

'I paint the land out of love'

For Ontario painter John Hartman, the scale of things is determined by their importance, not the rules of perspective. It's like the art produced by children: 'Here's me. Here's the Popsicle. It's a good thing. It's big.'

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Forty minutes by motorboat south of Britt — a forlorn Ontario town on the upper shore of Georgian Bay — there is a small group of private islands; some no more than an acre of glacier-sculpted granite. They are simultaneously isolated and alive with rich stories and memories of the land.

The local cottagers have their enchanted narratives that bump into each other in the midst of other more mundane conversations: about a fire started by a naked couple so intent on their lovemaking they failed to notice the trees being consumed by flames; about the wreck of the *Asia*, a passenger boat that broke up on the rocks a century ago; about the old man who spent years refurbishing an unsalvageable boat only, it seems, to avoid his wife's company.

Like all homespun tales, they have a mythic quality, even if the myths don't travel very far.

Painter and printmaker John Hartman, who has lived among the islands for years and knows their idiosyncratic chronicles intimately, paints them with geographic if sometimes eccentric accuracy, all the while gathering these conjured memories and imaginings onto the canvas.

"I choose to live in the area where I grew up," said Hartman, who was born in Midland, Ont., in 1950 and now lives in nearby Penetanguishene. "My experience of place is naturally intertwined with memory and reinvention."

Despite his abiding affection for the local, Hartman is shown and collected internationally. He has had solo shows in New York, Germany and Denmark and is widely represented in private, public and corporate collections, including the British Museum, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and, it seems from the list supplied by Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery, every bank and law firm around. "Many people have a great attachment to what John is doing," said Nicholas Metivier, director of Mira Godard, which is exhibiting a new collection of Hartman works starting today. "We have loyal clients who follow



'I get looser with the paint when I get close to finishing it,' says Hartman, whose new works at Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery are saturated with local legends. Right, Landslide at Harbour Breton, 1999.

his career closely and would never miss a new show."

Like Marc Chagall's folkloric paintings and much medieval art, Hartman's world is a mixture of the factual and the fantastical. No Group of Seven rocks devoid of humans here; no God-saturated monumental landscapes by Frederick Edwin Church. "The scale of things in my work is determined by their importance, not the rules of perspective. It's like the art produced by children: 'Here's me. Here's the Popsicle. It's a good thing. It's big.'"

Many Canadians will get a chance to see Hartman's expansive world-views up close, with the launch of *Big North*, a collection of Hartman works that will travel to five provinces over the next two years. Curated by Brian Meehan, director of the London Regional Art and Historical Museums in London, Ont., the show opened last week at Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art and features 15 large-scale oil paintings on



linen, the biggest of which is a vista-like 1.6 by four metres.

Hartman's method of working is a study in patience, leading to painterly fireworks. He will spend weeks making drawings in his handmade sketchbooks, then take a month, season, or longer to think through the composition: the various viewpoints, the detail to include in the raucous skyscape, how to portray his love for the land. His preparation of the canvas — which he stretches himself, sizes with rabbit-skin glue, then covers with titanium-white gesso — can take up to a month.

He compresses the desire and will to paint until "the inertia and the momentum pushes me so hard I can't not do the painting."

Like the canvas preparation, the painting too starts slowly. "I get looser with the paint when I get close to finishing it," Hartman said. "The thickest paint comes on at the end: Sometimes the final gesture may be a four-inch wide brush loaded with cadmium red." Matthew Hart, in his insightful catalogue essay, refers to Hartman's work as recording this "rapturous attack," this "scandalously blatant plunder."

This fluidity of paint, the colours

that meld into and nudge each other, together with the anecdotal nature of Hartman's imagery — he sometimes even provides a quick rendering of himself in the foreground, sketching furiously — is not to everyone's liking. It is less idea-driven, less didactic, than much art produced these days.

But beauty in art, or the landscape, or the role of narrative, is in the eye and affection of the beholder. Hartman is among a number of current Canadian landscape painters who are helping to redefine our vision of nature. They have no time for the "painting is dead" argument and examine with irony

or love or personal history the role of the land in shaping our waning century. Among this loose convergence are Eleanor Bond, Jeffrey Spalding and Tim Zuck. Spalding, known for his translucent and vertiginous views of Niagara Falls, "paints the landscape, I think, because it terrifies him," Hartman said. "I paint the land out of love."

Zuck is a particularly intriguing contrast. He owns the island next to Hartman's and, although the two artists sometimes paint a similar scene, they could not be more different. Zuck's work is marked by ironic detachment, a precision of edge and form, and a stillness that almost vibrates. "Zuck vacuum-cleans the landscape," Hartman said, "while I dump the compost bin in it."

The "compost bin" in Big North includes paintings from Georgian Bay as well as Newfoundland, where Hartman has visited extensively. For those interested in smaller works, the Mira Godard show, which runs until Oct. 9, features new paintings and pastels. Inspired by his travels through Newfoundland, Scotland and his beloved Georgian Bay, the new work is unmistakably Hartman: colourful, frenetic and saturated with local legends.

If you could float over the land, all the while listening to what people say about their connections to it, the visions in Hartman's paintings are the sort you would be likely to see. Painter David Milne said that "feeling is the power that drives art." It's certainly what drives Hartman.



Big North is on display at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, in Toronto's Ford Centre, until Oct. 31; at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in Owen Sound from Nov. 19 to Jan. 16; Kelowna Art Gallery in Kelowna, B.C., Feb. 5 to March 18; Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon May 5 to June 25; The Nickle Arts Museum in Calgary July 7 to Sept. 22, 2000; the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador in St. John's from Nov. 17 to Jan. 21, 2001; and the London Regional Art and Historical Museums March 5 to April 23, 2001.