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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID URBAN

The Miraculous Questions of Looking

BY ROBERT ENRIGHT

In the interview that follows, David Urban talks early on about an encounter he and his wife, the painter Gina Rorai, had with Titian's *Ecce Homo* in the St. Louis Museum of Art. It is one of those encounters that represents a species of aesthetic epiphany. In considering the choice Titian made to situate the figure of Christ at the centre of the painting, and then to almost dematerialize him, Urban is able to discern a good deal about the relationship between composition and meaning. For Urban, Titian's radical reconfiguring of conventional composition suggests something of the nature of transcendence, and becomes a useful extension of his own questions concerning the way the language of painting embodies intent.

In 2001 Urban produced his own tribute to Titian's painting, to which he assigned an English title. *Here Is the Man* similarly engages significant questions that emerge from compositional choices; it also addresses the connection between symbolic value and painterly density. As is always the case with Urban, who is a passionate and intelligent interrogator of Modernism, it pushes him further into a dialogue with the pictorial tradition to which he so imaginatively assigns himself.

The engagement with Titian's *Ecce Homo* marks his wrestling with a formidable angel. *Here Is the Man* is a painting of sombre weight, almost ecclesiastical beauty and flawless composition. It shows a fragmented cross, sitting a little off-centre in a space that has either opened up or is in the process of

being filled in. The ambiguity is not unwelcome. "Right now, I'm attempting to embrace all the contradictory impulses," Urban says in the following interview, "to make images that are simultaneously lucid and indefinite, light and dark." His intention is a blueprint for his achievement. In *Here Is the Man*, the cruciform shape is the colour of dried blood and is surrounded by a dappled surface of red, blue and orange, as if someone were knitting a sweater, badly. The impulse in looking at it is to make connections of your own and I found myself committing an act of imaginative carpentry by combining the two rust-coloured shards so that they complete the asymmetrical cross. In a work that has patches of flesh-coloured pigment circulating at its core, these fragments are the symbolic remnants of the body of Christ.

They are also integral to the composition. Urban has said that if a painting is working, at a certain point it completes itself. That painterly predestination is evident does, or how, but you have absolute faith that it will do something amazing.

preceding pages, left: *Here is the Man*, 2001, oil on canvas, 236.5 x 198 cm. Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

right: Installation, "Parts of a World," McMaster Museum of Art, January 5 to February 14, 1999.

Urban is always looking to the past as a way of discovering how to move into the future. The list of painters with whom he shares a discernible affinity is a tribute to pictorial innovation: Cézanne, Rouault, Marsden Hartley, Philip Guston, Harold Klunder, Terry Winters and Jonathan Lasker. When he asks himself, Can I imagine a late Guston without imagery? he poses a question that his own painting makes rhetorical. Urban's compulsion is to use painters who came before him as mediums through which to investigate directions he might take. His respect for the tradition of painting is equal part religious calling and aesthetic commitment. In two recent works from 2001, you can see clearly the efficacy of his serious play inside the modernist carnival. *Lost* is a reworking of Cézanne, in which the leaning to and fro of bathers and trees is exquisitely abstracted. Then in *Descending Figure*, 2001, he revisits Cézanne, but invites Hartley as well, and perhaps

The job of an artist is to connect with something that's valuable and somehow drag it into the future. It's not a matter of recreating it; it's a matter of honouring it in a way that it becomes viable again.

in *Here Is the Man*. If you cover over the larger rust mark that sits at a 45-degree angle on the lower left-hand side of the work, what becomes immediately apparent is that the eye escapes and the entire composition falls apart. Urban's sense of composition has about it an uncompromising rightness. What that means is that he is adept, not only at knowing when to make a mark, but also when not to make one. In *The Region November*, 1996, he orchestrates a skillful composition in which his signature loops and geometric shapes vibrate on an ivory ground; the painting is able to create the simultaneous feeling of a sense of play and a sense of gravitas. In *The Literary Man*, done a year later, he makes a painting that is compositionally audacious, maybe even reckless, so top-heavy you think it will fall over; but it doesn't. It has the awkward grace of some kind of early modernist machine, as if Tinguely started out doing prototypes in paint. You don't know what this machine he extends an invitation to Yves Klein, or maybe a youthful Borduas, to activate some framed white grounds. These are irresistible combinations of self and other; what they add up to are dazzling paintings.

