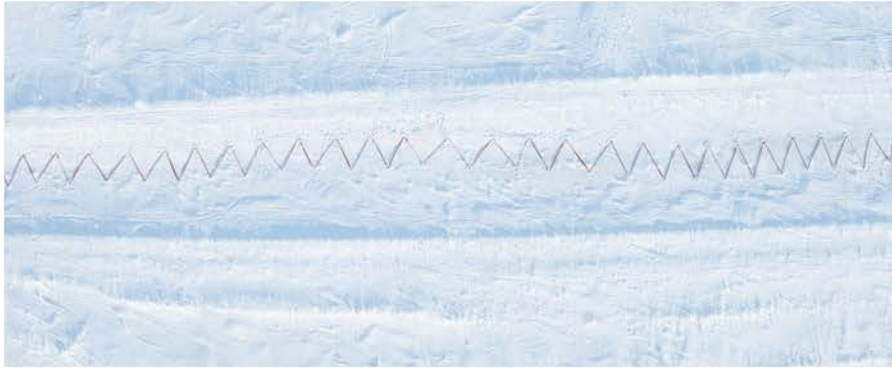


VISUAL ART

Trevor Kiernander

by Edwin Janzen



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fragility of Arctic sea ice and the environmental catastrophe looming as a result, are clearly and poignantly articulated.

Another northern perspective is provided in Jeneen Frei Njootli's *Being Skidoo*. The video shows the process of making regalia for snowmobiles. Working collaboratively with participants at a land-based learning camp near Vuntut National Park in the Yukon, Frei Njootli's work adapts traditional Gwitchin blanket patterns used for sled dogs, honouring and acknowledging the snow machines as necessary "partners in travel" for northern communities.

There were multiple videos in the exhibition, all presented with headphones so that the sound wouldn't bleed from one piece to the next. The exception was Rebecca Belmore's *Wave Sound*. A long copper cone sat on the floor of the gallery, its surface studded with the hammer marks of its making. On the wall was a photograph of a cliff with another large cone form installed near its edge. For "Landmarks 2017/Repères 2017" Belmore installed four of her *Wave Sound* sculptures in four national parks: Banff, Pukaskwa, Georgian Bay, and Gros Morne. Each sculpture gathered the ambient noise of each location and amplified them. In

the gallery sounds recorded from these locations played softly, a low murmuring. The sound of wind and ocean acted almost subliminally—it takes an act of concentration to isolate it from the noise you make just moving through the gallery. Coupled with the photographs of the various sites, Belmore's work succeeds in both bringing the sense of the land inside and projecting the viewer out of themselves, and out of the gallery. Again, we are reminded to pay attention.

"A Sense of Site" doesn't answer questions about re-presenting the ephemeral and the site-specific; rather, it poses more. It works as a companion to the original project, much as a catalogue would, and, as a catalogue does, it provides a record of the project. Here, though, that record is less documentary and more discursive, not a recording of a story but the continuation of one, or many. ■

"A Sense of Site" was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS, from February 9 to May 12, 2019.

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When you think of a "painting collective," it is normal to imagine a group of artists. Montreal painter Trevor Kiernander shows us, however, that it is also possible for the artworks themselves to exist in a collectivity, communicating together in a voice louder than the sum of its parts. With his latest show, "Are We Here?," Kiernander engages the visitor in this vein, laying out the exhibition with a view to functional precision and theatrical effect, each work and its particular situation envisioned with care in relation to the others.

In many exhibitions, the viewer may walk along the wall, encountering one painting after another, then another wall, then another; here, to the contrary, the pieces operate in concert to draw the viewer, bodily, around the space in a sensuous peregrination that relies on visual theatre, peripheral vision and surprise. Where ordinarily you might enter the gallery and follow the long, rounded wall that curves away, north and west, Kiernander resists this impulse; instead, on the wall opposite he has placed a monumental diptych, *Glitch in the Matrix*, which beckons the visitor directly across the gallery space. Approaching and contemplating this commanding piece, the visitor eventually glances left, where *That's Us (Wild Combination)* hangs, a dramatic, brightly coloured work—or right, toward another large work. Either way, the long, curved wall, upon which are a dramatic sweep of a dozen small- to medium-size works in a disposition simultaneously rowdy and suave, asserts itself first in the peripheral vision and then in direct focus.

Certainly this long curve is the Outremont Gallery's standout



feature; the exhibiting artist's conundrum is how to use, and not be used by, this imposing element, and Kiernander negotiates the challenge adroitly. Indeed, certain works were created expressly in response to the curve, including several circular tondi, for example, each less than a foot in diameter.

Also in this formal vein are a couple of small mirrors—one of clear glass, another tinted green—affixed, respectively, on two pieces, *This Is How We Walk on the Moon* and *Another Dimension*. They are suggestive of oculars or peepholes, and the visitor's urge is to push up close and look "through," but of course all the viewer sees is her own eye—or, more accurately, its reflection. We gaze into mirrors so that we may know how we look, but the images they give back, while potent and perhaps even useful, are also inverted horizontally, a fundamental problem (if not exactly an inaccuracy).

