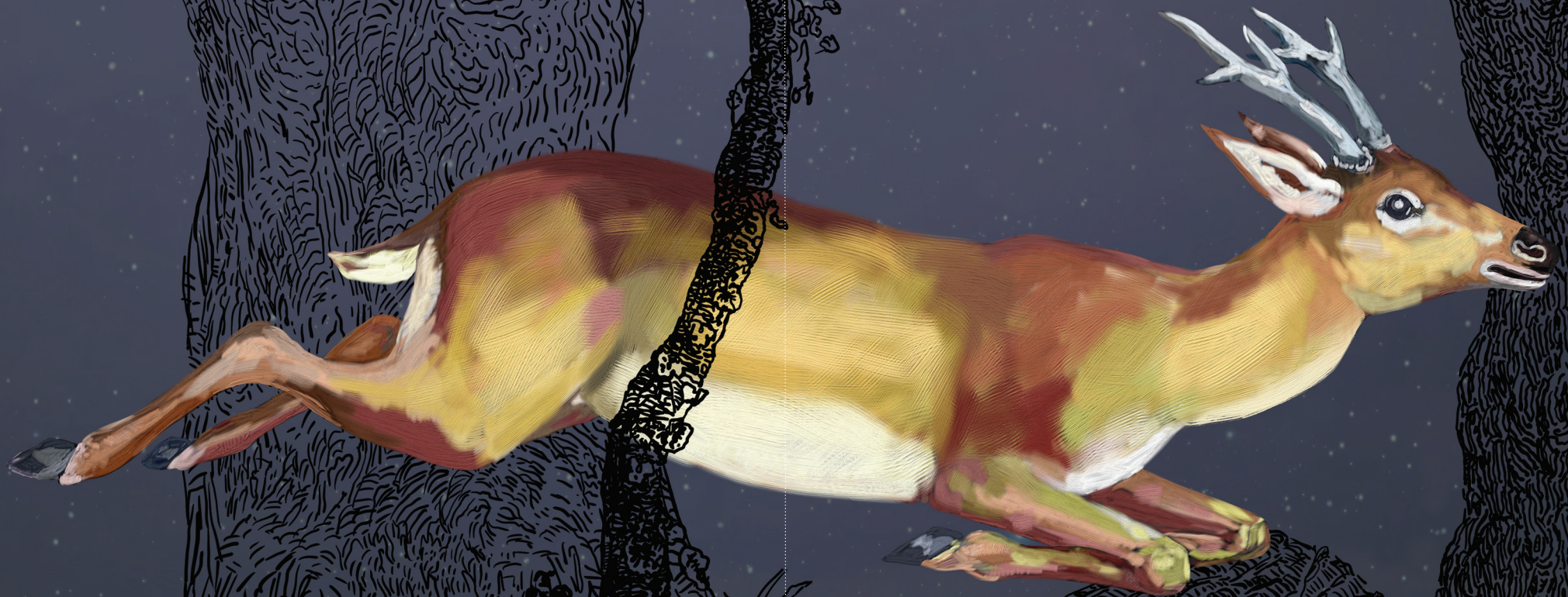


ALEX LIVINGSTON

DEER



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29 MARCH TO 8 MAY 2019 | STUDIO 21 | HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA



Deer Contemplating Mountain, 2019, archival digital print mounted on aluminum di-bond, 47" x 58.75"

DEER PAINTINGS

SARA HARTLAND-ROWE

A recent bus journey from Sydney, Nova Scotia to Halifax on a dull autumn morning. There are two dun-coloured deer grazing in a tawny field just beyond a copse of trees. Backs slightly arched, each stands on three delicate legs, one hoof poised to let them wheel and leap away if necessary. They are part of a scene—which also includes me, the other thirty-odd passengers, the driver, the narrow road, the intermittent rain-showers and the twenty-ton diesel bus. Together we form a shifting constellation of what Jane Bennet calls ‘vibrant matter’, ‘an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness’¹, that we too often reduce, all too easily beyond the rain-smeared bus windows, to ‘landscape’ or ‘nature’—the not-human, whose agency has been barely noticed and little acknowledged.

I have been thinking about Bennet’s ideas since first seeing Alex Livingston’s recent paintings. Before making the paintings, Livingston spent some time studying dioramas in museums of natural history, places, he says, where “the artificial [is collapsed] with the real to fashion a credible illusion.”² Dioramas suppose a tacit agreement between indexical fact—a stuffed creature of one sort or another, dried branches or a brittle-looking nest—and an abbreviated vision of landscape presented as if from an omnipotent, mobile eye: high on a ledge with the birds of prey, or in a bushy thicket with the forest-dwellers. Landscape is an imaginary space seen from without, a ‘controlled spatial and structural construct’³ that buttresses us from ‘wilderness’.