In an interview published in the catalogue for his 1998 exhibition "Parts of a World," Urban referred to some of the painters with whom he has been carrying on a continuous dialogue on the nature of painting. His assessment of Matisse summarized the French master's style as being nothing but "the miraculous question of looking." It is almost a rule when one artist admires another that a trace of the autobiographical adheres to the observation. With a change in number—to the miraculous "questions" of looking—Urban's phrasing of Matisse's gift functions equally well as a description of the range and achievement of his own work.

David Urban was interviewed in his Toronto studio by Robert Enright in February 2001.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *In an earlier conversation you told me that your paintings were almost too happy, that they weren't fraught with the weight of experience. How do you instil a sense of that weight if it isn't part of your life?*

DAVID URBAN: As a painter there's only one thing you can do to speed up the process, and that's to look at the achievements and the wisdom of other painters. You can almost talk about a "late" style in painting from the Renaissance to the present. If you look at late Titian, Velásquez, Goya, and then in more recent history, Monet, Bonnard and Cézanne—they all developed styles that art historians told us came about because they couldn't see properly. But as a painter you recognize instead that it's a shift into this area of profound knowledge. I realized this when we were in St. Louis looking at a Titian painting called *Ecce Homo*, in which the brutes are presenting Christ. It's a strange composition because Christ is right in the middle of the painting; it's anti-compositional in that the subject of the painting is almost not even there. He's blurred. I realized that's because he's sacred, and the proposition the painting is making is that sacredness is invisibility, obfuscation, or not knowing. That's what all these painters did in their late work. They tied the physiological and spiritual aspect of painting together iconographically. They devised ways of picturing the conundrum of existence and, of course, your feelings about the world intensify as you grow older and everything becomes more precious. Just having a child has been explosive for me in that way. I mean, you're living at one scale and then all of a sudden you're living at another. You can't say you weren't living before, but in a sense the scales shift and somehow you have to accommodate that in painting.

BC: *So looking at other painters allows you to invest weight in your paintings? What's the painterly language you use to bring that heft?*

DU: I'd like it to be almost as if the forms have personalities and that each of the elements has a place that's natural. It's hard to describe rightness in painting, except to say that you feel the relationship. Mondrian was the great philosopher of that kind of thinking in painting. His subject was freedom but his vocabulary could be construed as being the opposite of that, almost calculated or predetermined. Clyfford Still did the same thing. Also, there's a brutal quality in Still's work. The elements are all cleanly delineated and they all stand apart from each other. It's almost as if the whole phrase is parsed and everything is set up in a certain way so you can see very clearly how the painting functions.

BC: *Still is uncompromising. He's the most ruthless painter as far as the audience goes because he wants control and he doesn't want to give you anything.*

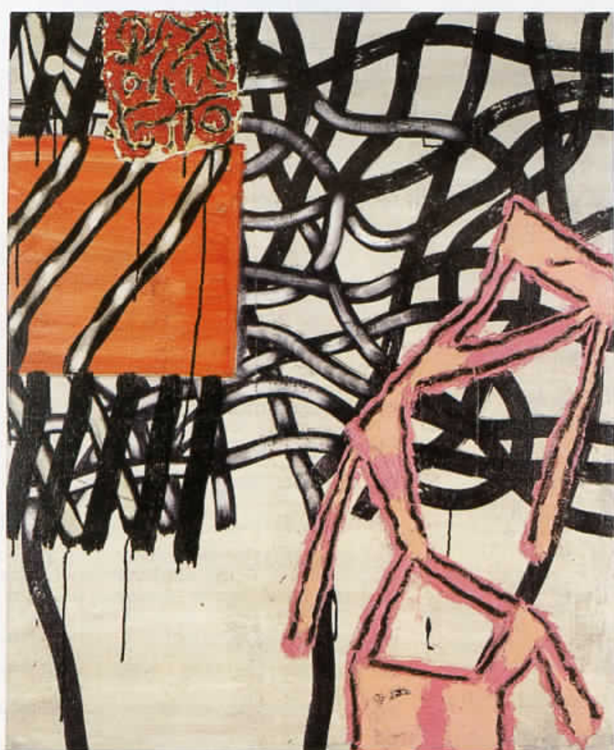
DU: Well, that in itself is a form of extreme generosity, in the sense that his obsessiveness is completely pictorial. It's not ideological obsessiveness, or contrived fussiness. It's genuine fanaticism about the ability of pictorial matter to communicate. He's just completely sure that what he's doing is powerful. Of course, you can convince yourself of these things as a painter, you have a mantra in your head saying, this is meaningful. You start to wonder, especially in the culture now, how things are valued and how they're received, because ultimately the social meaning of a painting is negotiated with the public. But when you read Clyfford Still's writing, he would say things like beware anybody who misuses my paintings because the wrath of the work will descend on you.