In "Are We Here?," a similar, related problem recurs in several diptychs composed of a pair of images that mirror one another inexactly. In *Glitch in the Matrix*, which anchors the show, each of the diptych's two panels presents a structural or architectural matrix in browns and greys and more

delicate forms in lighter colours, a tableau similar to but inverted horizontally from that of the other panel. Indeed, the panel designs mirror one another, but imprecisely. Further, the left-hand image, unlike the right-hand canvas, is painted on linen (large unpainted areas make this obvious) and is slightly narrower. As such, what results is a mirroring not of the image but of the idea of the image. Two smaller diptychs, *The Chase* and *Work It*, evince a similar mirroring dynamic using comparable strategies: ideational mirroring and the linen-canvas binary.

As painting exhibitions go, "Are We Here?" is unusual in several respects. One of the biggest is that while most of the pieces stand on their own as artworks, some don't. Augmenting the ones that do are several monochromatic items, a strategy that Kiernander—who has a background in graphic design—began developing with "Désorientation," his 2017 show at the Maison des Arts de Laval in Laval, Quebec, where he grouped abstract paintings and rectangular monochrome panels together in arrangements linked by form, colour and position. Since then, Kiernander has approached exhibitions as singular units rather than



series of groupings. He did this with "In Free Fall," 2018, at the Maison de la Culture Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in Montreal, in which monochrome rectangles were positioned around the show. Here, as there, the monochromes appear throughout: rectangular panels as before, but also a couple of curved, irregular plywood pieces resembling brushstrokes.

Thus comprised, "Are We Here?" is less a straight-up exhibition than an installation, a conceptual machinery of ideas or impressions. The visual language of this machine is Kiernander's signature brand of formalist abstraction, in which gestures (swoops and squiggles) and edges (hard-taped, soft or ragged) contend with colours, shapes, fields and even the exposed canvas or linen support. Earlier in his career, Kiernander often painted from photographs, resulting in recognizable figurative objects. Since then, however, figurative elements have been pushed off the canvas, yet remain suggested in a sort of idea-space. In the tiny work *The Weight of Time*, for instance, a primordial form in subtle, earthen tones threatens to assume shape, but doesn't. In *Will Send Title Later*, we imagine we see a flower and stem against

1. Trevor Kiernander, *The Chase*, 2019, oil, acrylic, chalk pastel and oil pastel on canvas and linen, 36 x 60 inches. All photos: Guy L'Heureux. All images courtesy the artist.

2. Will Send *Title Later*, 2019, oil, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas, 84 x 60 inches.

3. Hassaan Ashraf, *1*, 2019, text-based installation. All images courtesy La Maison des Artistes Visuels Francophones, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

VISUAL ART

“Lines of Difference: The Art of Translating Islam”

by Cliff Eyland

a backdrop of foliage, but nothing else in the work invites us further in that direction. Lacking in figurative objects, Kiernander’s works are still replete with forms in a continual regime of construction and reconstruction, anarchic yet somehow harmonious propositions in formal, spatial and colour relationships that play within and among the exhibition’s constituent works.

Kiernander’s exhibition titles—“Are We Here?,” “Désorientation” and “In Free Fall”—tend to evoke a sense of the ontological, and, indeed, this artist’s work is as much about being a painter—about his process, his choices—as about the paintings themselves. His works certainly evoke consistent concerns and even exhibit a certain look, but, more, they are about seeking and creating new ways to react and relate to art. In the milieu of contemporary painting in Canada today, it isn’t easy to stand apart from the relentless individualism of the market system—the lone artist, the studio, the dealer, the sale—and, as such, a certain inconsequentiality always looms. Though Kiernander is surely as concerned with practical considerations as any painter must be, through his particular strategies and approach he continues to prove that consequence in abstract painting remains very much within reach. ■

“Trevor Kiernander—Are We Here?” was exhibited at Galerie d’art d’Outremont, Outremont (Montreal), from March 7 to April 28, 2019.

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We have come a long way from identifying Canadian art with the Group of Seven and presentational Inuit sculpture, but clichés die hard. Happily, the young artists in this exhibition, assembled by the bright new curator Noor Bhangu, are up for the fight.

Challenges to the hegemony of Canadian art clichés have already figured in feminist, socialist and conceptual art since at least the 1960s, but more explicit critiques of the whiteness of Canada’s culture have become common only recently in new exhibitions such as this one and in First Nations art. I’m white and even I’m tired of Canada’s lazy hidden assumptions of white superiority. Many of us are tired of the mainstream, but these young artists are menaced by it every day. Racism, after all, is as Canadian as Wayne Gretzky.

Canada’s official multiculturalism policy, forged in the optimism of Expo ’67, looks shiny on paper, but pressure on immigrants and First Nations to assimilate themselves into British colonial modalities remains. Islamic artists from places such as Pakistan and India have endured British colonialism

since long before Canada existed as a country. A Pakistani friend of mine who recently immigrated to Canada, for example, fluent in seven languages, gets frustrated when Canadians compliment him on his command of English even after he tells them that English is his first language. At birth he was granted both the gift of a British heritage, like white Canadians, and the curse of British condescension.

Fraught relations between mainstream Canadian culture and contemporary Islamic art are highlighted in this show by Hazim Ismail’s and Hassaan Ashraf’s refusal to translate their texts for English- and French-speaking audiences. Avant-garde provocation lives, as this show, called “The Art of Translating Islam,” literally includes untranslated material. Noor attributes this to “a common desire to simultaneously translate and obscure cultural nuances from the controlling vision of a general public.” Contemporary Islamic avant-garde can taunt its audience.

These artists have attended contemporary art schools and work with international art-world forms and techniques, which makes me wonder about Islamic artists in