

Selections *from the*  
University *of* Toronto  
Art Collections



COLLECTORS' EDITION

PETER O'BRIEN

'Consumed with that which it was  
nourished by':  
Will Gorlitz's Literary Landscapes

A watery, vertiginous landscape. No horizon line, other than the edge of the canvas, to delineate an upper boundary or localize the purview of the gaze. Our feet all but capable of walking upon and through this constructed sea-edge. Transient intellectual lichens – twenty-five sheets of paper coloured by word and image – languishing for a time on the rocks and on the skin of the water, yet even now being absorbed back into nature. An insistent colouring by nature of these human pages already underway; and a tentative colouring of nature by the papery tools of hand and mind. Yellow flowers – long-stemmed freesias – perch like little feet on the surface of the pages. Each rectangular leaf a raft of fleeting information. And enveloping all this, seeping through the scene before us, is the materiality of paint that has ushered these things into existence. Small hatch marks that fashion and open up a site of distance and definition. The gallery's lighting reflected in narrow shards off the individual bristle strokes of the brush.

Is it possible to separate this visual image from language: both the texts that we use to explain this expanse to ourselves and the words that the painted pages conjure and intone? Is it possible to gather this work into our senses ('music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts,' said T. S. Eliot, in 'The Dry Salvages,' lines 210–12) before language gathers us and defines our response? Is it even desirable to remove words, those engines of thought, and their attendant historical heft from our visual apprehension of an abstract turn of colour or an object we see presented on the surface before us? Are we so contaminated by words – flirtatious at times, lugubrious at others; these strange things that are always desirous of definition, are forever tapping us on the shoulder – that we can only absorb the world's forms through these little knuckled marks on paper? This work, a random carpet of textual influence and image, needs words, seems to revel in their intervention, their meddling. Perhaps it's not so much 'contamination' as it is 'colouring.'

*Litteratus with Flowers*, like many of Will Gorlitz's paintings and installations, records the half-audible conversation between the represented image and the word-saturated language that we permit ourselves to be formed by. The painting was originally part of an installation that consisted of six paintings: four large paintings each measuring 201 cm x 267 cm (the other three were *Litteratus with Flames*, *Litteratus with Vessel*, and *Litteratus*





Will Gorlitz, Canadian (1952–)  
*Litteratus with Flowers*, 1989  
 oil on canvas, 201 x 267 cm  
 Faculty Club, University of Toronto

*with Fruit*); two smaller, narrow paintings measuring 201 cm x 97 cm (*Litteratus with Concealed Face* and *Litteratus with Face Concealed*); and book covers hot-pressed by such words as 'EXILE' and 'REFUGE' that were placed on the wall on either side of each painting,<sup>1</sup> the entire construct forming a sort of expansive library of two books. The two narrow paintings – each of which showed two stacks of books below and above two hands holding, 'like quotation marks,' an opened book on which was pictured a hand-concealed face – functioning as monumental book spines (Gorlitz, *Conversation*). The installation was not so much about literature and its methodological presence. Rather, the work was *litteratus*: a more abstract, generic understanding of the way words form themselves into and out of narrative, commentary, and theory. This specific painting, *Litteratus with Flowers*, is

1 Originally, Gorlitz had titled this collection of paintings *Catharsis*, and this individual painting *Catharsis with Flowers*. He now considers the original title 'a mistake'; the group of paintings 'was not meant to be a catharsis on my part' and the 'convoluted sense of humour' of the original title, he thinks, just gets in the way. Gorlitz quotations are taken from a conversation with the artist, August 1996.



but one page of that original installation, synecdoche for the larger show and the presence of the infinite meanderings of language within us.

