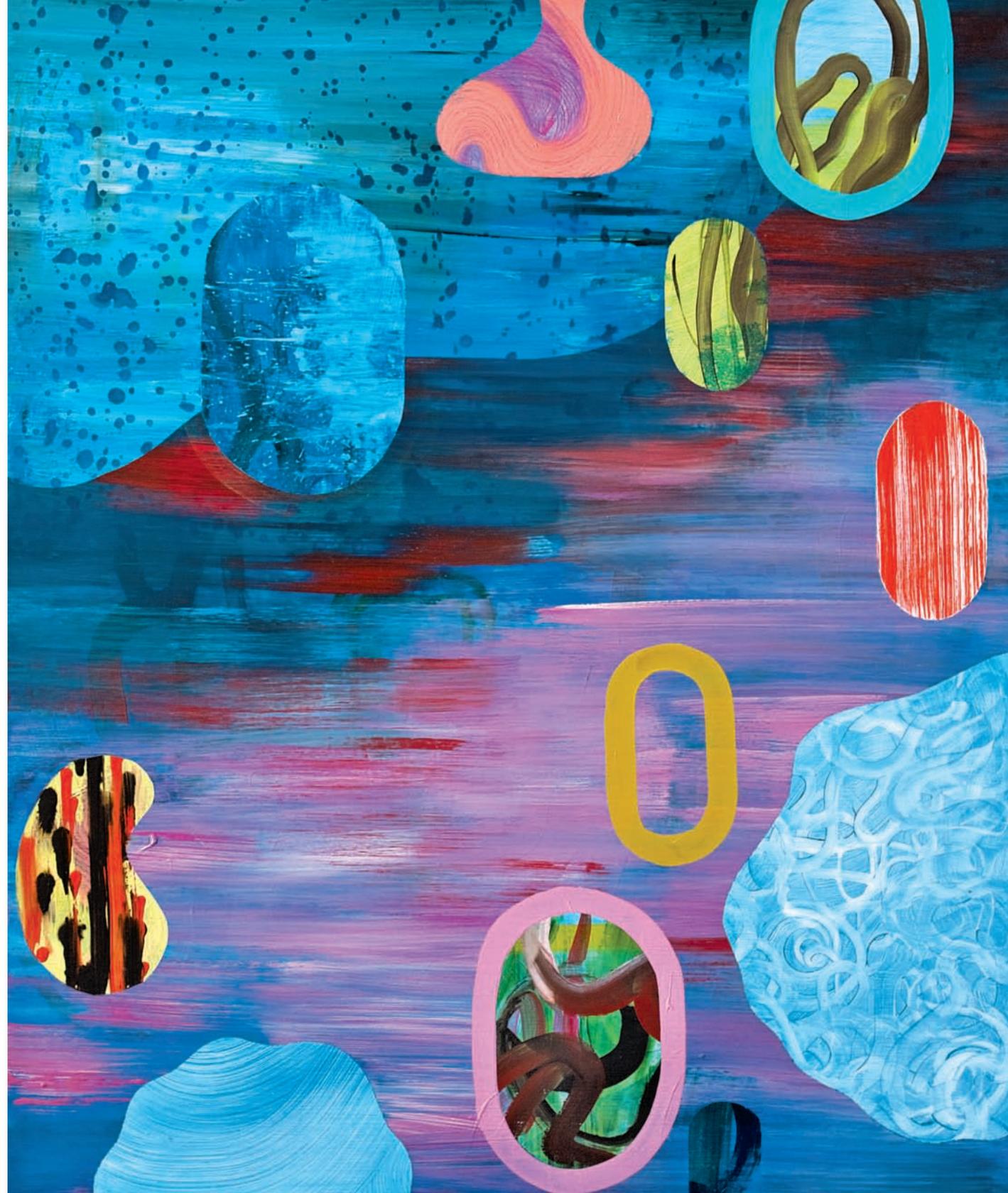
regarded as a postmodern strategy of parody to mock the solemnity of the true-believers of modernism but it is the formal elements that Fyfe emphasizes in her new works rather than their satiric possibilities. By cutting up the knits into smaller units and machine serging them into a quilted pattern she is able to further manipulate the placement and direction of the individual motifs, gaining further control of the formal elements of the medium to create dynamic, eye-popping compositions.

