



David Urban...Leading Canadian Painter...Art Beyond The Parameters Of Canvas

Meraj Dhir for FashCam

On a sunny afternoon this past week I ventured into the heart of Toronto's bustling financial district to visit a hedge fund manager friend of mine. While waiting for him in the austere atrium of that megalith of high modernism, the Mies van der Rohe designed TD Tower, I noticed this amazing, monumental work by Canadian artist, David Urban. I've been a fan of Mr. Urban's work for a while now and decided to take a few snapshots of the piece. While I was snapping my pics a gentleman out on his smoke break approached and struck up a conversation and we discussed the painting. We noted how Mr. Urban had introduced the human figure into this abstract, highly conceptual, anti-gravitational space. As we were chatting, the receptionist sitting at the desk joined in and expressed her adoration for the work as well. She informed us, that not only did the painting enliven and charge the sterile, monochromatic space of the atrium; it also had the added benefit of reflecting and dispersing light streaming in from the entrance. *"I love to look at this painting when I come to work every morning."* She said. *"My whole desk was shrouded in darkness before, but now I get so much more light throughout the day!"*

Let's take a moment to dig down into the formal operations of the work as I interpret them. The painting is organized broadly along intersecting diagonals. Eccentric vectors and rectilinear diagonals lead our eye across the surface of the canvas, simultaneously working in both centripetal and centrifugal directions and lend the surface a sort of Cezannean tautness and texture. Mr. Urban creates a truly pictorial space that nonetheless houses the human figure (indeed one can count three bodies). Dual strategies are at work in this canvas. On the one hand, the picture is strewn with musical motifs and iconography, instruments, an amplifier, and even writing, while on the other, clashing and intersecting bands of paint and the all-over compositional arrangement, visually express and capture the improvisatory quality of great jazz on a more abstract, purely visual level. As one's eye wanders through the work, or takes in the larger Gestalt, one experiences

something like a synesthetic effect where one sense modality, here vision, spills over into another sense modality, that of music and sound. We might think of this work as a pictorial exemplification of the artistic fecundity discovered by the jazz artist who attempts to exhaust the various musical permutations available within certain constraints, a set number of chord progressions, or parameters.

But what I'm especially fascinated by is Mr. Urban's introduction of the human figure within the overall architectonics of the work. The head of the central red figure occupies the picture's geometric centre, though perhaps not its attentional or pictorial centre. As any painter knows, once the human figure is introduced into any compositional arrangement it becomes a strong attentional node, drawing visual energies ineluctably towards it, threatening to arrest the viewer's gaze. As in life, so too in painting, stasis is death. Mr. Urban overcomes this problematic by virtuosically balancing and playing (indeed, as one might an instrument) with the visual energies and forces within the work. The red bands and hatch-marks, accented in places with white paint, create a compressed scaffolding that house the human body in an interminably ambiguous space. The rhythmic concatenation of line and planes –indeed rhythm may be one of Mr. Urban's greatest resources – guide and disperse the eye as the various orthogonals and larger blue planes waffle between suggesting depth and lying atop the surface of the canvas, further calling into question and destabilizing any equivocal apprehension of pictorial space. The restless visual scansion promoted by the picture is one of the great joys of viewing Mr. Urban's work. Moreover, it prevents the human body from working as a pure magnet for the eye.

I cannot help but think, as well, that the painting operates on tradition in particularly interesting ways. There are numerous suggestions in the work that the act of painting is coeval with that of composing music. Note how the two figures flanking the central one seem absorbed in, alternatively the act of painting and musical composition or how the left register of the picture depicts a large amplifier which is rhymed on the right by what might be a large, abstract easel painting, or even more suggestively, a window?



Canadian artist, David Urban

In one of the seminal treatises on the art of painting, *Della Pittura* (On Painting, written in 1435), Italian humanist and architect, Leon Battista Alberti wrote that a painting should operate “as a window” out onto the world. As if all at once, Alberti, writing at the height of the Italian Renaissance, would come to define the paradigm for all picture-making that was to follow. Think of the numerous assumptions housed by this metaphor of “painting-as-window”. Leave aside the obvious implications of a painting being a naturalistic view of the world. But the very idea that a painting organizes a view, that it is something framed and composed for an upright vertically orientated, standing spectator is also transmitted through Alberti's trope. And take the fact that it was during this period that one-point linear perspective was developed and enlisted to articulate a vanishing point within the work while simultaneously “placing” the viewer with a correspondingly ideal position that extended out into their own space. Or that a figure in the painting should function as a proxy for the viewer, attuning us to the orientation we should take before the work.