The painting presents the viewer with an interplay of individual moments of apprehension: an intellectual or narrative display scattered in twenty-five discrete movements, and the passing moment of nature that engulfs these human intimations and marks. The work, says Gorlitz, is 'a completed state that exists in the viewer, not in reality' (Conversation). Nature is here not fashioned in a photographic manner and is certainly not oblivious to the pages that have been formally assembled upon its integument. There is a contrived presence to the rocks and water and the pages. This is not an instance of pathetic fallacy, where human emotions are acted out in the artist's presentation of nature (Wordsworth is particularly taken by Nature's *human* ways: 'Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song! ... And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves!' ['Immortality' Ode, lines 172, 191-92]; or consider the dreamy, pastoral scenes of Antoine Watteau: *The Embarkation for Cythera*, for example, which was once known as the masterpiece of French masterpieces, is circumscribed by comforting trees, gentle, smooth hills, and a dozen or so chubby cherubs leading the way). But neither is it a portrayal of dispassionate nature disregarding these humble human offerings. Perhaps it is an elaborate conceit of both nature and the intellect, each contrived by Gorlitz, each element there to serve a pictorial purpose.

Writing about a different series of paintings by Gorlitz, Barbara Fischer states that the artist 'ruptures the discourse of realism ... His work fissures the imaginary unity and the promise of representation, and in these gaps shows not only that which cannot be represented, but also that which continually exceeds representation, namely the real' (14). I am not sure what Fischer means here by the 'real' (perhaps it is the way that each individual imagination, complete with its own visual and intellectual detritus, speculates the world into being), but the phrase 'promise of representation' seems to capture a distinctive Gorlitz flavour. He does not want to offer us representation, but rather the allusion to, the desire for, representation. These are all objects we see before us: flowers, rocks, water, spent paper. But together they do not recall any image we have seen. They are not locked in a time or a place that we remember. These objects are not some instant of mirrored nature, or if they are, they are parenthetically composed. The scene is a weighted, infinitely allusive assemblage that is both informed by and burdened by language, textual image and nature, or in the words of William Shakespeare, the scene seems to be 'consumed with that which it was nourished by' (Sonnet 73).

Perhaps what Gorlitz presents the viewer is some sort of painterly uncertainty principle. Werner Heisenberg stated in 1927 that the velocity and the position of a subatomic particle cannot both be measured accurate-



ly at the same time. Measuring the position of an electron, for example, involves a relatively large uncertainty in our ability to measure its velocity, and vice versa. Gorlitz's canvases and installations often leave us on this shifting ground between the 'particles' we know as image and intellect. The more we choose to follow the path of the image and all of its non-verbal intonations, the farther we get from the intellectual and cerebral discourse that informs this work – the wealth of reading and thinking that hovers like a scrim before the painting. And the more we follow the path of thought and language and discourse that enfolds the painting, the more we remove ourselves from the physical delight of paint on canvas, of colour's rich legacy, and of the image's hold on our unconscious. Is this painting located in some tensional middle ground, where we can encounter either this fabricated nature or our intellect's serpentine windings, but cannot experience both simultaneously? Does one world view necessarily disrupt our apprehension of the other? Will we always be destined to migrate, in some excited state and with some uncertainty, from one to the other? If there is no such thing as pure, unfiltered Nature, is there likewise no such thing as pure, unfiltered consciousness?

In a series of Gorlitz paintings from the late 1980s, this nourishing, consuming dance between the picture and the text (both actual and metaphorical) is particularly intertwined. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* is a series of sixty-three drawings (each measuring 25 cm x 33 cm) stacked three high to compose twenty-one parts. The oil pastel that Gorlitz used was applied directly to the text and book paper of an English translation of Freud's contentious 1905 text of the same name (where Freud first discussed his theory of the Oedipus complex). On the top and bottom panel of these mini-triptychs are a series of apple-pear groupings, one apple and one pear slowly circling around one another in a random, transmuting still-life. The apple and the pear are joined on the page by a primordial, dark ooze as though they have sprung from the dankness of the earth or are about to be swallowed up by the earth's blackness. The middle panel displays a series of common objects that engage our curiosity precisely because of their commonality: a disembodied electric heating element glowing red-hot (a curious image to rest on a page of text); a man's black umbrella half unfurled; a shaving mirror reflecting a black belt; a hand stretched out over the page, partially covered by a blue cloth.