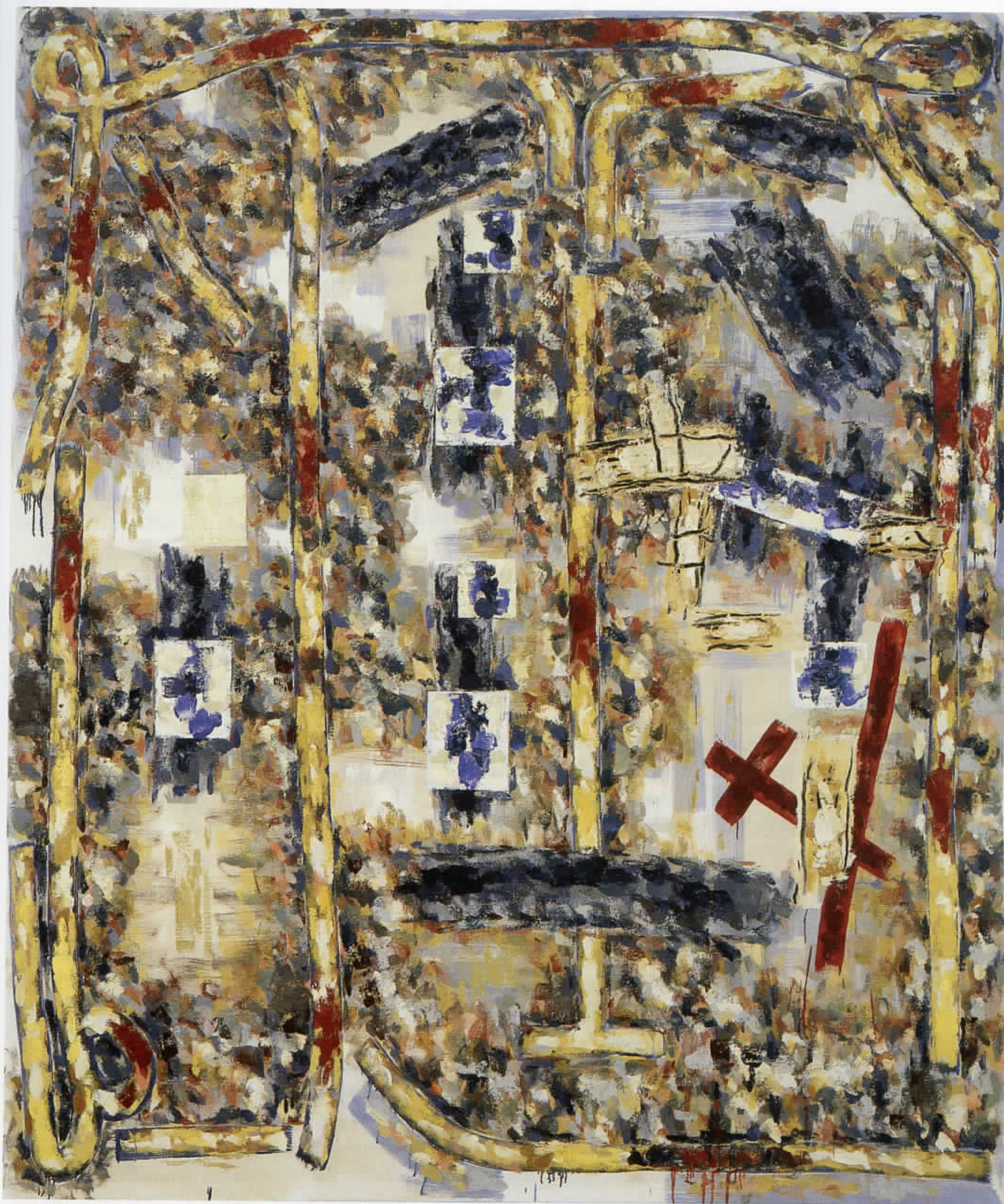
BC: *It sounds a little bit like the Old Testament.*

