

ALEX LIVINGSTON

Paintings 1985-2005

Curated by Susan Gibson Garvey

Dalhousie Art Gallery
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above: *Young Alex Points Out the Exact Spot That He Saw the Tiger*, 1983, 147.3 x 261.6 cm (Cat. 1)
 below: *Traveling Companions*, 1983, 142.2 x 226.1 cm (not in the exhibition)



Haven, 1985 (Cat. 2)
238.7 x 226.6 cm

FOREWORD

AN IMPORTANT ASPECT of our mandate at the Dalhousie Art Gallery is to present work by contemporary artists who have made a significant contribution to the art of this region. Alex Livingston came to Halifax in the early 1980s to study at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), and, apart from intermittent sojourns at the Cooper Union in New York (1982), in artist's residencies in Glasgow (1992) and Banff (2003), and a year of graduate studies at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, England (MA 1995), he has lived in this province ever since, working in his studio and, since 1986, teaching painting and drawing at NSCAD (now renamed NSCAD University).

Livingston's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in both public and commercial galleries across Canada and abroad, but seldom have these exhibitions dealt with more than one aspect of his work at a time. Although his studio practice shows no signs of exhaustion, it seems timely and appropriate to present a mid-career survey of this artist's work, in an attempt to tease out the many threads of his oeuvre and make sense of the parts as facets of a rich and complex whole.

Accordingly, this exhibition examines Livingston's work over the past 20 years, from his early large colourful neo-expressionist paintings through various degrees of biomorphic figuration and abstraction to his latest black and white linear compositions. Ranging between the single iconic image and an all-over dance of pattern and gesture, and between small, intimate works and oversize canvases, Livingston's

paintings have included both thickly-worked surfaces in saturated colours and flat, simplified forms in monochromatic hues. Despite this broad range of styles and subject-matter, one can detect a consistent sensibility and underlying set of concerns that, intriguingly, help to identify Livingston's work as characteristically his own.

I would like to thank Alex Livingston for his enthusiastic collaboration at every stage of this project. It has been a genuine pleasure to work with him. I would also like to thank the public, corporate and individual lenders who generously allowed us to borrow important works for this exhibition: the Art Bank of Nova Scotia, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Canada Council Art Bank, Museum London, Blois, Nickerson and Bryson, Laura Graham Design, Purdy's Wharf, Heather Atiyah, Fred and Elizabeth Fountain, Cameron Graves Hayden, Fred and Susan Holtz, Jan Peacock and Steve Higgins, and private lenders who wish to remain anonymous. We are also pleased to be able to present a significant Livingston work from our own collection, the 18-part *Water and Land Paintings (Series 2)* 2001-2, in its appropriate context in the exhibition.

The co-ordination of a large survey exhibition such as this requires considerable professional expertise, and I am grateful to our Registrar/Preparator, Michele Gallant, for organizing the transportation and installation of these (often oversize) paintings with smooth efficiency. In this task, she was ably assisted by Stephanie McNair. I am also grateful to our Office Manager/Communications Officer Sym Corrigan, who, in addition to overseeing the financial logistics of the exhibition, designed this beautiful catalogue. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the exhibition funders, The Canada Council for the Arts and the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage, without whose support this project could not have been realized.

Susan Gibson Garvey, Director/Curator



above: *Cypresses*, 1986 (Cat. 4)
216.0 x 289.0 cm



right: *Garden*, 1986 (not in the exhibition)
213.4 x 254.0 cm



Four Flowers, 1988, 151.5 x 205.5 cm (Cat. 6)



Flowers, 1989, 139.5 x 170.5 cm (Cat. 7)



Twist, 1989, 141.0 x 179.0 cm (Cat. 8)

All the fecund busyness of earth...

ALEX LIVINGSTON'S WORK is rife with dualities, oppositions and contrasts — of representation and abstraction, of the natural and human-made worlds, of the microcosm and the macrocosm, of all-over patternings and the single iconic image, of land and water, of the tiny and the titanic, of multiple small canvases and singular large ones. It is this tension between extremes, rhythmically cycling through Livingston's work over the years, that indicates the scope and liveliness of his ongoing immersion in the conundrum of contemporary painting. This 'conundrum' is familiar to many painters who began their careers in the last quarter of the twentieth century, but it most particularly haunts and animates those painters who graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) during its late Conceptual period, when taking up a paintbrush carried the weight of a counter-revolutionary act.

Livingston comments, with characteristic understatement, that this period was "an intriguing time to be learning about painting". Artist/curator Cliff Eyland points out that "as a graduate and then teacher at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Livingston was at the centre of a furious debate" concerning the revival of figurative painting, spearheaded by Livingston's painting professor, the late John Clark. Eyland comments further, "Clark participated in the introduction [to NSCAD] of lush, big figure painting in the late '70s and early '80s, a period experienced by students as an ideological glass bead game involving faculty such as Benjamin Buchloh, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Bruce Barber (all committed to socio/critical work) and a group of painters including John Clark, Ron Shuebrook

and Judith Mann...”¹ Buchloh, in particular, made stinging indictments of what he referred to as the “forlorn aesthetic positions” of those attempting to revive painterly figuration and representation,² while Clark’s strong, expressive canvases demonstrated an equally passionate devotion to the painterly cause.

Despite constant reminders that painting was a ‘suspect space’, Livingston absorbed the painterly examples afforded by neo-Expressionist and New Image painters such as Leon Golub, Francisco Clemente, Susan Rothenberg and Lois Lane, not to mention the important late narrative works of Philip Guston (and, a few years later, Anselm Kiefer’s complex figurative paintings and the realist/abstract dualities in the work of Gerhard Richter). His own conviction that painting was a legitimate creative act that echoed the inherent ‘creativity’ of the natural universe allowed him to pass through the acrimony of the NSCAD debate relatively unscathed, with his curiosity about painting’s forms and purposes intact. Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of Livingston’s devotion to paint is the fact that, although his work can be humourous and, at times, bizarre, it is almost completely devoid of the irony that characterizes much postmodern painting.

Livingston’s undergraduate work demonstrates a preference for large-scale canvases in which simplified, vibrantly colourful figures and objects interact in the shallow space of the painting. A work from his graduating exhibition at Anna Leonowens Gallery in 1983 (and later purchased by the Nova Scotia Art Bank) remains a kind of talisman for much of his early postgraduate work. Called *Young Alex Points Out the Exact Spot That He Saw the Tiger* (page 4), the painting presents the sketchy image of a boy pointing to the yellow outline of a tiger just discernible behind the striped form of a steamy hot water radiator. Curator Robin Metcalfe comments that “for Livingston, who remembered the childhood experience of ‘seeing things’ in the dark, in piles of clothing, etc., the painting was a self-affirmation. ‘Young Alex’ insists on the validity of what he has seen, even if no-one else has seen it. The artist, by acknowledging and validating this vision, asserts his allegiance both to the primacy of inner personal vision over external visual ‘facts’, and to representational form as the expression of that inner perception.”³ Such a sentiment is strongly reminiscent of the poet John Keats’ famous statement: “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination”⁴ — a romantic position hardly likely to endear the young painter to the likes of Benjamin Buchloh. But Livingston had his finger on a different pulse.