These images seem simultaneously to be over-choreographed and quite arbitrary. If they were separated from the Freud shade through which they peer, they would be termed articulate and perhaps passing strange but not particularly disruptive or emphatic works. As it is, they are formed upon and surrounded by the canvas of Freud's words. We come to these humble drawings with some understanding of the power of images and their overtones (merely referencing Freud is itself enough to do that). This suite of drawings comments on, literally on, a text that at first seems to have no



relationship to it. The mind wants to connect, to explain, to be led through a story that does not have a foundation or story-line. We see the Freud text flirting with the oil pastel, fading in and out of our sight: '... clarity or certainty. For ... first, the novelty of the ... and secondly, the ... is completely ... to make two ... out wide future prospects ... we saw previously [86f] that it was possible to ... a multiplicity of innate sexual constitutions from ... in the development of erotogenic zones, so we can now make a similar attempt by including the *indirect* sources of sexual excitation. ...'<sup>2</sup> All of the markings, both textual and painterly, become symbolic, laden with a sort of chiaroscuro of tension and positively reverberational with innuendo and allusion.

But these items – shoehorn, shoes, harmonica, duct tape – are also familiar moments from our everyday life. The eye's natural intention is towards reading large swaths of the text, even though chunks of it have been imaged away. Are these sexual images of fruit copulating? Do the drawings of the umbrella and the hanger and the shoehorn and the harmonica nudge male viewers towards some prurient phallic memory? Does the image of the open door with which this series begins lead us towards our own personal sexual recitations? Gorlitz seems to persuade us towards some sense of primordial memory, with both the text and the images locked in a symbiotic embrace, what Jerry McGrath calls 'the tension between drives and decorum' (9).

In Gorlitz's most recent major work, *Real Time*, the audience is again placed in a wedged space between thought and picture, this time between nourishing memory and consuming fire – or is it perhaps more accurate to say nourishing fire and consuming memory? Exhibited at Toronto's Power Plant gallery in 1994, *Real Time* is part didactic theorizing about the vagaries of time and part representational invocation of landscape: human, imaginative, and natural. (Simon Schama points out in his recent book *Landscape and Memory* that the Dutch word '*landschap*, like its Germanic root, *Landschaft*, signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction' [10].) On opposite walls of the gallery space Gorlitz placed paintings: on one side a large triptych of burning grasses, caught in an instant as though by a high-speed photograph – one fugitive moment wrestled into the permanence of paint. On the other wall there hung three series of black-and-white photographs of three female faces (as it so happens, Gorlitz's daughters), again caught, localized, in a moment of fleeting time. These 'realistic' faces, of course, both reveal and hide information. Too much specific data eclipses more subtle knowledge, and photographs (factual, reliable photographs),

2 See top right section, page 8, of Jerry McGrath's catalogue of Gorlitz paintings (*Three Essays*) for these words drifting in and out of view.



as Margaret Atwood reminds us, sometimes exist where we look for them. 'This Is a Photograph of Me,' she writes:

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre  
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where  
precisely, or to say  
how large or small I am:  
the effect of water  
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,  
eventually  
you will be able to see me.) (lines 15-26)

Surrounding Gorlitz's nine photographs, in random fashion, were thirty sheet-metal panels that provided a cloudy, somewhat rumpled reflection of the space, where viewers may have been able to see themselves, if they looked hard enough. On the floor in the middle of the gallery space Gorlitz had placed sixty open cardboard boxes, fifty-four of them empty. In the six closest to the photographs of the girls he placed six video monitors facing upwards, each one frenetically counting off in the blink of an eye (thirty frames per second, the standard measure of videotaping) from one to thirty over and over again, a sort of high-speed, looping, digital Sisyphus. These monitors became the time-elapsing cinders of a digital fire flickering in warm red and white light before our eyes.

