

Beyond the Wall

CHRISTIAN ECKART moves painting into sculpture

BY MARK CHEETHAM

PHOTO CHRISTOPHER DEW





PREVIOUS PAGES: Glass Hexagonal Perturbation – “Hive Brane” (detail) 2011 114 painted aluminum frames and custom-coloured translucent glass 4 x 10 x 2.5 m COLLECTION LI KA SHING KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTE OF ST. MICHAEL’S HOSPITAL, TORONTO PHOTO CHRISTOPHER DEW

RIGHT: Curved Monochrome Paintings 1999 Acrylic urethane on aluminum 1.82 m x 99 cm x 30.4 cm each; (BACK GALLERY) Small Curved Monochrome Painting 1999 Acrylic urethane on aluminum 44.4 x 38.1 x 25.4 cm PHOTO GALERIE THADDEUS ROPAC, SALZBURG

OPPOSITE: The Absurd Vehicle 2005–11 Extreme-effect acrylic urethane and powder-coat on aluminum and steel with rubber, stainless steel and various automotive components 3.3 m x 4.26 m diameter COLLECTION THE ARTIST



Anyone who frequents downtown Toronto will soon have the chance to see a dramatically new, beautiful and challenging work by the Calgary-born artist Christian Eckart. This past August, his expansive *Glass Hexagonal Perturbation – “Hive Brane”* (2011) was installed in the east lobby of the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael’s Hospital. The work commands and articulates space, stimulating us to reconceive both painting and sculpture—and, indeed, the place of art-making itself.

Eckart has always asked a lot of painting, and this commission stretches him and the medium to optimal effect. More than ten metres long, four metres high and two-and-a-half metres deep, *Hive Brane* is a colourful web of doubled-sided glass panes floating effortlessly in the open, spare lobby space. The work performs dynamically in the otherwise subdued context. Through a subtly tuned palette of 14 custom colours and a range of geometries, Eckart at once harmonizes his piece with the predominant earth and wood hues of the lobby space itself and greatly extends and enlivens its chromatic impact. The work’s translucent panels play with the abundant natural light that flows in from large southern and eastern exposures. While *Hive Brane* looks like a painting from some viewpoints, it works in 360 degrees and isn’t flat. More than an aesthetic object for our delectation, however, the piece must function in at least three ways: to welcome and redistribute both light and people from outside the building, to seduce the eye with its kaleidoscopic refractions, and to manage the interior space in a practical way by creating a semi-private corridor within an otherwise open area. Relationships between form, surface and frame bear a strong relationship to a long-term fundamental of Eckart’s work: to focus on two primary components of a painting—frame and panel.

Eckart’s paintings have articulated a dialogue with sculpture since he came to prominence in New York in the 1980s. Thirty years later, he isn’t so much a painter or a sculptor as a meta-artist whose material propositions make us think and feel. “I consider my work to be a kind of philosophy of art articulated through the creation and manufacture of objects that embody particular sets of concerns,” he wrote regarding his 2011 exhibition “The Absurd Vehicle and Other Propositions” at the McClain Gallery in Houston. He continued, “I do not think of the things I make as artworks but, rather, as propositions for, or potential, artworks. Ultimately my feeling is that art is a verb and is something that occurs in the space between a percipient and any device that might be found occupying a space where things generally known as artworks tend to show up.”

The Toronto “perturbation” acknowledges the need to communicate with both groups and individual spectators in a busy area. The entire work relates sculpturally to its large, containing space while also connecting

more intimately with the body through its individual triangular panels; the painting makes sweeping gestures by virtue of its scale and vibrancy, but can also readily address a solo viewer because its faceted surface offers small-scale details, shards of a larger work that act like individual canvasses for a more personal gaze. These individual panels are identical from both sides, but as the piece as a whole angles in from either end, the geometrical grid softens to embrace the space, and it can never appear flat like a traditional painting. Complex in its design and fabrication (manufactured to Eckart’s exacting standards by Toronto’s Soheil Mosun Limited), the work’s considerable presence nonetheless comes from its simplicity. *Hive Brane* reminds us that painting addresses viewers both visually and physically; this carefully machined yet somehow organic colour-generator has the ability to move people.

Art in publicly accessible places should be effective for a broad range of viewers. The beauty of Eckart’s installation—its reflective and translucent qualities, its vibrant yet finely tuned palette, its geometrical rhythms—can satisfy the casual passerby as well as the connoisseur of abstract painting and sculpture. If it remains the case that many people come to art expecting to see a demonstration of skill and authorship, his work again makes good. By examining an Eckart piece up-close, one can readily appreciate its distinctive details: for example, the unique design qualities of the aluminum armature that supports the glass panels in the St. Mike’s work. Translucent colours and hard support exist in delicate equilibrium. No two triangles are identical; there is no repeating pattern. It’s clear how this bodywork of complex angles and brackets holds the glass panels, yet, at the same time, the colour soars free.