If *Young Alex*... affirmed Livingston’s commitment to his own painterly vision and imagination, another painting from the same graduating exhibition prefigured

1. Cliff Eyland quoting from his article in *Vanguard* magazine [*Vanguard*, summer 1988 p.33] in his catalogue essay for *Alex Livingston Paintings*, Gallery 111, University of Manitoba, 1998.

2. “The specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation and traditional modes of production... because their attempts to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness.” Benjamin Buchloh: “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression” as found in *Modernism and Modernity*, Buchloh, Guilbert and Solkin, Eds., The NSCAD Press, Halifax, N.S. 1983. This important book was published by NSCAD in the same year that Livingston graduated from it.

3. Robin Metcalfe, catalogue essay for *Alex Livingston: Recent Paintings and Drawings*. Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, 1989, page 5.

4. John Keats: letter to Benjamin Bailey, Nov. 22 1817, as found in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, Fourteenth Edition, 1968, page 584.



right: *Aesop's Hillside*, 1993 (Cat. 14)
182.9 x 138.1 cm

below: *Earth Dreams*, 1992 (Cat. 12)
139.7 x 213.4 cm



other principles that would become increasingly relevant in his work: *Travelling Companions* 1983 (page 4) presents the image of an awesome creature of nature — a whale — below the image of an equally awesome creature of humankind — a hydrogen-filled airship. Each oval behemoth hurtles through its medium, water or air, bent on its own mission, each a shadow of, and shadowed by, the other. This simple painting garners within its placid contours volumes of commentary on the culture/nature dichotomy, and on morphological relationships in art and science.

Early taxonomists once grouped things together that were morphologically similar, assuming that since they looked alike they must in some way be related. In the earliest museums (the sixteenth-century cabinets of curiosity, or *Wunderkammern*), it would not have been unreasonable to find the image of a whale and that of a dirigible (had such things existed or been known then) displayed side by side. Unlike the later disciplinary museums, the early cabinets did not separate the works of nature (*Naturalia*) from the works of humankind (*Artificialia*), but saw in one the reflection, or companion, of the other. The dialogue between *Naturalia* and *Artificialia* is a recurring theme in Livingston's works, and it is interesting to see that in a much later painting of a tiger — *Tiger and Abstraction* 1998 (page 39) — a not-so-young Alex has transmuted his understanding of the nature/culture duality into a formal dialectic between representation and abstraction in painting.

SNAKES IN THE GARDEN

LIVINGSTON'S EXHIBITIONS in the years immediately after graduating involved (appropriately enough, if one is speaking about beginnings) images of trees and gardens, often with Eden-like characteristics. The huge canvas *Haven* (page 5) from the exhibition called *Trees* at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in 1985, presents the image of a stylized tree full of brightly coloured birds, each surrounded by a vibrant halo of paint, as if by its own life force. One is reminded simultaneously of mediaeval frescos of Saint Francis preaching to the birds and visions of paradisaical gardens intricately woven in oriental carpets. (In fact, the painting was prompted by the reproduction of a fresco from the ruins of ancient Herculanaeum — evidently Livingston was mining a wide range of art historical sources for potential imagery). The lush expressionism of the *Trees* exhibition was followed a year later by an even more ambitious exhibition, titled *Vistas*, at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax. Oversize canvases dripping with spontaneous brushwork and saturated fields of colour presented dramatic perspectival views of ornamental gardens.

Simultaneously recalling the visual delight of Matisse or late Monet and the elegant discipline of abstractionists such as Richard Diebenkorn (particularly his *Ocean Park* series), the panoramas of receding avenues of cypresses, of geometrically trimmed topiary, of fountains, trellises and bowers filled with pleasurable sensuousness, represented a daring achievement for a young painter who knew that, at that time, figurative painting seldom received critical attention unless it was steeped in a dark, selfconscious irony or neo-Expressionist despair.⁵

Vistas was, however, the last time Livingston employed Renaissance-style perspective in his work. Having demonstrated he could use it to dramatic effect (page 8), he abandoned traditional pictorial space — the idea of the painting as a window opening onto views that recede in orderly perspective — in favour of the shallow picture-plane of the Moderns, to be followed somewhat later, as we shall see, by an equivocal, unfixed ‘non-Euclidian’ space of his own invention.

From the long perspective of the garden scenes, Livingston zoomed in on flowers. He invented stylized emblematic blossoms, painting them in large, bold, heraldic configurations that curved sensuously across the canvas (page 9), again recalling a range of cultural sources, from Celtic illuminations to the arabesques of the Alhambra. As I have written elsewhere, Livingston

*became fascinated by the formal arrangements of pistils, buds and stalks. As if the telescope had become a runaway microscope, probing towards the basic elements of material life, the twisting vines and stems of his flower paintings metamorphosed into tiny seedlings, thence to protozoa and spermatozoa, and, reaching inside the cell itself, to the double helix of DNA. In a few short years of intense production, Livingston managed to collapse the oppositions of micro- and macrocosm into a fascinating painted universe of analogous forms: stalks, chromosomes, ribbons, waves, sperm, snakes.*⁶

Livingston’s solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1989 demonstrated the rapid progression of his imagery from emblematic flowers to the spiral forms of microscopic cellular structures. In his catalogue essay, the exhibition’s curator Robin Metcalfe provides an informative exegesis on the many possible layers of symbolic meaning in these works, relating their curvilinear twists and loops to cultural symbols from ancient earth religions, as well as Classical, Celtic, Islamic and Hindu traditions, while at the same time acknowledging their allusions to a modern understanding of cellular processes.⁷ Perhaps prompted by the similarities between the twisted forms of DNA and the Asclepian symbol of medicine — the caduceus — Livingston spent the next year or two painting images of snakes.

5. In the highly influential anthology of critical writing, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Brian Wallace, Ed., New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), a source book that no art professor could afford to ignore in the mid-1980s, well-known theorists discuss the possibilities under which new painting might be permitted a valid critical stance. While the allegorical impulse (Craig Owens) is grudgingly allowed some validity (provided it is overtly self-reflective and deconstructive) there is no room in any of the critical arguments at this time for an uncomplicated revival of the sensuous or beautiful. Painters had to wait another ten years or more before new theories of beauty, such as those of Dave Hickey (*The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*), became current.