DU: Yeah, and it's a little bit of Samuel Jackson's *Pulp Fiction* as well. I find that really endearing and very valuable because now we assume that the opposite is true: that it's all meaningless and that abstract painting is *just* abstract painting. But why should we settle for a vision of art that is not transcendental and does not have aspirations beyond what we've been taught? If you read the language of film criticism and compare it to a visual art journal, it's as if the language is truncated. We settle for less. An abstract painter today can make fun of how bad Clyfford Still's paintings looked, or they take a motif of '70s wallpaper and make it into a statement that somehow emasculates the grand hierarchy of the Abstract Expressionists. I just think that's so boring. Those subjects aren't worthy of painting. Write a poem or find another medium for those ideas because to me they're linguistic, they're not painterly. With people like Still you see the last great tenacity of a fantastic tradition and that's our greatest asset in painting right now. It's all we have. So how do we go forward? Well, we look at those people and we look at what they believed in and what they said, and we ask, what is it physically about the way their work was made that enables us to still find this faith in communication?

following page, top: *Human Geometry #5*, 1995, oil on canvas, 39 x 32." Private Collection, Calgary. Courtesy Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary.

lower: *The Region November*, 1996, oil on canvas, 84 x 72." Collection: National Gallery of Canada.





BC: What does this faith have to do with scale?

DU: I'm trying to do paintings of different scales, but I suppose I find that large-scale paintings are where I'm most myself, where I can express myself most fully. The small ones challenge that notion. Also, I've become more interested in figures like Cézanne, early Mondrian, Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley. These are people who were making work that was very clearly connected to certain pictorial traditions—landscape and still life painting—who then took those first steps into a kind of abstraction. I find that a really fertile area right now. I've started exploring different scales because that factor is a big part of how those paintings work. That minute stroke has a very specific relationship with the viewer. It's the only way to get those things; you can't use a contemporary technique like airbrush and communicate those ideas. To me, the job of an artist is to connect with something that's valuable and somehow drag it into the future. It's not a matter of recreating it; it's a matter of honouring it in a way that it becomes viable again. I think as artists you feel these things are completely alive and they're permanently relevant.

preceding page: *Descending Figure*, 2001, oil on canvas, 236.5 x 198 cm. Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

BC: I want to inquire into this process of retrieval. You describe those shifts when representation or figuration begins to become something else. Do you look for those interstices, for those moments when things begin to declare themselves?

DU: Absolutely, because those moments are more provocative and when something really fundamental is happening. If you think of Miles Davis, when he had his quintet with Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter and Tony Williams—what planets aligned to create that moment? Clearly those guys knew the shift was occurring when they were playing. It's so palpable in the music that it's still hair-raising when you listen to it today. In a sense, some of their innovations have been codified and have become useful parts of the tradition. But what a lot of people have missed out on is the sense of friction and discovery present in that music. I think it arises out of an attempt to create something new.

BC: With someone like Marsden Hartley, were those always awkward intervals when it wasn't clear what was happening? Are you also interested in the fact that it's unresolved?

DU: Well, that awkwardness is a sign of humanity and I'm very interested in that in painting. Who are the painters who are most human? I don't want to make generalizations, but certainly the late work of Philip Guston does something that collectively we recognize as being very human. You can have your idea of something and then you have the physical reality of it. How willing are you to make those limitations the subject of your work? And to me the great example is Matisse. At the Barnes exhibition here in Toronto you saw a lot of paintings where he was coasting, but I'd rather watch Matisse coast than just about anything else. The standard line about him is that he's elegant and there's a flourish of decorative impulses in his work. But when you look at the great paintings, they're so incredibly awkward. With Matisse you may remember a painting as being the most elegant, beautiful thing in the world. But when you confront it as a thing, when you look at it in terms of painting, it's almost brutal. What's so clear is the thought, the recognition that everything counts and that what's taking place is almost a life-or-death struggle. It's the struggle of attempting to create meaning. And that's serious. With Matisse, it's clear when he goes after the meaning that he's willing to forego all his incredible technical expertise and all his preconceived notions about how colour works.

