

## Road Trip Pictures

By Neil Wedman

Pat Service's Road Trip is the destination, not the journey.

I wrote that, more or less with a straight face, and will let it stand since these austere, map-like paintings seem to occupy a pivotal juncture in the excursion of Service's art. Painted in 2013, the Road Trip pictures are not really the final destination but a concrete expression of the transformations Service's work has undergone and continues to practice. Based on recollections of an actual road trip taken a few years earlier through B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan, these paintings relate the overland travel with the abbreviated language of visual dream notes. The images formed by calmly deliberate gestural strokes and solid forms, sit on the surfaces of the canvases each under-painted with a different colour; deep blue, deep purple, dark green, acid orange, relating the passing scenery with the visual urgency of road signs.

Of the group, two remarkable compositions most strongly relate to this comparison. *Corner*, an Edward Hopper-like set portraying a building at the edge of town and *Directions*, a sparse grid of street poles and edges that centres on the depiction of a few road signs that the very painting itself resembles. Part of the reason for this likeness is that both compositions are formatted to a square 42 x 42 inches directing viewers' initial reading to be impactful and total, taking in the whole scene at a glance. *Corner* has a slight suggestion of narrative contemplation as two strokes of paint that delineate the street lead a person's eye to the unknowable area around the corner of the building. But that curiosity is defused by a fire hydrant placed in lower left quadrant of the composition and, pictorially, in the middle of the intersection, where it doesn't belong. The enigma of the fire hydrant's placement is a tangible compositional conceit and the mystery of the other side of the building is easily forgotten in its presence.

Except for the rendering of the signage in *Directions* and the grounding colour fields, dark forest green in this one and regal purple on *Corner*, there are no solid areas of paint in either picture, both being essentially line renderings and very reductive paintings. The strength and authority of these paintings is, then, in the line. Some are thicker than others, especially when depicting objects that look like lines anyway, like lampposts. And some lines are in different colours demarcating different edges of different forms. The lines are begun with a slim brush loaded with paint and dragged confidently along the canvas until the paint is spent and the trail all but peters out entirely. Looking at the organization of paint and line forming the windows on the building in *Corner*, one can see that the application is calculated and consistent. These are pictures made of lines with real weight, luminosity and the substance of paint.

The dry brush technique, as it is sometimes called, and as I have just described, has appeared as prominent signifier in Pat Service's work throughout her career. Looking

closely at Service's seemingly more traditional, impressionistic landscape paintings from 25 years ago; large studio paintings, executed in acrylic on canvas from watercolours and sketches made outdoors, there remains an irrefutable resemblance to the original, spontaneous sketches. There are broad strokes made with broad brushes and the edges of forms are undefined, scratchy dry brush strokes, scumbling paint rough patches and swatches of incongruous colour describe the prairie horizon beneath a powerful Emma Lake sky, the land as soft and roiling as the clouds above, as if the whole scene could blow away with the weather. In a catalogue essay from 1992 the artist, Charles Killam, writing on Pat Service says "One of the demands of the art of good painting is that the paint and the subject have to be pushed and struggled with to some degree...". He's right and quite apt in this case. As much as they portray the landscape in every mark and stroke they also convey physical effort of perception and the struggle to get it on the canvas.

The dry stroke of the brush is a stroke of notation and process. It's not the most beautiful application of paint, it lacks illusionism, and it has the look of work. Returning to Service's Road Trip paintings we find these deliberate, uncertain lines articulating forms all over the place. The top and bottom halves of another square composition, this one in Royal Blue and entitled *Punctuation*, are divided by a lightly wavering white line, like a jump rope designating distant hills on the horizon. The weight of the line in the thickness of the paint is irregular, although the movement is smooth enough, the translucency places the land it describes into the imagined distance. Elsewhere in the series the dry lines corral cut-out-like sections of solid colour, soften hard edges, make them glow or vibrate or just draw familiar shapes in the plainest terms.

I'm not sure that I could readily locate evidence of the "struggle", at least not in the same sense as referred to above, in these works. They are, after all, small minimalist abstractions and quite unlike the energized surfaces of the big, Emma Lake paintings. The colours and lines and shapes of the Road Trip pictures undulate and move with a balance and the assurance of someone who has worked steadily to tame the confusion of representation and to interpret her experience of the world in an increasingly rarefied, clear vision. But still the animated gesture of the artist's hand is present in every moment and at every turn. Pat service is adept at achieving a light touch with the boldest stroke. Service will always be an honest landscape painter and, in keeping with that, the Road Trip pictures reflect upon a real experience, sights witnessed and sensations felt. But they are clearly not romanticized reveries or sentimental reminiscences of the past. It is in the very strength of the artist's abstraction that her paintings reverberate in the present moment, where, ultimately, we would all like to be.

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