6. Susan Gibson Garvey, catalogue essay for *Snakes and Ladders: Recent Paintings by Harlan Johnson, Alex Livingston and Leslie Sasaki*, Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1992, unpaginated.

7. Robin Metcalfe, catalogue essay for *Alex Livingston: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1989, 16 pages.

It is clear at this point that the artist's primary task was to seek meaningful 'content' to parallel his engagement with the sensuous physicality of paint. His permissions came not from art theory but from literature and from readings in myth and archetype — the works of Carl Jung, Mercea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, among others — that encouraged a popular re-enchantment with symbolic imagery. In my essay for the exhibition *Snakes and Ladders* at the Dalhousie Art Gallery (1992) I wrote that Livingston had found his subject-matter in "the rich and varied 'feast of nature', all the fecund busyness of earth, its fullness and generosity."⁸ Livingston's view of nature, however, was at this stage invariably cultural: his 'vista' paintings were not untamed wilderness but cultivated gardens, his flowers were as much invented as botanically correct, and his snakes were presented not in their natural habitats but in formal designs, woven into a heraldic pattern or curled up on elaborately wrought platters. The painting *Earth Dreams* 1992 (page 12), for example, links two intertwining snakes (painted in a manner reminiscent of the helical forms in *Ribbon* 1989) on a lattice, with their mythological roles within various cultures represented by an encircling pattern of silhouetted hieroglyphs and symbols.

Livingston sensed the danger of too much visual literalism in his snake paintings. That is to say, while examining their cultural meanings he felt he may have strayed too far into the descriptive or illustrational. In the fall of 1992, he took a year-long leave of absence from teaching, under the auspices of a Canada Council grant, and spent part of it in an artist's residency in Glasgow, Scotland. He recalls the delight he felt in acquainting himself with the wonderful range of historical and decorative art works in the famous Burrell Collection on the outskirts of Glasgow. There he saw in the flesh some of the images that had fascinated him from the start: the intricate weavings of mediaeval tapestries and seventeenth-century embroideries filled with depictions of birds, animals and fantastical beasts on *milefore* patterned backgrounds, and Persian miniature landscapes, with their vertical perspectives of serried ranks of hills in jewel-like patterns and colours. Upon his return to Halifax, he made a number of works which drew directly on the visual stimulus of the Burrell Collection, of which *Aesop's Hillside* 1993 (page 12) is perhaps the best example. In this work, the grille or lattice-work of *Earth Dreams* has morphed into a kind of cloisonné effect, a black line (as in wrought iron or stained glass) which now encloses a range of animal and vegetal silhouettes against a bright golden field of modulated abstract brushmarks. The vertical orientation and 'all-over' distribution of form in *Aesop's Hillside* prompted the next important development in his painting practice.

8. Gibson Garvey, op. cit.

BIOMORPHISM

IN HIS 1994 EXHIBITION at the Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, Livingston showed ten new paintings that seemed to represent a significant break with his previous work, both in treatment and in subject-matter. Paintings such as *Big Blue* 1993 (page 18) and *Midnight Betrothal* 1994 are large all-over compositions of vaguely biological forms and gestures that seem to float, change shape and recombine in a gravity-less space. Biomorphic images burgeon, attenuate, suggest familiar shapes — body parts, internal organs, flowers, gonads, planets, parts of animals — but mutate into other less familiar forms across a painted surface that itself modulates in such a way that distance seems unfixed. As Leslie Sasaki writes in his catalogue essay for the Owens exhibition, “To become engaged with these paintings is to be enveloped by them... In a world without gravity our mobility increases. This ubiquity, this sense of finding oneself simultaneously inside an event and outside it, looking in and looking out, being everywhere and nowhere, works to fold the viewer into the paintings.”⁹ One could regard this ‘non-Euclidian’ space as owing something to the exploded picture-plane of the Cubists; but, whereas Cubists presented simultaneous multiple views of their subject from a perspective outside the picture, Livingston’s all-over weaving of mutating forms seems to envelop both viewer and viewed in a complicated dance *within* the expanded field of the canvas.

No longer clearly referencing specific art historical and cultural sources (although the title of one of the pieces, *Walkabout*, does evoke the unique space-time concepts of Australian Aboriginal ‘Dreamtime’), these new paintings were generated through a very different process from his previous work. In conversation¹⁰ Livingston describes the process as akin to automatism: one starts with a mark, a line or gesture, embellishing it intuitively until it takes on a particular form, somewhat like (legendary Bauhaus painter/teacher) Paul Klee’s idea of taking a line for a walk. “The mark or line is the generative unit — the ‘egg and sperm’ — of form,” Livingston comments, “How do you take that abstract gesture and provide it with representational meaning? How do you mine it for its narrative potential?” In watching what the imagination does, given certain kinds of triggers, Livingston was surprised how small or tentative the mark can be — how little you need, in fact — for the imagination to get going. Essentially, these paintings are as much about Livingston’s probing of his own mental and visual processes as they are about external subject-matter.

To me, this particular series recalls the Burgess Shale, the famous fossil-filled deposits discovered in the early 20th century, that enfolded in their layers an

9. Leslie Sasaki, catalogue essay for the exhibition *Alex Livingston: New Paintings*, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB, 1994.

10. During studio visits between the curator and the artist December 2004.

astonishing range of previously unknown life-forms — fantastically varied creatures, both ancestors of currently known species and hundreds of evolutionary dead-ends. So many mutations and variants, so many trials and errors! Livingston's all-over works represent a bold experiment too, one which clearly equates the process of painting and of imaginative creation with the process of biological evolution.

Although the experiment was admired, not every viewer found the biomorphic works entirely successful. John Murchie, in a review for *ArtsAtlantic* writes: "That Livingston's ten paintings do not finally succeed as paintings-in-themselves should not discredit the exacting effort to discern and manipulate a visual lexicon which recognizes a history that truly articulates a present. That the outcome is always in doubt is, in the ongoing biography of a painter, the basis for the existential anguish of real creative endeavour."¹¹ Writing about these works when they were exhibited later, in a 1998 exhibition at Gallery 111 in Winnipeg, Cliff Eyland has fewer doubts: "Alex Livingston has become one of Canada's most accomplished painters by absorbing and then moving confidently beyond the neo-expressionist world of his youth."¹² Flawed or not, the biomorphic works are a substantial achievement, and a measure of how far the young painter had travelled in his first decade of studio production.

