

John Kissick: Painter, Thinker, Scribe

By Pete Smith

It's a full house of poshly dressed people at the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery on a hot evening in June, except for the artists in the crowd who stand notably apart. Some wear shorts and sandals; others, jeans and a t-shirt. I'm wearing a baseball cap. There are many artists in the room, which signals its own special importance, given that the show is taking place in a venue more than an hour from Toronto. Few city artists venture past an area code change, let alone two. But tonight, a significant contingent have bussed or car-pooled in.

A woman wearing an expensive-looking, drape/smock affair delivers an opening, board-of-directors-type address to get the ball rolling. Several corporations and banking institutions are offered thanks for making the event possible. The curator steps up to provide a summary of the work on view and express her interest in the project. There is a brief pause while the artist moves forward. Tonight he's batting cleanup. John Kissick is a smooth public speaker, but he seems a little *nervous*. This is, after all, a retrospective of ten years of his work and he is clearly overwhelmed by the show of support. It is a moment that artists dream about: a public acknowledgement of their contribution to art's perpetually itinerant dialogue. While actors dream about Oscars, artists dream about retrospectives. The tasteful applause at the end means it is now ok to reload the wine glasses.

A few weeks later, I visit Kissick at his studio in Elora, Ontario. I live in a cute small town, but Elora seriously out cutes my little hamlet. It is handsomely self-contained with small, local businesses. Kissick's studio is on the third floor of the Elora Arts Centre. He has several paintings on the go as I walk in. The floor is littered with big jars of paint, mediums and brushes. Colourful paint splatters are layered deeply throughout. They are marks that tell their own story: another form of retrospective, a retrospective of making. How many paintings has this floor absorbed? How many failures scraped and heaped onto its surface? Colours precisely mixed, diluted, smeared and ultimately cast aside are buried under

constant shifts of new decisions and impulses, bearing witness to both triumph and collapse along the way.

The Kitchener retrospective is the first traveling survey of Kissick's work, and it is high time. Despite the reputation that he has garnered in this country, the artist remains somewhat underappreciated. Although he has exhibited his work extensively in Canada since the early 1990's, it is in the last ten years, since moving back to Toronto from the U.S., that Kissick has emerged as a notable figure in Canadian art. He is a writer, an educator, an art-educator-administrator and, most importantly, a painter. In all these capacities he has helped shape contemporary Canadian art. How does he reconcile the diversity of this expanded practice into the realms of cultural production, cultural commentary and artist education? It is a model that harks back to older traditions of the artist as intellectual but also establishes a new mold for Canadian artists, particularly painters, in the early 21st Century.

But first, some back-story on my own connection to Kissick:

In the fall of 2004, I decided to go to graduate school. I had been showing my work in Toronto for three or four years, garnered attention here and there, and had a relatively solid understanding of what I was about as an artist. As someone who identified himself as a Toronto painter and wanted to stay in the country, there really was only one choice for graduate school: the MFA Program at the University of Guelph, which boasted an impressive list of initial faculty such as Margaret Priest, David Moos Tony Scherman, and Ron Shuebrook. At the time of my application, Fastwurms, Robert Enright, Monica Tap, James Carl, Susan Dobson, Ben Reeves, Suzy Lake, Christian Giroux, Jean Madison, Laurel Woodcock, Sandra Rechico, Arthur Renwick and Will Gorlitz were on staff. John Kissick was the director of the program, a position that he still maintains. He was also my advisor, along with Monica Tap and Will Gorlitz. I feel no conflict singing Kissick's praises; he was one of the principle reasons that I chose to attend Guelph. Getting to know such people is part of the whole idea of grad school.