BC: When he wanted to do a perfect drawing, there was just no argument.

DU: There you go. Language fails when we start talking about these things because the word *perfection* doesn't accommodate the fact that the most perfect things are actually quite flawed or human. That's why we're so enthralled with Matisse's line drawings.

BC: It's what Robert Browning was getting at in his poem about Andrea del Sarto, the perfect painter whose work evidenced no soul. He was dealing with the contradiction inherent in the notion of perfection. If you achieve it, you're in deep shit.

DU: That's right. I feel the late de Koonings have been misunderstood in that way. He did something very radical in those paintings. Their surface looks completely lucid and absolutely realized. In fact, when you look at the photos of how the work was created, it was made in exactly the same way. Except that he scraped the paintings down when he revised them, as opposed to letting the crusty bits build up, which gave them the signature mark of his early work. So those works pose the interesting question of do you need that garbled facture in a painting in order for us to read the struggle in certain ways? That's something I'm doing in this work. There are moments of clean, direct

thought, and then there are moments where you can see there's been some hesitancy or a kind of stammering.

BC: *You clearly look at a lot of painting and think about the implications of mark-making. Does that carry with it any anxiety?*

DU: I always think about T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" because it articulates so clearly the job you have as an artist. Central to that is the paradox that you're most yourself when you're most under the spell of somebody else. How does that happen? I think in a general cultural sense we've almost become afraid of that and superficially at least we demand from artists that there be clear breaks from any visible tradition, and this has driven the art market recently. It's boxed us into this place where an obsession with newness has actually taken the place of a desire to make things that are real.

I'll work on a painting for a certain amount of time and then it starts feeling like a place rather than a painting. When it becomes a place, I know it's working.

BC: *What propels the energy in the piece for you?*

DU: When I was young, I was making the transition from learning how to print to learning how to write—which to me had a connotation of the glamour of the adult world, where all of a sudden you link your letters up. Somehow my work is connected to that moment. I'm not sure how but there's a sense of making the transition from a kind of inchoate and primitive form into something that has elegance and glamour and transcendental aspiration. In some sense, that turning over is connected to signing my name. It comes out of that basic moment of writing. We've lost that sense of writing. I've looked at old family letters and everybody scripted so eloquently. This is when we all had the quill pens.

BC: *When you made a mark, it mattered.*

DU: And everybody had this ability. Then suddenly writing became almost secondary. Now we've moved into a phase where we've basically eliminated it altogether, where everything is cut-and-paste in a virtual way. But what do those things mean to us now and how are they affecting our ability to look at things? We're losing our connection collectively with writing; I don't just mean thinking through writing, but with script, with actually making writing. I was at an antique market, looking at academic paintings from the '50s and '60s, Sunday painters you can buy for $50, and they are operating at a technical level that's 10 times what a lot of professional artists are working at now. I'd rather buy a sketch by an unknown person who had greater understanding of visual nature than some of today's esteemed artists. It's a very strange thing and in some sense I'm trying to recover some qualities of painting and art that are not being honoured. I'm not sure how to put it because I feel that people want certain things from painting and I think artists also feel these connections very strongly. But they're not very strong in our culture right now. It relates to what I was saying about Clyfford Still. His desire for certainty plays a big part in being able to think about making paintings in that way.

BC: *You have made paintings which have a strange pictorial volume—*trompe l'oeil *exactly—but that have a Philip Guston quality. Is that something you're after?*

DU: I think Guston called it a "thingness." That's partly related to my interest in Marsden Hartley too and in Mondrian's early ocean and pier work, where there's a sense of connecting to real things. In my earlier work, I'd take the turpentine and hollow out the forms to give it dimensionality. Now it is literally *trompe l'oeil* because the dimensionality is painted into the picture. One of the hard things for me is realizing that the work I make now is going to be very, very difficult and that it's going to take a lot of time. I've been working on

these paintings for about two years now. They're completely at odds with what I was doing earlier, even though it's the same iconography. It's just translated into a different method. Gina said to me once that I needn't worry about unifying my work because it's unified by virtue of the fact that I made it.