This wasn't so clear to Livingston at the time, as he cast about for the next logical development. Due a sabbatical leave from teaching, he applied to study for his Master's degree at the Chelsea School of Art, London, England, a school known for its strong painting program. In London, after several false starts and much internal questioning, Livingston eventually found a way to move forward with the biomorphic imagery, epitomized by the painting *Heartland* 1995 (page 22). This work presents a large, vessel-shaped central image, within which the energetic spirals, serpentine coils and wandering strings of his biomorphic paintings take on new identities, at once reminiscent of mitochondrial meanderings inside a living cell and, at the opposite end of the scale, of the gaseous nebulae of outer space, where new galaxies are born. In a statement about *Heartland* for an exhibition catalogue, Livingston comments that "Nature is both familiar terrain and abstracted space. In this work both concepts are combined in the central space, the heart of the canvas... Eclectic forms and lines converge and intertwine to convey a sense of dynamic energy that resonates as shapes which can be read as pulsating cells or hybrid galaxies..."¹³ Several versions of *Heartland* followed, large and small, and in the smaller versions in particular one can easily imagine the form of a human head in the oval outline; one might even interpret the internal coils and spirals as flashing neurons in the

11. John Murchie, "Alex Livingston: New Paintings", *ArtsAtlantic* #51, Spring/Summer 1995.

12. Eyland op. cit.

13. Alex Livingston, artist's statement for the catalogue of the *SBC European Art Competition*, Swiss Bank House, London, UK, 1995, p. 102.



Big Blue, 1993, 218.4 x 172.7 cm (Cat. 15)



Walkabout, 1994, 218.4 x 172.7 cm (Cat. 18)

mind of someone thinking or dreaming. In later exhibitions, Livingston would sometimes show these essentially abstract works alongside representational animal or flower images, using these somewhat startling juxtapositions to underscore what he considers to be the dualities at work in human perceptions of nature.¹⁴

NATURALIA AND ARTIFICIALIA

IN LONDON, Livingston also resumed his interest in botanical flower forms, looking for inspiration in the antique *Florilegia* (seventeenth-century catalogues of familiar and exotic flower types). Through this line of enquiry he began, once again, to invent flower forms, as much for their potential for generating new painterly marks as for their literal descriptions. As the following statement makes clear, he began to experiment not only with the flower forms themselves but also with the ground on which they were painted: “The invented flower, plant and seed forms in the painting *Flora 1* 1995 are inspired by the tradition of botanical illustration and its related processes of identification. A white ground bearing traces of erasures and overpainting isolates the ‘specimens’ and evokes the sketch book page”.¹⁵ The overall form of his floral paintings shows the images not in their natural setting but in regular grids, intended to reference the sorting and classifying procedures of the early botanists; but the grounds themselves are not uniform, and their brushy surfaces provide a constant reminder that we are not actually looking at objective diagrams but, rather, at paintings — at sensuous manifestations of the imagination.

In addition to the botanical subject-matter, Livingston developed an interest in the manner in which the historic illustrations themselves were produced using the techniques of woodcut and engraving. It was through this study of illustrated antiquarian taxonomies, books in which the author attempts to categorize all known variants of flora and fauna, that he found his next clear path of enquiry, resulting in works as visually different from the all-over biomorphic paintings as those were from his previous emblematic flowers and snakes.

A History of Four-footed Beasts and Other Curiosities is the title Livingston has given to a set of over 100 small black-and-white canvases depicting a range of animals, both actual and mythological (page 38), which was exhibited as an installation in various configurations in galleries in the Atlantic region and Ontario from 1997 to 1999. The title derives from a much earlier work, *A History of Four-footed Beasts*, by the English translator, lexicographer and zoologist Edward Topsell, first published

14. As was the case in the installation *Wild Things*, Livingston's contribution to the internationally touring group exhibition *Theatrum Mundi* (The Marion McCain Exhibition of Atlantic Art) curated by Susan Gibson Garvey and organized and circulated the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, NB, in 1997. The installation included ten 'animal' paintings and three small 'Heartland-style' abstractions.

15. From an unpublished proposal for the group exhibition *Far and Wide*, organized by Visual Arts Nova Scotia and exhibited at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, in 1996.

in 1607. Topsell based his compendium of animals on an even earlier taxonomy by the Swiss zoologist Conrad Gesner, who in turn based his work on a number of different sources, including mediaeval bestiaries, the works of Aristotle and Pliny, ancient myths and fables, and the dawning search for scientific facts through direct observation. Gesner's works are among the first examples of alphabetical ordering in the history of taxonomy.

Livingston found a facsimile copy of Topsell's combined works, *A History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects* in the library at Saint Mary's University, Halifax. He was immediately drawn to the little woodcut prints illustrating the text, images that ranged from realistic renderings of familiar animals to fanciful depictions of fabulous creatures. He enlarged and translated the printed images into individual paintings, delineating the animals in black oil paint on brushy grey-and-white grounds similar to those that he had developed in his flower paintings (only, in the case of the animal works, the brushmarks begin to cross horizontally and vertically, suggesting a woven surface). Grouped together in floor-to-ceiling installations (often on a wall painted deep red), the animals take on multi-layered resonances — historical, mythological, scientific, allegorical. In this arrangement (which deliberately abandons Topsell's alphabetical ordering), domestic animals mingle with exotic ones, large animals with small, predators with prey. They exchange a complex network of looks, and occasionally stare directly at the viewer — with a slightly disconcerting effect, as artist Laura Millard remarks in her catalogue essay titled "Each Creature is Story" (which accompanied the installation at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in Ontario): Livingston places the viewer "within, not outside, this network of looks which are charged with the potential exchange of predator and prey."¹⁶ She goes on to suggest (quoting from Neil Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature*¹⁷), that scientific enquiry today benefits from the inclusion of subjectivity and cultural tradition in the interpretation of our understanding of the natural world, a position that accords well with Livingston's apparent preoccupations.

Visually, the somewhat dry black-and-white delineations of animal prints (however characterful their expressions) were a complete turnaround from Livingston's previously lush, painterly mark-making, much to the surprise of some viewers and reviewers.¹⁸ Moreover, Livingston intended the animal paintings to be exhibited together in one area of a gallery, while an adjacent area would be filled with multiple variants of his abstract "Heartland" works, which, by the time of

16. Laura Millard, "Each Creature is Story", brochure essay for Alex Livingston's exhibition *A History of Four-footed Beasts and Other Curiosities*, Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, Owen Sound, Ontario, 1999.

17. "Every creature in the world is, for us, like a book and a picture and a mirror as well." Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.