In the paintings Livingston has woven together a range of representational tactics (photography, drawing, engraving, and painterly mark-making) in digital paintings that shift readily from the narrative to the deconstructive and back again. All of the paintings feature a single deer in 'nature'—there's a mountain, a lake, a scene, so the title tells us, that takes place at night. The landscapes are seamless insofar as their space seems to recede, though the space could also be a shallow horizontal plane and a backdrop. The backgrounds of two of the paintings are undeniably photographic, are, in fact, photographs, while the drawn trees, grasses, logs and shrubs bristle with the repeating hatch-marks of 18th century engraving. The vegetation is 'see-through'—whatever field or form is behind it is visible through the gaps in the calligraphic drawing-marks that describe bark, leaves or branches, or the thousands of stars that dot the sky in *Night in the Forest*. The deer, though, are painterly, as is the grey-fawn hare that races alongside a bounding stag in *Night in the Forest*, their rounded bodies built from contour marks that blur and overlap. Livingston effortlessly integrates these very different representational modes, deliberately flaunting the artificiality of their relationship while simultaneously gathering the elements together. The coherence between deer and environment is completely persuasive—one feels affection for the creatures with their wide, gentle eyes and little herbivore lips almost upturned in a knowing smile. Each painting describes with great immediacy a creature in a landscape; each painting makes it clear that the landscape, the creature, and the painting are constructions. Barry Schwabsky, in his recent compendium of contemporary landscape painting, *Landscape Painting Now*, describes a genre of paintings to which Livingston's work might belong:

Paintings that highlight their own constructedness never let you take too seriously the old picture-as-window idea...[w]hatever you think you see in them, you're never just seeing through them; you have to be able to see how they make their propositions about reality...and...[their] propositions about poesis, which is simply the Greek word for making.⁴

But just as one has to challenge the veracity of the window-view, one must also interrogate poesis itself. A painted mark is far from autonomous, belonging to a battalion of encoded meanings: authenticity or ironic quotation, direct observation or mediated process, imagination or representation. As the image of the deer carries with it the weight of signification, so do the tools—painted mark, colour, surface and material—that make up its representation.

Livingston's construction of the paintings, their overt work of poesis, is one part of what these paintings propose. The other is what Stephen Shaviro describes as



Night in the Forest, 2019, archival digital print mounted on aluminum di-bond, 47" x 55.7"



On the Spot, 2019, archival digital print mounted on aluminum di-bond, 47" x 55.7"

the ability to “point to, and speak about [the] organised-world-without-us without thereby reducing it, yet again, to our own conceptual schemes.”⁵ The paintings are a complex of reference, recognition and resonance that kick up sufficient, dazzling visual dust for a different kind of understanding to slip in, as if through a gap in a rigorously maintained fence. Livingston does this, in part, via colour, that elusive, unfixable ‘polymorphous magical substance’⁶ that is the focus of Julia Kristeva’s seminal essay from 1982, *Giotto’s Joy*. In it she describes colour as perhaps the only entity that can enter the realm of signification without being entirely subsumed by it,

Chromatic joy is the indication of a deep ideological and subjective transformation; it discreetly enters the theoretical signified, distorting and doing violence to it without relinquishing it.⁷

This is useful, given that European thought for the past two hundred years has considered everything outside of human signification to be “inarticulate and inarticulable mush”⁸. If colour can assist the human subject to recognise, experience and describe a beyond-the-text world in a pre-language, pre-codified state, perhaps it makes space for what Shaviro and other speculative realists describe as the difficult but necessary task of ‘point[ing] to and speak[ing] about this organised-world-without-us’.

Two of the deer paintings take up this task overtly, using colour in order to do so; other paintings fulfill Shaviro’s difficult task by turning the viewer’s viewing of the scene onto themselves.

On the Spot is a remarkable painting, pulsating with interconnecting strands of textural, spatial and narrative information. A scrim of energetic marks shimmer, mirage-like, over the surface, simultaneously defining objects and space. There’s a doorless rustic cabin nestled into a valley; it is a kitsch icon, a marker of space and scale, and an emblem of human presence in, and its irrelevance to, the ‘organised-world-without-us’. The beautiful doe who poses in the centre of the painting does so as a human idea of animal presence—she is spotlit, in spite of the twilight tonality of the painting, and she looks directly at the viewer. Her legs are gracefully rooted on the ground. This is not a deer instinctively poised to flee, but a creature presenting herself to be scrutinised.