Though calibrated to specific buildings, Eckart’s works also deliver the pleasures of connection with the international art world. For those familiar with the recent history of art, the pieces are replete with carefully considered affinities. Eckart has spelled out the associations. In 2003, he organized an exhibition called “Space Vehicles: Allusion Objectified” in Houston, bringing together eight artists who, in his words, “represent some of the more interesting, albeit disparate, markers in the terrain of post-abstract and





Hexagonal Perturbation 2007
Extreme-effect acrylic urethane on
aluminum 1.9 m x 1.37 m x 7.6 cm

post-pop or non-pop artistic production. They break down unrigorously into two groups—a 'senior' group including Donald Judd, John McCracken, Imi Knoebel and Marc Vaux and a 'junior' group comprised of Julia Mangold, Julian Opie, Gerwald Rockenschaub and myself." On this external axis, too, his works are propositions, questions. As he reported in another text from 2002, "I am an artist who emerged, arguably, at the end of the history of painting and the end of the history of abstraction. My relationship to both is what I would call archeological and anthropological. My interest in the tropes of abstraction and the imperatives that drove both their development and reception is the way in which they can be used to describe the civilization from which they emerged and evolved."

Eckart's installations are beautiful—no question—but what of their self-titled quality of "perturbation"? We might inquire about the implied unease, and question to what ends they aim to unsettle us. In some of Eckart's earlier paintings—the dark and deep *Power Chord Cycle* (1989–90), now in the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, or his exquisitely honed *Curved Monochromes* (1992–ongoing), whose polished surfaces seductively reflect the viewer's presence—beauty is something of a Trojan Horse, a vehicle for the penetration of our consciousness. Following the lead of the Danish intellectual Tor Nørretranders in *The User Illusion* (1991), Eckart believes that "most of what goes on in a person's brain doesn't emerge in their consciousness." To access this level of submerged awareness, Eckart effectively extends the selectivity of consciousness in his art, culling the customary fascination with superficial visual information to forge an aesthetic—but never aestheticized—distillate of our perceptions, emotions and fundamental nature. In an unfinished, unpublished text, Eckart comes close to Nørretranders's thoughts; he suspects that "much of our response to an artwork...is not informational in nature, but rather poetic and/or exformational." Similarly, Eckart muses, our reaction to works of art "seems to take place non-consciously, with only a small fraction of the impressions actually filtering through to conscious awareness." His new works seek to engage us on this level.

The visual and technical refinements needed to achieve this quality of depth can seem less important once they have reminded us of our

unconscious selves. For Eckart, "beauty" may be a necessary function in gaining access to a deeper property: the sublime, or what he often refers to as a "meta-sublime." If these works deflect us from our usual unthinking aesthetic habits and give us access to new levels of sophistication or profundity, it is arguably because of what some scientists suggest are analogies—even homologies—between perceptual and neurological geometries and the worlds we perceive and build. Put simply, we may literally see through hexagons. In her 2007 *Echo Objects*, the University of Chicago art historian Barbara Maria Stafford claims that "there appears to be an echoic relationship between the carpentered outer world of edges and our staked-out mind-brain."

Do Eckart's perturbations resonate with us because parts of the brain "echo" the structures of geometric abstraction and vice versa? Could this echoic stimulation produce and explain the effect of the sublime, that awe-inspiring sense of connection with and diminutiveness in the presence of the cosmic? These are momentous questions.

Eckart's works have not been as readily visible in Canada as those who appreciate his art might wish. While his pieces are found in several public and private collections in this country, and while he has shown periodically in Calgary and Toronto, his new installation allows us to engage with his ideas on a different plane. A permanent work has the advantage of soliciting interactions under varying circumstances and over time—interactions that include its evolving relationship to other large-scale urban art. If *Hive Brane* effectively develops the outside/inside, street/lobby interplay specifically for the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute, the work could be placed in conversation with other ambitious, accessible artworks.

At the moment, such a conversation is eminently possible in downtown Toronto, thanks to James Turrell's *Straight Flush* (2009), installed in the lobby of the Bay Adelaide Centre, a few blocks from St. Mike's. The artists' works share several qualities. Both pieces are prominent from the street and inside their respective architectural contexts. They are semi-public, space-defining sculptural works that depend on light for their effect. And both assert the transformative potency of art. Turrell's *Straight Flush* consists of five large, vertical, rectangular fields of colour recessed into a massive marble wall and facing a glass curtain wall; changes in hue and intensity across the five elements are accomplished by artificial backlighting. Each recessed light field can be viewed as singular, or as in concert with the others. While Turrell says that the glowing panels "work in a sequence, together," his work—however kinetic—feels very much like a series of paintings. Eckart's nearby *Hive Brane* is more palpably sculptural.

Eckart's personal, unpublished notes on his practice resonate with his Toronto work, located in a hospital research institute. He writes, "It has always been my belief that the most radical qualities of artworks, over the long term, are the perennial ones: beauty, grace, elegance, dignity, simplicity, depth, slowness and benevolence. If we consider the conceit of avant-garde practice in general, that certain gestures are somehow for the good of the community, what, then, is the nature of a *healing artwork*?" *Glass Hexagonal Perturbation* – "*Hive Brane*" is an answer. Its healing potential lies in its ability to reduce and reorganize excess visual and corporeal stimulation precisely through these perennial but all too rare qualities. It aims to harmonize with—and thus strengthen—the fundamental elements of our perceptual apparatus. It is an encouragement to take reorganized ways of seeing back into a communal space. ■