18. Reviewer Gil MacElroy comments that these works "undercut" (in a surprising and interesting way) his expectations of how paintings by Alex Livingston should look and behave. "Alex Livingston: A History of Four-footed Beasts and Other Curiosities", *ArtsAtlantic* #59, Fall/Winter 1997, p. 10



Heartland, 1995, 183.0 x 152.4 cm (Cat. 19)



left:
Flowers 2, 1996 (Cat. 22)
 66.0 x 96.5 cm



left to right:
Untitled, 1996 (Cat. 23)
 61.0 x 50.8 cm

Untitled, 1995 (Cat. 21)
 50.8 x 45.4 cm

exhibition, had evolved into small, rather carefully controlled rectangular abstractions (as in the small *Untitled* abstract, page 26). Livingston's stated purpose was to contrast two different mechanisms for understanding and ordering nature: "[these two different groups of paintings] speak of dualities in the pursuit of meaning and truth in the study of nature... ...[They] play analytical modes of understanding against fanciful ones, and hierarchical structures of meaning against understanding garnered through lateral, randomly achieved connections."¹⁹ In fact, Livingston was never quite satisfied with this arrangement and, after presentations in the Atlantic region, the *Four-footed Beasts*... exhibition was shown in public galleries in Ontario without its more challenging abstract section.

Livingston, did, however, create a new set of animal images that were permanently paired with their own abstract canvases, and whose titles emphasized the juxtaposition, as in *Greyhound and Abstraction* 1998 (page 26) and *Tiger and Abstraction* 1998 (page 39). He felt these were more successful. The contrast between the plain black-and-white illustrational animal and the colourful, almost tartan-like weaving of red, yellow, blue, white and black brushmarks in the adjacent abstraction may well underscore the different frameworks (scientific, allegorical and so forth) within which we consider the natural world. But if this is the case, what terms of reference are we to use when Livingston starts to overlay images of ordinary household objects on the 'tartan' abstracts, as he does the following year (for example, in *Funnel with Abstract* 1999, page 26)? It seems that just as we become familiar with Livingston's latest terms of reference, and just as we begin to find analogous meanings between his painting 'language' and his subject-matter, he executes another turnabout, and we are left playing catch-up again.

The set of paintings that immediately follow the animal/abstract images take as their subject-matter not the works of nature but the works of humankind. These are what Livingston calls his 'object' paintings (1999–2001). All at once (it seems) the artist's gaze, which has been so concerned with the teeming variety of biological life in multiple arrangements of animal, vegetal and cellular forms, is now turned upon prosaic household items like jugs, boots, scissors, umbrellas and chairs. Not *naturalia* but *artificialia* — and pretty mundane *artificialia* at that. Given such a dramatic switch in subject-matter, one is obliged to speculate whether the artist's real attention might have been focused elsewhere for some time, and whether, on one level at least, subject matter has not been the essential issue at all, but merely the pretext for a more fundamental line of enquiry.

19. From the artist's unpublished exhibition proposal for *Four-footed Beasts*..., 1997.

ABOUT PAINTING

ALTHOUGH HIS EARLIER CAREER involved probing the rich subject-matter of the natural world in an attempt to deliver ‘content’ that would adequately match (and justify) his powerful engagement with the sensuous, expressive application of paint, in his second decade of postgraduate production Livingston is at least as much concerned with the nature of painting as he is with the painting of nature. Through his work with the woodcuts and engravings of plants and animals he became fascinated with the printed line itself, and with how to translate that line into paint. In the ‘object’ paintings, he turns from the antique bestiaries and pattern books to the mundane wood- and metal-engravings that illustrate nineteenth-century catalogues of commercial and household products. He comments that what he is now presenting is “blatant clip-art painting”²⁰, isolating a single object centrally in the canvas, enlarging it to monstrous proportions, as in the six-foot high *Jug 1* 1999 (page 27), or gathering individual images in a mass of little panels like so many secular icons. He claims that, thus translated, the images of “jugs, boots, clocks and other commonplace things now operate free from their original merchandising roles,” and “in their new role, these images are both emblematic and enigmatic.”²¹ Well, yes — but the jig is up. Given his history, we are not convinced that Livingston is all that concerned about the social significance of jugs and umbrellas. It is clear that what really interests him are those lumpy black lines — “bold, ragged, sensuous and immediate”²² — and their role as active, painterly marks on the canvas.

In some ways the course followed in Livingston’s ‘object’ paintings parallels that of his earlier progression from his oversize garden-view canvases through emblematic flowers to a fascination with the microscopic forms of cellular life. From the oversize canvases isolating a single object (jug, boot, clock), he turns his attention to smaller canvases presenting various objects emblematically on different coloured backgrounds, then zooms in on parts of objects, and on the lines that describe these parts. Finally, he enlarges the image of the printed mark so that it takes on its own life as a new form, not so much a line describing the contour of some other object, but a thing in itself, almost liberated from its duty of description, as in the painting *Early Morning* 2002 (page 30). This work belongs to a group that Livingston refers to as ‘collage’ paintings, which combine a number of lessons learned from his previous painting experiments. In their all-over dance of image and form, and their floating ‘non-Euclidian’ space, and even in their more poetic titles, the ‘collage’ paintings echo the earlier biomorphic paintings — except that now the elements

20. Alex Livingston: unpublished statement for an exhibition of ‘object’ paintings at Studio 21, Halifax, 2001.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.



clockwise from top:
Greyhound and Abstraction, 1998 (Cat. 34)
 59.7 x 127.0 cm

Funnel with Abstract, 1999 (Cat. 41)
 61.0 x 50.8 cm

Untitled (small abstract #2), 1997 (Cat. 29)
 30.3 x 25.4 cm



Jug 1, 1999, 199.4 x 168.9 cm (Cat. 37)

do not so much resemble the organic building blocks of biological life as they do the building blocks of pictorial structure. Active lines, abstracted from the contours of images of household objects — clothing, crockery, musical instruments and domestic paraphernalia — dance together in a shallow, interwoven space.

At the same time as he was working on his ‘collage’ paintings, Livingston started to focus on images of water, enlarged from tiny engravings of ships on the ocean. He was not particularly interested in the ships but in the kinds of marks that depict the ripples and waves on the water, trying to capture that precise moment when a simple line moves from being an indeterminate mark to a descriptor. For some time, Livingston had been digitally manipulating his source imagery, scanning the printed images into his computer, enlarging, fragmenting and restructuring them — in order, as he states, “to emphasize their bold linear structure and abstract form”²³ — and basing his paintings on the new print-outs.