When we regard the major wall-work, *Impulsion* (2009-10), we are even less inclined to impose a parodic interpretation because the paintings take their place among the stretched fabric works with great dignity. This reminds us that many pioneering modernists like Liubov Popova, Sonia Delaunay and Aleksandr Rodchenko created significant works in the discipline of textile design as well as drawing and painting. Certainly there is a good deal of playfulness and humour in *Impulsion* but the wit is more akin to a stream of visual puns rather than chiding lampoons. The sprawling panoply of striped, checkered, plaid and tartan patterns are variously warped in their stretching and placed beside homonymic paintings, a juxtaposition that charges the arena of her chromatic explorations.



above:
IMPULSION
(installation view) 2009-2010





left:
WATERWORLDS 4 2006

Fyfe's drawing installations of the past (*Island Picnic*, 2007, *Network*, 2008) have been freewheeling works, mixing sculptural elements made from found objects, drawings and collages in free-form ways that expand our notions of what a drawing can be. There is an affinity to Richard Tuttle in this work, and perhaps the "sculpture/painting" installations of Jessica Stockholder. Many components of the new mixed-media installation *Impulsion* display a wild palette, yet it is a more contained, restrained formation than her drawing installations because of the persistence of the rectangle of the stretcher frame. The elegant salon hanging format of the work also references Allan McCollum's *Surrogate Painting* installations of the early 1980s although Fyfe's assemblage becomes the antithesis to McCollum's Minimalist arrays. In spite of this difference she manages to engage similar questions of mass-production and originality in art, albeit under the guise of a dazzling opticality that rivals the intensity of Op Art.

It may be time to return to Matisse's idyll of *Luxe, calme et volupté* and contemplate the implications of the premise that Matisse proposed at the time. The title explicitly clarifies that Matisse is staking out a terrain of visual pleasure. It will not be restrained in its colour exploration as the work of his contemporaries, Braque and Picasso, when they mined the planes and geometric forms of Analytical Cubism, primarily using grays, ochre and browns to reflect the sobriety of their heady pursuit. Nor will it engage the linguistic and theoretical questions that were to come in the work of Duchamp and Picabia. The third option of pleasurable yet rigorous opticality that Matisse chose was certainly embraced by an art public but was often undervalued by the chronicling critics and art historians and this may be expected. Perhaps, even, an art of the senses is better left to the poets like Rainer Maria Rilke, Gertrude Stein, Frank O'Hara or Charles Baudelaire who often championed visual splendour in their writing.

In the glade of the gallery, Fyfe generously offers a world of visual opulence, peaceful contemplation and, indeed, sensuality. Like Matisse she takes us away from a troubling world outside the gallery and, like Matisse, she may be criticized for this act of escapism. However illusive the concept of the idyll may be, it remains nourishing. It is enlightening to realize that cultures where daily life is a struggle against adversity often produce wondrous visual treats, whether it is the carpets of the Afghans, the weaving of present-day Mayans, the folk paintings of Haitians. I believe that the new rise in abstraction that romances the aesthetic concerns of Matisse and Post-painterly Abstraction is a tonic for our distressed planet and a balancing force to some of the more austere, logocentric works that are common today. Lindy Fyfe's art does not attempt to negate its important antitheses; instead it engages in a vital discourse by offering a glimpse into an Arcadian clearing.

Andy Fabo

LINDY FYFE

Confluence

© 2010

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery
72 Queen Street, Civic Centre
Oshawa, Ontario L1H 3Z3
rmg.on.ca

Graphic Design: Rob Gray, DesignWorks Studio
Printing: Laser Reproduction, Toronto
Photography: John Bingham, all pages
Michael Cullen, p. 14

Curator: David Aurandt

Catalogue of an exhibition held at
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery
4 September – 31 October, 2010

Distributed by: ABC: Art Books Canada
327 Ste. Catherine W., Suite 229
Montréal, Québec H3B 1A2
abcartbookscanada.com

ISBN: 978-1-926589-07-7

1. Fyfe, Lindy.
 2. Art Modern—21st century—Exhibitions.
 3. Painters—Canada.
- I. Aurandt, David. II. Fabo, Andy.
III. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. IV. Title.



The
Robert McLaughlin
Gallery



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



cover: IMPULSION (installation detail) 2010
image previous page: INTERWEAVE 8, WITH RED TARTAN 2010
right: IMPULSION (installation detail) 2010