BC: *Gerhard Richter is the only painter who seems to be able to be 25 different painters. Nobody else has been able to pull off such radical shifts.*

DU: Yes, and ultimately when you think about his work, it's unified by sensibility. What do people respond to in painting? There was a Eugène Leroy show on recently at The Power Plant and the paintings had some of this almost numinous quality. Harold Klunder's work in the late '80s and early '90s had some of it as well. But what is it about that blurring and breaking apart that provokes us in a certain way? I've almost become obsessed with how that works. These paintings feel like they can accommodate the vision of the world that I have. I don't identify with the person in those earlier paintings any more.

BC: *I keep thinking how your recent paintings remind me of something but maybe they're just reminding me how beautiful paintings can be.*

Hope, 1998, oil on canvas, 20 x 16." Collection: Michael and Sonia Koerner, Toronto. Courtesy Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto.

facing page: *Lost*, 2001, oil on canvas, 236.5 cm x 198 cm. Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

DU: I think that sense of reminiscence when you're looking at the work is actually a quality of Rouault's that I've been obsessed with. Now there's an interesting painter. Holy smokes. I was talking to a friend of ours who said that in Europe he's not the forgotten painter he is here. He's still very active in the hearts of a lot of people.

BC: He's been trapped inside a Symbolist framework. We tend to regard his painting of the crucified Christ as being about the crucifixion rather than being about the way he makes a painting.

DU: One of the critics said that he had the curse of being a religious painter in a secular age. It truly has panned out that way, but not for those of us who know he's totally current and provocative.

BC: I think of a number of European painters who obviously learned a great deal from him.

DU: That's right. He's at the centre of that idea of the conflation of paint and spiritual matter. The paint has to be magnificently alive; otherwise it's just paint. When you look at his late works, they're almost geological, something that could be cut out of the earth.

BC: They're tectonic.

DU: That's right. But they have a truthfulness to them. They're just great paintings.

BC: One of the problems that arises when you make good paintings is the burden of that self-accomplishment.

DU: I'm haunted by how little I've accomplished. It's like Shakespeare. You can't skirt the shadow. When Gina and I looked at the Barnes's Bathers [*Les grandes baigneuses*, 1900-05], which is the best of Cézanne's paintings on that subject, the hairs on my arms were standing up. It was almost a prophecy of the entire history of modern painting. It's still the strongest and most modern statement because all the contradictory impulses are there. The sense of architecture and the sense of dissolve; a real form up against a sense of imaginary form. It's like all those paintings in particular had an imaginary sense. For me they feed into this question of how can I make abstract paintings? Is it possible to make phenomenological abstraction? Because if that's the highest achievement in painting thus far, then how do you proceed? The answer is in those Bathers paintings because they're fabrications. They're not looking at a motif and yet they're based on the knowledge that comes from looking. That's why I've said my relationship with nature has become absolutely central to what I'm doing now, in the sense that I want the paintings to be natural.

BC: I'm struck by how passionately you talk about painting and how much it matters to you.

DU: When you talk about it, a lot of people don't know what to say. But what we're doing now is natural because this is what we do, this is how we do it, this is what our life brings. We talk about painters and we get all excited. I feel this is true about all abstract painters. There's this connection with figuration because abstraction really is a kind of subsidiary, a stream off to the side. I think great things happen within it and it has tremendous potential. It's like something Sean Scully said: "It's ridiculous when people say Abstract Expressionism is over because I was 30 years old when Barnett Newman was still painting." These people made certain propositions and it's up to us to keep the ball rolling and to bring certain things forward.

BC: I'm interested in the conversation that goes on in your work between structure and gesture. Because sometimes the paintings are very tight. You've talked about painting being like brick-building but sometimes the energy of the painting seems to be implosive rather than explosive.

DU: Well, you talk about the problem of the mark in my painting as opposed to Gina's painting where there are no problems anywhere because the mark comes directly out of Cézanne. It's not related to building an image but building a thing that is an image. So these paintings are impacted with thousands of marks. I'll give you an example. I'll work on a painting for a certain amount of time and then it starts feeling like a place rather than a painting. When it becomes a place, I know it's working. For me that's through juxtapositions of colour so the whole thing starts to breathe, there's a shimmering or some kind of motion within the image that's alive. That's when I feel there's something to work with. This is not related to some of the earlier painting that was concerned with creating what was almost a calligraphic image.