This somewhat prosaic, mechanical process resulted in some of the most elegant works of his mature production to date: his ‘water and land’ series, of which the 18-part *Water and Land Paintings (Series 2)* 2001–2 (page 31) is a prime example. These small canvases consist entirely of painted black lines reduced to simple cyphers — translations of the original printed marks describing the textures of different kinds of water or land in the source imagery. Without a horizon line (but often subtly diminishing towards the absent horizon as if in a perspectival view), these doubly distilled linear configurations nevertheless recall ‘rough wave’, ‘ploughed land’, ‘calm water, or ‘grassy meadow’ by the most slender means (including a simple blue or green wash underlying the all-over pattern of marks). What results is a refined tension between the representational and abstract; a convincing demonstration of the autonomy of the painted mark, even as it poignantly evokes the rich varieties of natural forms on the surface of the earth. Toronto writer and critic Gary Michael Dault comments enthusiastically, “what I like about [the ‘water and land’ paintings] is the deftness with which they contest their mechanical origins and their resolution as vignettes of personal expression.”²⁴ Livingston went on to produce a number of variations on this theme, including an exquisite set of lithographs of the abstracted water images.

23. from an unpublished statement to accompany a grant application, 2003.

24. Gary Michael Dault, “Rettig and Livingston at Wynick-Tuck”, *The Globe and Mail*, R7, June 15 2002.

‘STRING’ THEORY

CHARACTERISTICALLY, Livingston tends not to linger long in a particular formal or thematic variation once he feels that the immediate line of enquiry has resolved itself into some satisfactory canvases. Sometimes he reaches a point where he feels

he is repeating himself, or is compelled to pursue a new direction by his own driving curiosity. Whatever the reason, each identifiable stage in his work over the past two decades has seldom lasted more than a couple of years — although it is also clear that each new development has its logical predecessors, and spawns new directions that have some traceable connection with past explorations. The progress of his oeuvre is not a purely linear narrative, but one that spirals around and catches up with itself at different levels of expression and experience. As in most artistic careers, there are also false starts and lines of enquiry that have never resolved themselves into paintings. Livingston's trials and errors, as well as the development of successful ideas, are graphically traceable in hundreds of working drawings and sketchbooks that he does not usually exhibit. The small selection of these engaging drawings in this exhibition is intended to indicate the broad range of thought and experimentation that happens around and between the more finished paintings.

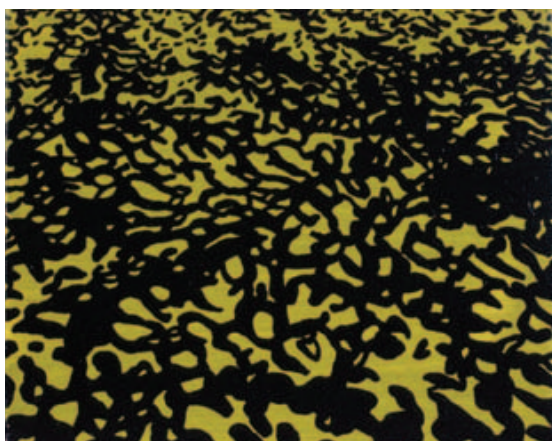
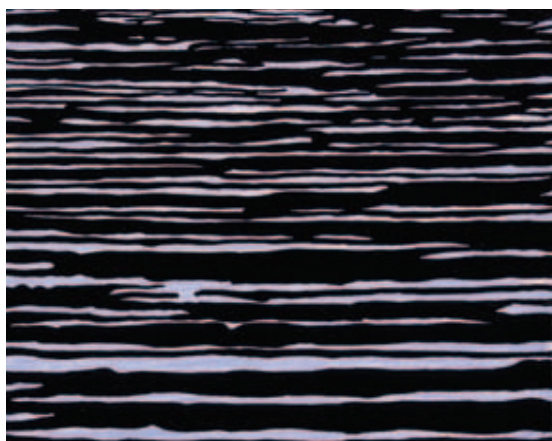
Interestingly, after the somewhat mechanical work involved in producing the 'water and land' paintings, Livingston felt the need to return to a more spontaneous form of painting, and so, instead of working out his ideas in the sketchbook, he went immediately to the canvas, and to an unexpected series of all-over paintings that resemble nothing so much as knitting. The calligraphic mark covers the canvas in serried rows, like automatic writing, linked in a fine or coarse mesh, depending on the size of the paintbrush and the oscillating movement of the wrist (page 32). Livingston describes his 'mesh' paintings as five-finger exercises intended to recover the looseness and freedom of gesture that he needed for his latest abstractions. However, he liked the mesh effect sufficiently to experiment with different scales and colours before moving on.

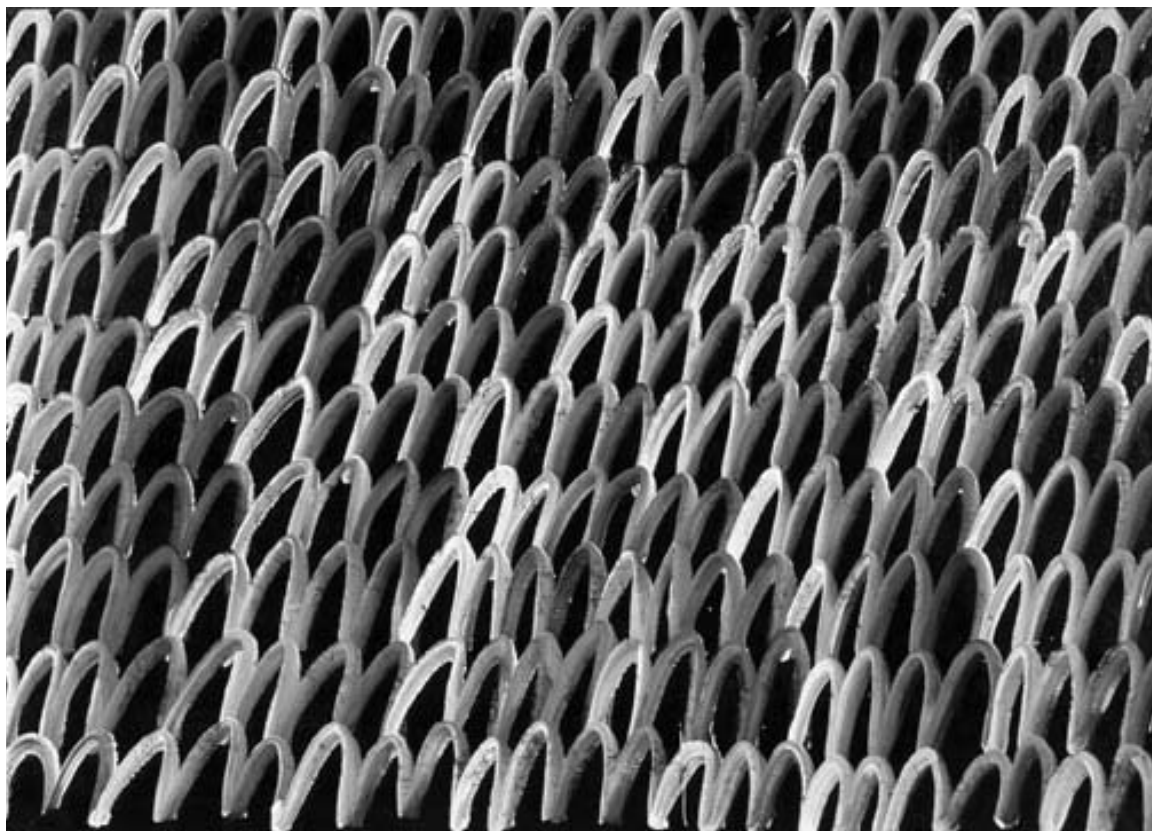
The final group of works have not previously been exhibited elsewhere. They are 'pure' abstractions in black and white, employing various widths and lengths of energetic brushmarks on a plain white square or rectangular ground (page 34). During a recent studio visit, the artist and I sat surrounded by these simple yet very active canvases, and I remarked on the differences between these works and his early colourful expressionist paintings — although both employ a sensuous brushmark. Livingston replied that eliminating colour and using only linear gestures is "astringent; it clears the mind" and that he feels he is working here with "the basic DNA of painting" — the brushmark. It is interesting how contested that simple element has been in the recent history of western painting — how so many late twentieth-century artists worked to distance themselves from the personal brushmark, believing it to be suspect, contaminated with Modernist egoism. However, it seems that what keeps