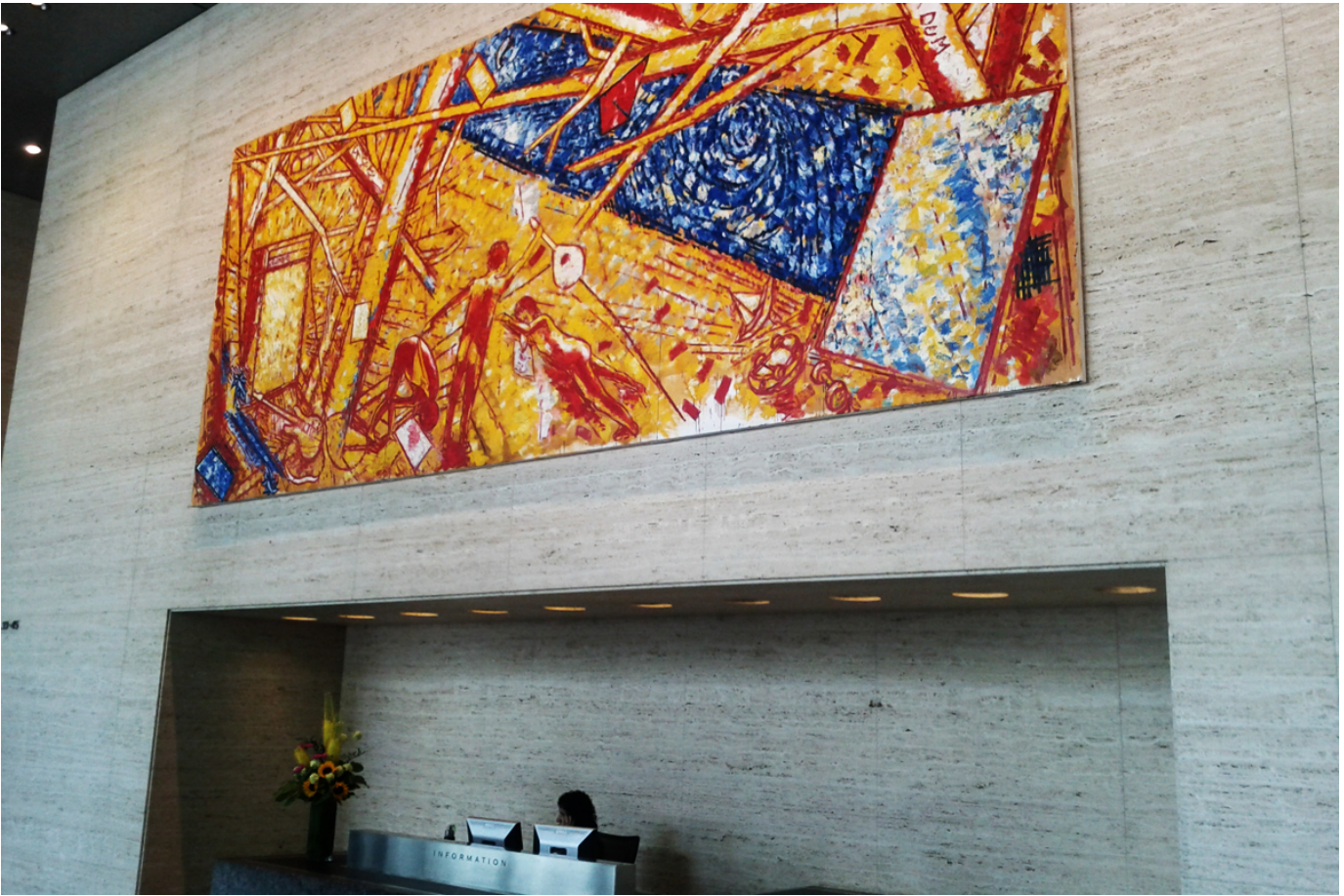


photo: Meraj Dhir

With the central placement of the human figure (do we see three figures or three arrangements of the same body engaged in different activities?) and the skewing of orthogonal and perspectival lines, Mr. Urban seems to simultaneously invoke this tradition, even as he deranges it. Mr. Urban's topsy-turvy, vertiginous picture space debases the tradition of the upright easel painting: the figure crouching over what might be a painting is engrossed, Pollock-like, with the canvas laid flat on the floor.

Perhaps we have here an allusion to what Leo Steinberg termed the "flatbed picture plane". Writing in the 1960's, Steinberg proposed a counter-narrative to both the Albertian trope of painting-as-window and formalism's emphasis on medium purity. He saw in the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, Pollock and Noland, a fundamentally new pictorial space that emphasized horizontality and heterogeneity, reading as much as perceiving, a literally and figuratively debased painterly space, that challenged Clement Greenberg's reigning narrative of medium specificity and pure opticality. For Steinberg, this new painterly space was as much conceptual as it was optical. He would use the metaphor of the 'flatbed' printing press as a means to retrospectively interpret art back until the time of Alberti and before.

In Mr. Urban's work, the viewer's own positionality before the picture is destabilized, thwarted, even called into question. Is the large rectangle of blue a literal citation of this metaphorical window, fluctuating here between figure and ground? I have not even begun to discuss Mr. Urban's use of colour, the rhyming of blue bands that extend and suggest a space beyond the parameters of the canvas, or the white highlights that further electrify the picture plane. But I am truly grateful for having come upon this painting in the place I did.

If you're ever in Toronto's high finance, Bay Street neighborhood, I strongly encourage you to take a peek into the atrium of the TD Tower. The ability of a work of art to so galvanize and enliven such a communal space is a significant achievement indeed.