BC: I've often wondered if that's a European way of making a painting as opposed to an American one. There seems to be something about the freedom to make a mark as opposed to the necessity to make a mark, which describes the difference between European and American painting.

DU: The subject of freedom in relation to the mark is American. Or is it the relation to self? The self figures so prominently in American abstraction.

BC: Maybe what I'm saying is that tradition meant more for Europeans for a while. I think that obviously is evolving too, but there's a more potent tradition of American painting now that has to be dealt with. And the European thing has to be "archaeologized" and recovered, because the Europeans are the forgotten painters.

DU: Rouault is a perfect example. In a sense, Barnett Newman did make a radical break, but where did he go as a painter after that? I think Philip Taaffe is one of the few and he's found a completely unique way to do it, which is actually the opposite of what Newman's paintings do visually. So that's an authentic continuation of Newman. But in another way, a painter like me needs a connection with materiality and how the individual connects with the making of art. Newman, although I loved him, is a dead end. So I'm looking at the cinematic quality of Newman, but how do I bring that together with Rouault and his fussy religious paintings? How can those things come together? I think I agree completely with that notion of Europe, of looking back at the European precedence in terms of revitalization.

BC: Someone like Robert Murray picked up Newman but not as a painter. He made steel sculptures.

DU: And those are very silent and grand in the same way. It's really interesting when you start looking at how the legacy of a certain artist plays itself out, and which people are legitimately extending that legacy. You probably watched the series Ken Burns did on jazz.

BC: The criticism of the Burns history was that it was far too narrow.

DU: It took me a while to figure it out, but the problem is that Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch basically hijacked this series. They have their agenda; Wynton is a great, great trumpet player and he's a man on a mission and I respect that. But what they tried to do was to define jazz, in a sense. We've been trying to define what good painting is versus what irrelevant painting is. What Burns did is to look at Miles Davis and say, he was great when he was acoustic but when he started getting into funk and rock 'n roll, it diluted his genius and the impact of his music. Then I thought, wait a second, jazz invented rock and funk, all that stuff came out of jazz, so if jazz wants to get funky or put in some heavy metal, we should respect that, since it all came out of the same thing. It's actually absurd. In that sense, the legitimate children of these great traditions are actually the ones whom you don't even recognize. That's why people listen to Miles Davis now and say, oh, in the '70s he lost it. If you listen to early New Orleans parade music, it sounds like Miles Davis in 1975 with three guitars, all the funk rhythms, all the interlapping things—with everything going off in its own direction. I suppose the same thing is happening now in painting. The example of Newman and Taaffe is apt in this sense. These things are being continued and they will flourish. It's just that they're going to assume different forms from what we might have expected.

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BC: So what do you do with Gerald Ferguson in Halifax? It seems to me, when you mention Taaffe and his tradition, that Ferguson is trying to find a way to use pattern to say something about painting and not just about the application of a motif.

DU: I think of Gerry Ferguson's work as being about landscape and place in a way that Taaffe's work isn't. But Ferguson is such a scholar and he knows so much about painting. I don't know what it is about his work that I

find authentic as opposed to that of some of his students who use a similar methodology and whose work strikes me as being too conceptual or not grounded. I think it has to do with the sheer amount of knowledge and love that's manifested and that somehow comes out in the work in a different way. Maybe it's another example of the actual method being at odds with the sentiment of the work. What there has to be for painting to work is what Wallace Stevens would call "vital change." That's really what painting has to have; it has to be transformative.

BC: Have you deliberately expanded your palette to get more colour into the painting?

DU: Colour is just an enormous issue. You can't even fathom it, in a sense. Gina's always had a relationship with colour that I envy. She's always had a very beautiful and very diverse palette. Up until a few years ago, my work didn't have that richness or that expressive breadth, so I've been almost systematically trying to expand my relationship with colour.

BC: I look at certain of your new works and think of Turner and his light.

DU: They do relate. It has to be the bare ground of the painter, but it's also spatial; it's light but it's also painted. So it's all those things. In a way, Turner was not so much about picturing in nature as he was about giving us our feeling of nature. That's something that I try to do in abstract art: give the feeling of what it is to live, which is often related to our experience of colour and landscape and our experience of colour through memory and all those things.

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BC: But are you thinking metaphorically when you're painting?