There are, in this overheated age, a multitude of times through which we all pass. In Gorlitz's statement for the *Real Time* show he evokes the two extremes: 'In our culture there is a preoccupation with the immediate present that systematically ignores the things that endure or seem eternal. My project proposes to create a work comprised of dissimilar media – to affirm the sustained and the eternal along with the immediate present, as mutually interdependent paradigms of time' (3). *Real Time* yokes various times together, from the ephemeral, new cardboard boxes spotting thirty ticks of the clock to the permanence of memory and its inevitable mutations. ('Eternity,' said William Blake, 'is in love with the productions of time' [line 10].) The painting of burning grasses, a small patch of nature in the midst of earthly transubstantiation, becomes a formalistic, localizing representation of one intangible moment. These ignited grasses do not seem to threaten the whole of nature. They are, like the landscape of *Litteratus*



with *Flowers*, or Monet's water lilies or van Gogh's skies, controlled, painterly creations that evoke but do not mimic nature. The faces of the girls are likewise locked within the permanence of a fixed speck of time, each one looking in upon the surfeit of time here summoned within the gallery's spaces. Perhaps, like any parent, Gorlitz is merely attempting to record the fleeting permanence of his children's faces – fixing the instant through photographs – while the natural ability that children possess (more so than hyper-conscious adults, it seems) to defy this fixing tumbles forward through time.<sup>3</sup>

Hal Foster has written of 'alternative visualities' to refer to the ways of seeing located in the unconscious or the body or the past (xiv). Gorlitz's paintings often invoke the multitude of visualities anchored to the letters that we use to compose words that we then form into stories, which we hope will explain to us the things that will forever remain beyond our capacity to comprehend. For Gorlitz this is perhaps related to the fact that when he arrived in Canada from Buenos Aires at the age of six he spoke only German and Spanish, and had to acquire, at his new home of Winnipeg, the ability to re-understand his world through a new set of signs and visual marks on the page. (Michael Ondaatje in his poetic memoir of Ceylon, *Running in the Family*, recalls through the filter of the present the Sinhalese alphabet he learned as a child: 'The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid ... Moon Coconut. The bones of a lover's spine' [83].) Perhaps there was a sense both of exile and refuge within the words that Gorlitz acquired within his child's absorbent mind. Perhaps these letters that formed new sounds in his ears and imagination were his first memorable visual images. Perhaps he saw images no different from the way he saw those strange, cuneiform markings we call 'letters.'

Can language or nature or the imagination bring us any closer to the real? Or is it enough to paint or talk about the otherness of the world that surrounds us and is separate from us? In his book *Real Presences*, George Steiner speaks of artists and their task of telling us 'of the irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world. Only art can go some way towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer inhuman otherness of matter' (140). Gorlitz paints this desire to understand both the natural and the cerebral, knowing that, at best, we can do little more than follow a charmed bend of colour here or an intoxicating bit of text there. We are bound by the tension between two things we can never fully understand. And at the end of all this talking, after we have pushed aside the few

3 In another temporal twist, this time from 1987, Gorlitz used a photograph taken of him by one of his daughters as the central image in a series of three large paintings entitled *Bad Faith*.



clouds that this written commentary has placed between the work and the viewer, we are still, fortunately, in the presence of a painting called *Litteratus with Flowers*, which makes its own commentary with paint and these curious yellow flowers that stand upon these floating pages.

For their assistance with this article, I would like to thank Patrizia Libralato from Sable-Castelli Gallery for her loaning of Gorlitz material; Ruth Weider from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection for her transportation of thoughts and person; and curator/art critic Liz Wylie for her confident and informed editorial hand.

#### WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Selected Poems*. New York: Simon and Schuster 1978
- Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In *Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed Northrop Frye. New York: Modern Library 1953
- Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber 1959
- Fischer, Barbara. 'Perspective 86: Will Gorlitz and Nancy Johnson.' Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario 1986
- Foster, Hal, ed. Preface. *Vision and Visualities*. Seattle: Bay Press 1988
- Gorlitz, Will. Artist's Statement. *Artline*. Toronto: The Power Plant, January-June 1994
- Conversation with the artist, August 1996
- McGrath, Jerry, ed. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Artspeak Gallery 1989
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1982
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Knopf 1995
- Steiner, George. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989