Early Morning, 2002 (Cat. 45)
121.9 x 147.3

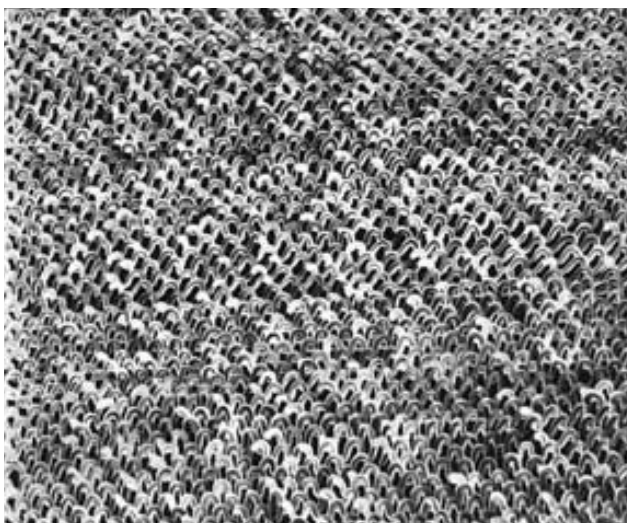
Water and Land Paintings (Series 2), 2001-2, detail (Cat. 46)
18 parts, 20.3 x 25.4 cm each





Mesh 3, 2004 (Cat. 53)
134.6 x 188.0 cm

Mesh 1, 2003 (Cat. 51)
50.8 x 61.0 cm



Livingston going is precisely a guiltless pleasure in the sensuous rewards of paint — something that, when coupled with his purposeful enquiries, seems not at all as indulgent or irrelevant as past critics would have had us believe. Indeed, in an almost perfect parody of Benjamin Buchloh, a more recent critic, Dave Hickey, declares provocatively that “In images... .beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder; and any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence.”²⁵

In fact, as I watch the little worlds of activity in the indeterminate fields of these canvases, it seems to me that there is not so much of the ego here, but a lot of enquiry into the behaviour of paint, and an ongoing engagement with the kinds of emotional and figurative resonances that even the most random aggregation of marks can generate. These compositions are not, of course, entirely random, however open and spontaneous the artist has been. There are no accidental drips or splashes (the signature rhetoric of much abstract expressionism). These grey snakes, black squiggles and smeared dashes of off-white tend to pull away from the edges of the canvas and, as if attracted through some internal gravity, weave around and through each other, like — here we go again — the activity in a cell; or the dance of distant galaxies; or the passage of thoughts from synapse to synapse in the brain’s interior; or... I ask the artist if he was thinking about subatomic string theory. “Well... it does enter into it” he replies, cautiously. And immediately we are pulled away from abstraction back into all that fecund busyness of the cosmos.

From his instinctively expressive early works to his more measured experiments with mark and gesture, Livingston has never let go of the deep analogical relationship that he perceives between the creative activity of painting and the self-propelled forces of biological life. Even as I write, I know that Livingston is experimenting with adding colour and other details to the new abstracts (although not for this exhibition), following another twist in the spiral of his practice. While it will likely be the visual delight of the works that will engage our attention, the kind of pleasure that emanates from the physical fact of paint will always return him (and those of us who let it) to a primary amazement at the physical universe itself.

Susan Gibson Garvey
Halifax, February 2005

25. Dave Hickey, “Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty” as found in Bill Beckley, Ed., *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetic*, New York: Allworth Press, 1998, p.16.

right: *Untitled #1*, 2004 (Cat. 55)
76.2 x 76.2 cm



below: *Untitled #5*, 2004 (Cat. 59)
121.9 x 182.9 cm



ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

ALEX LIVINGSTON was born in Kingston, Ontario in 1958. He grew up in Quebec and Ontario, and currently lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), Halifax, NS, and the Cooper Union, New York, NY, receiving a BFA from NSCAD in 1983, and at the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, England, receiving an MA in Fine Arts in 1995. He has also undertaken artist's residencies in Canada and England.

Livingston has exhibited his paintings in numerous solo exhibitions in public and commercial galleries across Canada, notably Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, ON (2002), The Tom Thomson Memorial Gallery, Owen Sound, ON (1999), Artspace, University of Waterloo, ON (1999), Gallery 111, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB (1998), Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, Corner Brook, NL (1997), Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS (1997, 1991 and 1985), Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, NB (1994), Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS (1989), and Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, NS (1986), as well as in artist-run centres in Halifax, such as Eye Level Gallery (1988) and the Khyber Centre for the Arts (1996). He has also participated in group exhibitions across Canada and internationally (in London, England, as well as in Bedford, MA and Washington DC, USA), and his work has been selected for several nationally touring group exhibitions of contemporary Canadian art, including three Marion McCain Atlantic Art Exhibitions (2000, 1997 and 1994, organized by the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, NB), and INNOVASCOTIA (organized by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1985). Livingston is represented in Ontario by Wynick/Tuck Gallery, and in the Atlantic region by Studio 21.

A visiting artist and panelist in various university and gallery settings in Canada and England, Livingston is presently Associate Professor of Fine Arts at NSCAD University, Halifax, NS. He has received several creation, project and travel grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as from the Culture Division of the Government of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Arts Council, and his work has been regularly reviewed in local and national media and arts journals. Livingston's paintings are included in private, corporate and public collections, most notably in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Museum London, the Nova Scotia Art Bank and the Canada Council Art Bank.

LIST OF WORKS

Dimensions in centimeters, height precedes width. All works collection of the artist unless otherwise noted.