DU: I'm thinking as little as I can when I'm painting.

BC: That's probably a good thing. It is possible to think far too precisely on the painting event. It's Hamlet's malady.

DU: I have one friend in particular whom I respect so much as a thinker and who has the potential to be a great painter. But he's completely stifled himself by over-thinking. Just pre-determining to the nth degree exactly what it is he's doing, what every mark means.

BC: That doesn't allow for much serendipity in the act of the painting.

DU: And the whole point of visual art for me is in opposition to language, inasmuch as we use language to

make it meaningful culturally. Dave Hickey quotes Jeremy Rolf, saying there's an element of positivity to the visible world that completely eludes the historicity of language. To me, that sense of positivity in the visual world, the sense of positivity in music as being ahistorical and alinguistic, is huge. You can't *not* believe in that. One of the funny things about a lot of the stuff that we see now is that it's made by people who don't believe in it. It doesn't work because they don't understand that the medium fundamentally is different. It's not linguistic, you can't force linguistic thought. It has to be expressed. A lot of video artists like Bill Viola or Stan Douglas do really good work because they understand that first of all it has to be visual. What would Stan Douglas do without Hitchcock? And where would Bill Viola be without Renaissance painting?

BC: *What about virtual space in painting?*

DU: I have a fear of virtual space. I grew up on Warner Brothers cartoons, they're so dynamic and beautiful. Now they use computer animation and can round out the objects and make these imaginary things exist in a very convincing space. I find it creepy, in the same way that I find children lost in computer games, blowing the heads off soldiers for five hours, very, very creepy. I'm making all the arguments that were made against cartoons 30 years ago and I know that. But I do think there's been a shift and that the potential for loss of reality in the generation coming up is very real. After five years of age apparently you start to differentiate between an imaginary environment and a real one.

BC: *But for the video-game generation the danger is that the real one never comes alive.*

DU: Exactly, and the boundaries between those two are not clear. Anyway, there's something in my personality that I feel is almost at odds with abstract painting. People have described abstract painting as a virtual world. But the abstract painting I love always has a sense of connectedness to the world; it's not about creating something other than that. Although, a painter like Jonathan Lasker seems to be authentically commenting on virtuality and all those things. But I really don't like much virtual painting. It seems to me entirely superficial. It's not good abstract painting and it's not good cartooning. It should at least do one of them well.

BC: *There's something about it that's almost viral. I can't put my finger on what it is but it seems to be contagious and they haven't come up with a cure for it yet.*

DU: Standing close to those paintings, you can catch some of that virus. It's perfect work to characterize the project of young abstract painters, that hot painter stuff. They all have in common a feeling of being alienated before you even get to the painting. Before you can even really experience the work, there is an attitude built into it. This is what the world is: you come to me on those terms and I spit back something even more violent than you could have imagined. I just find that terribly insulting. They want to cut off the debate before it even happens because they say the work's about negation and about emptiness. So, when you say you feel empty when you look at it, you're reinforcing how perfect it is.

BC: *So it's a tautology of boredom. My problem is that I don't know how to look at this work, how to engage it. I keep wanting to be engaged and it pisses me off when I'm not.*

DU: I think the right reaction is to be angry. We're in danger of losing that human connection. I want to be exhilarated, I want the feelings I get when I see a great concert and I feel as if the bandstand lifted. But there are things that come out of perceptual painting that are just transfixing because you get caught up in asking what is real. All the big questions can be engaged through looking at this kind of painting. It just makes me so sad when people say that realistic painting is finished because when you engage in it on the highest levels, as Cézanne did in the late paintings, they're mind-boggling. They're almost incomprehensible. They're permanently radical and that's what any good painting does. It makes a question out of looking and it makes looking a pleasure at the same time. I've come to realize there is something painful about this process—and perhaps this goes some way in explaining its current disfavour. There must be a continuous attempt at understanding and yet these images remain mysterious—they are emblems of a kind of serene and troubling autonomy. In one of his last poems, Stevens wrote about a golden bird that sang "a foreign song." I used to wonder why that bird didn't sing for us. It didn't sing for us because it is *like* us. We offer up these images in the hope that we may understand. ■

facing page: *The Literary Man*, 1997, oil on canvas, 192 x 137 cm. Private Collection, Vancouver. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montréal.