Gradually, one becomes aware of a disturbance in the fabric of the painting, subtle shifts of colour that hover somewhere above the deer’s head. They suggest that

she, too, has thoughts. She, like us, might have a 'credible illusion' of place, though not the same as ours and not directly knowable by us. As if from behind a hunter's blind of representation and intertextuality, Livingston quietly indicates the imaginary gap that lies between us and other entities: human experience on one side, the world-without-us on the other. Livingston sets up the landscape and the creature within it as one face of a double-sided mirror through which we dimly perceive that other creatures may be actants as well.

The colour disturbance in *On the Spot* has a corollary in the beautiful and gently comic *Buck Imagining Doe*, in which faint bubbles of colour effervesce in the air above a handsome, almost smirking buck, but *By Calm Water* and *Night in the Forest* work in a different way. As with all of the paintings, there is a powerful sense of both artifice and illusion. Because of the paintings' relationship to museum dioramas, the titles of both paintings become ambiguous: the protagonist—she who is in the forest or by calm water—could be the deer in the painting, or the (human) viewer observing a scene by a painted lake or an artificial night. *Night in the Forest* shows a gorgeously painted deer and an equally tactile hare leaping across the picture plane. Both creatures are full of character and life, yet one can almost see the well-placed bracket that would support them in a skilfully-crafted diorama. Most notably, however, *Night in the Forest*, and *By Calm Water* suggest a distinct evocation of time, not just because of the creatures' actions (leaping and strolling). A poignant sense of time and time-passing is created by the fragility and transparency of the drawn forms, trees, grasses, and fallen logs, that lie between the picture plane and a deep, recognisable, but nonetheless mysterious background. Their fragility and their artifice suggest that, unlike the distant sky, these delicate forms could be unmade as easily as they were made. If, in *On the Spot* and *Buck Imagines Doe*, Livingston shows us the semi-permeable barrier through which we can intuit the lives of other creatures, with *Night in the Forest* and *By Calm Water*, he opens the door to the possibility that we, watchers and watched alike, are little more than 'credible illusions' beneath the limitless horizons of the sky.

Ursula LeGuin's short story, *She Unnames Them*, describes a human 'she' who gives the other creatures back their names ("the generic appellations...and all the Linnaean qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like a tin can tied to a tail,") in order to rid herself, and them, of the 'clear barrier' that 'had stood between myself and them'⁹. 'Unnamed', the creatures feel far closer than before: 'how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day.'¹⁰



Buck Imagining Doe, 2019, archival digital print mounted on aluminum di-bond, 47" x 59.75"



Deer By Calm Water, 2019, archival digital print mounted on aluminum di-bond, 47" x 65.5"

Livingston acknowledges, and celebrates ‘all the Linnaean qualifiers’, his masterful poesis offers a beautiful and compelling arena of signification. But within that rich field, he provides space for Bennet’s ‘active, earthy not-quite-human capaciousness’ to be felt. One leaves the paintings as did LeGuin’s narrator who bid farewell to her home in Eden: the key to the garden has yet to turn up but there are ways, if you choose to look for them, to walk alongside the world.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3
- 2 Alex Livingston, Artist Statement, 2019
- 3 John Stilgoe, *What is Landscape?* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2015), 1
- 4 Barry Schwabsky, *Landscape Painting Now* (New York, Thames and Hudson, 2019), 209
- 5 Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 68
- 6 Michael Taussig, *What color is the sacred?*
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), 219
- 8 Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 67
- 9 Ursula LeGuin, *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (Toronto, Penguin, 1987), 195
- 10 LeGuin, *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*, 196

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SARA HARTLAND-ROWE is a painter who lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (BFA 1990), and the University of Illinois at Chicago (MFA 1993) before moving to Halifax in 2000.



ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Kingston, Ontario, Alex Livingston received a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and an MA Fine Arts from the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, England. Livingston has exhibited his paintings in numerous solo and group exhibitions in public and commercial galleries across Canada and internationally in England, Scotland, Germany, South Korea, China, and the United States.



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Clockwise from upper left image:

Buck Imagining Doe
Deer Contemplating Mountain
Deer By Calm Water
On the Spot
Night in the Forest

top and opposite: installation views from the exhibition at Studio 21
 next page: detail from *Buck Imagining Doe*, 2019