1. *Young Alex Points Out the Exact Spot That He Saw the Tiger* 1983
oil on canvas
147.3 x 261.6
collection: Nova Scotia Art Bank, Halifax, NS
2. *Haven* 1985
oil on canvas
238.7 x 226.6
collection: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS
3. *Poplar* 1985
oil on canvas
121.9 x 91.4
4. *Cypresses* 1986
oil on canvas
216.0 x 289.0
collection: Private Collection
5. *Untitled* 1987
oil on canvas
122.0 x 122.0
collection: Purdy's Wharf, Halifax, NS
6. *Four Flowers* 1988
oil on canvas
151.5 x 205.5
collection: Canada Council Art Bank /
la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil des Arts
du Canada, Ottawa, ON
7. *Flowers* 1989
oil on canvas
139.5 x 170.5
collection: Canada Council Art Bank /
la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil des Arts
du Canada, Ottawa, ON
8. *Twist* 1989
oil on canvas
141.0 x 179.0
9. *Ribbon* 1989
oil on canvas
185.5 x 141.0
10. *Radiant Flower 1* 1991
76.2 x 61.0
oil on canvas
collection: Nova Scotia Art Bank, Halifax, NS
11. *Radiant Flower 2* 1991
76.2 x 61.0
oil on canvas
collection: Fred and Susan Holtz, Toronto, ON
12. *Earth Dreams* 1992
oil on canvas
139.7 x 213.4
13. *Snakes, Birds and Fish* 1992
oil on canvas
102.9 x 151.8
14. *Aesop's Hillside* 1993
oil on canvas
182.9 x 138.1
15. *Big Blue* 1993
oil on canvas
218.4 x 172.7
16. *Midnight Betrothal* 1994
oil on canvas
218.0 x 172.7
collection: Museum London, London, ON,
gift of the artist
17. *Cricket Song* 1994
oil on canvas
173.0 x 213.4
collection: Museum London, London, ON,
gift of the artist

18. *Walkabout* 1994
oil on canvas
218.4 x 172.7

19. *Heartland* 1995
oil on canvas
183.0 x 152.4

20. *Flora #1* 1995
oil on canvas
183.0 x 152.4

21. *Untitled* 1995
oil on canvas
50.8 x 45.4

22. *Flowers 2* 1996
oil on canvas
66.0 x 96.5
collection: Jan Peacock and Steve Higgins

23. *Untitled* 1996
oil on canvas
61.0 x 50.8

24. *Untitled (flowers, bird, insects)* 1996
oil on canvas
40.6 x 50.8

25. *Small Flowers #2* 1996
oil on canvas
25.4 x 30.5
collection: Cameron Graves Hayden, Halifax, NS

26. *Selections from Birds* 1998
oil on canvas
dimensions vary

27. *Selections from A History of Four-Footed
Beasts and Other Curiosities* 1997-99
oil on canvas
dimensions vary

28. *Untitled (small abstract #1)* 1997
oil on canvas
25.3 x 20.2

29. *Untitled (small abstract #2)* 1997
oil on canvas
30.3 x 25.4

30. *Untitled (small abstract #3)* 1997
oil on canvas
30.3 x 35.3

31. *Untitled (small abstract #4)* 1997
oil on canvas
35.5 x 45.5

32. *Untitled (small abstract #5)* 1997
oil on canvas
35.5 x 45.5

33. *Tiger and Abstraction* 1998
oil on canvas
40.6 x 101.6
collection: Fred and Elizabeth Fountain,
Halifax, NS

34. *Greyhound and Abstraction* 1998
oil on canvas
59.7 x 127.0

35. *Fox and Abstraction* 1998
oil on canvas
30.5 x 70.5

36. *Blackbird and Abstraction* 1998
oil on canvas
30.5 x 61.0
collection: Private Collection

37. *Jug 1* 1999
oil on canvas
199.4 x 168.9

38. *Scissors* 1999
oil on canvas
30.5 x 24.8
collection: Laura Graham Design, Halifax, NS

39. *Funnel* 1999
oil on canvas
30.5 x 24.8
collection: Heather Atiyah, Cape Breton, NS



installation view (above) and selections from (below) of *A History of Four-Footed Beasts and Other Curiosities*, 1997–99 (Cat. 27)



40. *Umbrella* 1999
oil on canvas
30.5 x 24.8
collection: Heather Atiyah, Cape Breton, NS

41. *Funnel with Abstract* 1999
oil on canvas
61.0 x 50.8

42. *Umbrella with Abstract* 1999
oil on canvas
122.1 x 91.4
collection: Blois, Nickerson and Bryson,
Halifax, NS

43. *Late One Night* 2001
acrylic on canvas
213.4 x 152.4

44. *I Can Hear You From Here* 2001
acrylic on canvas
175.3 x 142.2

45. *Early Morning* 2002
acrylic on canvas
121.9 x 147.3

46. *Water and Land Paintings (Series 2)* 2001–2
acrylic on canvas
18 parts, 20.3 x 25.4 each
collection: Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS,
purchased with matching funds from the
Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition
Assistance Program

47. *Water* 2003
oil and acrylic on canvas
151.1 x 195.6

48. *Water #1* 2003
lithograph on paper, edition 2/4
56.2 x 81.7 (image) 67.5 x 92.3 (paper)
(Courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, ON)

49. *Water #2* 2003
lithograph on paper, edition 2/5
56.2 x 81.6 (image) 67.3 x 92.2 (paper)
(Courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, ON)

50. *Water #3* 2003
lithograph on paper, edition 2/5
56.2 x 81.7 (image) 67.2 x 92.5 (paper)
(Courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, ON)



Tiger and Abstraction, 1998, 40.6 x 101.6 cm (Cat. 33)

51. *Mesh 1* 2003
oil on canvas
50.8 x 61.0

52. *Mesh 2* 2003
oil on canvas
61.0 x 76.2

53. *Mesh 3* 2004
oil on canvas
134.6 x 188.0

54. *Untitled* 2004
oil on canvas
40.6 x 50.8

55. *Untitled #1* 2004
oil on canvas
76.2 x 76.2

56. *Untitled #2* 2004
oil on canvas
76.2 x 76.2

57. *Untitled #3* 2004
oil on canvas
76.2 x 76.2

58. *Untitled #4* 2004
oil on canvas
121.9 x 182.9

59. *Untitled #5* 2004
oil on canvas
121.9 x 182.9

60. *Untitled #6* 2005
oil on canvas
121.9 x 121.9

61. *Untitled #7* 2005
oil on canvas
121.9 x 121.9

62. Selection of working drawings and pages
from sketchbooks, media and dimensions vary

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detail from *Untitled #5*, 2004 (Cat. 59)



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