In addition to its faculty, Guelph also boasted a list of accomplished alumni. The headliner was the painter David Urban who had emerged in the mid 1990's in

Toronto to early acclaim. In his success, Urban was pretty much responsible for signaling permission for youngish (white) men to be able to make big abstract paintings in the city of Toronto again. Trumpeting a return to sincerity (in a manner similar mid-90's literary culture), Urban's work and uber-intelligent rhetoric opened a fissure in the discourse of Anti-Modernism that had a stranglehold on *serious* painting discourse at the time. The art establishment (and Powerball goers) in this town were clearly smitten. They had a new king, crowned him in record speed. Toronto painters, however, were decidedly less sure. His generational peers, were split and indeed Urban's rhetoric as a painter invited such division. His work solicits a selective return to Modernist values and while he has not been alone in this proposition, either here or abroad, Urban, was among the first to take the plunge.

This is the backdrop for Kissick's early work. The acclaim his abstractions garnered placed them in league with Urban's Neo Modernism (Gary Michael Dault called him, "a shirt-unbuttoned expressionist."). From 2003 onwards, however, the work turns to present a challenge to the modernist legacy. It gets pulpy and more physical. Bright, comic book colours and shapes collide with muddy, Ab Ex forms and gestures. Rather than unwavering structural and graphic certainties, Kissick's collage-like works display doubt about the foundation of painting, asking timely and important questions. Kissick's paintings from 2003 onward brim with a longing for unmediated painting experience tempered by an awareness of where abstract tropes have ended up: as surface patterns at IKEA and paintings inside Super 8 motels. Through their mashed, paraphrased motifs, his paintings suggest that wanting to believe is not the same as believing—once you *know* that Santa Claus doesn't exist, can you ever go back to waiting for him to come down the chimney? With their vibrant and joyful exuberance, Kissick's paintings show that skepticism is a mindset apart from cynicism.

Between starting grad school and finishing, the Guelph MFA program took on an enhanced profile in the Toronto art scene. The term "The Guelph Mafia", became a common term of expression and Guelphies were all of a sudden everywhere in the art scene. Kristan Horton, Martin Golland, Katie Bethune-Leaman, Derrick Sullivan,

Melanie Authier, Maura Doyle, Zin Taylor, Adam David Brown, Sarah Cale, John Eisler and Sara Graham all emerged as artists of note. It would be wrong to give Kissick the credit for their work, but as a quasi “Godfather figure” in this mob (even though Tony Scherman does a better Marlon Brando), Kissick is part of the story. Under his direction as Director of the School of Fine Art and Music, Guelph has produced not only a collection impressive graduates but also an impressive faculty. As director, Kissick leads his faculty by example. He teaches. He writes. He administers. He paints. He is the busiest person I’ve ever met, yet he still finds time to drive two hours on a cold February morning to have a studio visit with a *former student*. He drives an hour and a half to be the end-of-semester-critique examiner for a *former student’s* first 4th year sessional appointment. In that critique, by the way, he was just how I remember him being: smart and funny and tough and generous. He bought lunch afterwards.

There is a long tradition of painters being teachers. Simone Peterzano was a pupil of Titian. Peterzano taught Caravaggio. Ingres studied with David. Pierre Narcisse-Guerin taught both Gericault and Delacroix. Klee and Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus. Albers studied at Bauhaus then taught Rauschenberg and Twombly at Black Mountain College and Eva Hesse at Yale. Hans Hoffman taught Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers and Lee Krasner at the Art Students League. Lee Krasner taught Jackson Pollock in their living room. In the final decades of the 20th century, after the influx of speculative capital and the birth of “art market” culture, painting finds itself separated from teaching more than at any time in its past. Traditionally these component parts work in tandem. In Canada, where art is attached to fewer capital interests than in other countries, many artists teach. It is an environment where artists are expected to think and where serious painting has always been an intellectual activity. John Kissick is a painter who teaches. This is what defines him.

Back at KWAG in June, there are only a few people left in the gallery. I’m sitting on a bench running calculations about filled wine glasses, elapsed time and the drive home while Kissick talks to a young artist nearby. He spots me and ushers

him over for an introduction, Jeff to Pete, alum to grad, grad to alum. Kissick supervises the exchange. Jeff's world is looking up.