

TIM GARDNER

APRIL 17 TO JUNE 7, 2009

We invited Vancouver photographer Stephen Waddell to interview Tim Gardner with an understanding that the relationship between their work might not be immediately apparent: Waddell works in large scale photographs and Gardner works in the more intimate scale of watercolour. By initiating this conversation we hoped to draw out questions that consider the unique relationship between photography and painting, in particular in light of both Waddell's and Gardner's interest in figurative painting and its relation to the landscape. This is an excerpt from a longer interview that will be published by the Contemporary Art Gallery in the summer of 2009.

Stephen Waddell: Tim, let's start. Tell me what influenced you as a young artist and when did you start taking your painting seriously?

Tim Gardner: OK, I guess my first influence was in high school art class looking through the art books and I was struck by a painting by Eric Fischl, "sleep walker" I think it's called. The boy is standing in the kiddie pool, I think he's masturbating. Fischl's work opened my eyes to what was possible in terms of painting and drawing pictures. _____

SW: How old were you at that time?

TG: Probably about 17 or so. _____

SW: I guess that comes to my next question, and so in a sense would you say that you always wanted to be a figurative painter?

TG: From that point on I was mainly interested in figurative painting. _____

SW: What's interesting about Fischl, or at least his early pictures is that he confronted us with narratives, the history of painting and it was figurative and that meant something at that time. Still means something, but, it's different now. But was that the first kind of art that kind of struck you?

TG: Yeah. I guess it was just a matter of identifying with the subject matter, the person depicted in the painting that led me to the kind of art I was making when I started to get serious about it, which were the pictures of my older brother and his friends partying. That was the first major body of work that I did. That came out of wanting to connect with someone or a way of painting friends for myself to hang

out with. That sounds kind of sad, but that's how it began. From there I developed an interest in masculine archetypes, which continues now. This interest has informed other influences as well. I looked back at Velàzquez and Manet, John Singer Sergeant, and those kind of figurative painters. And the whole tradition which leads up to Fischl and Attila Richard Lukacs. So I became very interested in that whole lineage, in oil painting on a grand scale. That carried through my university years. Until I got to New York and started to experience some of those paintings first hand, and that changed my relationship to them. I think it's because the way I was learning initially was through text books. I was looking at these figurative paintings but 4 x 6 inch size. I guess I didn't really understand the scale of them. Once I got to New York I made an effort to seek out Attila Richard Lukacs and I started working for him actually, I spent two years working in his studio. I was also being encouraged to look at the popular figurative painters at that time like John Currin, Richard Phillips and Lisa Yuskavage. _____

SW: So when you began as a figurative painter you opted to use those sources. You opted to use photography, and not paint from a model, not to seek out older ways of working and observation. And that is irrefutably part of painting, I would say. And so in a sense all of those painters in New York that you mentioned were borrowing from the Gerhard Richter model of painting from photographs. Was that something you thought about? Or was that just the natural first approach?

TG: Looking at Richter and the photo-based aspect of painting was the permission part of it, that permission said it was ok to paint from photography. I never really thought about it too much until recently. The whole idea of projecting images on the canvas and going from there leaves out an important aspect of painting, the drawing part of it. I see it as a fundamental aspect of painting. So when I was projecting images on the canvas and painting them I guess I just wasn't always satisfied with the process. _____

SW: The idea of 'permission' is interesting. It seems that you started without doubting the Richter model but what happened once you did?

TG: Well I think what happened with me was that I was constantly hearing about this oil painting lineage that I was a part of and I wasn't necessarily that interested in it anymore. And I ended up in my second year of grad school going home for vacation and just doing watercolours, because it seemed natural and accessible at the time.

SW: So you're working through sources as you have described and watercolour offered brevity and a more open strategy for you than oil painting. So how did your subject matter differ once you began the shift to watercolour?

TG: In the beginning I was using basically the same subject matter once I switched to watercolour. Soon after that I started incorporating a great deal of landscape. That's where some technical difficulties had arisen for me when I was painting in oil. Initially I was making large oil paintings of single figures against black backgrounds that didn't take very long to finish. Then painting large landscapes required more time than I felt necessary. I was then more interested in moving through these images and ideas at a faster pace. So watercolour offered me a way of working faster and smaller in scale. _____

SW: Yes I see how that shift to watercolour and reducing scale worked to get what you wanted to say out. I see the smaller scale as having maintained that relationship to larger figurative influences. If you see it that way, do you think that has to do with how they are made?

TG: The first watercolours were of similar imagery, basically the same subject matter. There were figures on dark backgrounds, they were like night scenes of people on tracks and the like and then when I started to incorporate landscape it really opened up and really changed the way I was painting and thinking about it. _____

SW: In what ways were those?

TG: It changed who I was looking at for one thing. That meant I stopped as much looking at Velasquez and all those kind of figurative painters and more at landscape based painters working on a more intimate scale like Casper David Friedrich, and a Russian painter named Nicholas Roerich. I started thinking more about the relation of the figure to the landscape. What that meant, in terms of the subject. How people had depicted it before and how I was thinking about it now. _____

BIOS

Internationally, Canadian artist Tim Gardner is well-known for his precise watercolor paintings and oil pastel drawings. He incorporates the Canadian landscape into much of his work, often pairing it with a lone figure, drawing a contentious parallel between the wildness of nature and the unpredictability of human behaviour. Gardner has had numerous solo exhibitions internationally, most recently at The National Gallery, London (2007) and SF MOMA, San Francisco (2006). His exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery will be the first solo exhibition of his work in a public Canadian gallery. Gardner is represented by 303 Gallery, New York.

Stephen Waddell studied in Vancouver receiving a BA from Simon Fraser University and an MFA from University of British Columbia. From his beginnings as a painter, Waddell relied on snapshots and Polaroid photographs as studies for his paintings. This process eventually inverted itself. In the late 1990s Waddell began using his understanding of painting to make photographic images full-time. He has shown in Canada most recently in a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2008, as well as exhibited throughout Europe at Compositions, Berlin (2006); Kunstforum Baloise, Basel (2006); and Schirmer/Mosel Showroom, Munich (2004). Waddell is represented by Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver and Toronto, and Galerie Tanit in Munich.

Our education programmes are generously sponsored by Connor, Clark and Lunn.

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ISBN: 978-1-897302-34-7

The Contemporary Art Gallery is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council, the BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch and the BC Arts Renaissance Fund which is administered by Vancouver Foundation. We are grateful for the support of Vancouver Foundation and our members, donors and volunteers.