

Matt Shane, Solastalgia, McBride Contemporain, Montréal

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Matt Shane *Solastalgia*

Matt Shane's *Solastalgia* at McBride Contemporain is a gorgeous series of landscape paintings based on Google Earth images whose resolution has been pushed beyond its ability to hold form. By deliberately abusing the surveillant reach of this ubiquitous digital platform, Shane aligns himself with artist and experimental geographer Trevor Paglen, whose photographic practice often involves surpassing the limits of visibility. Paglen employs these strategies not in a bid to promote ambiguity as a conclusive state, but to interrogate how thresholds of visibility restrict people from seeing how power operates. Understanding this requires one to recognize the difference between machine eyes and human eyes; I suggest that both Paglen and Shane offer such lessons of distinction through a cartographic sensibility toward landscapes, which draws attention to relationships between the surface of representation and the surface of the world.

Thanks to ever-developing technologies of vision, Paglen argues, "the geography of seeing is changing." It is such processes of transformation that have inspired his long-standing interest in notions of the visible and the invisible, which intersect with landscapes both physical and digital. These oppositions undergird his work as an artist, as he asks, "What happens to an image when you push it to the point where it breaks? When you push vision to the point where it collapses?" Shane is asking these questions too, although he uses paint rather than photography to push on the edges that hold form. But whereas Paglen's experimentation with technologies of vision is a way for him to interrogate systems of state control, Shane's seems more of a broad-scale longing for what was. This concern is expressed in the show's title, *Solastalgia*, a term coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe environmentally induced distress. It's like homesickness, but instead of distance being the cause of separation from "home" and the subsequent

melancholy, it is a lament for a loved place that is irrevocably changed by environmental degradation.

In *Solastalgia*, Shane challenges the powerful triumvirate of vision, landscape, and memory, plumbing the deepening relationship between the latter two to encourage a reconsideration of what the term "environment" means on a tangible level beyond its use as a political catchphrase in a climate-critical period. This series of "anti-static," or alternatively "active," images participates in Western landscape traditions (yes, plural), following, for example, the primary tenet of W. J. T. Mitchell's *Theses on Landscape*: "Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium." As such, each painting speaks to process as a competition between generative and destructive forces (as you can't have one without the other). Cumulatively, the paintings render homage to the twenty-first century's ironic adulation of the notion of "development" at the cost of devastation, by capturing environments and architectures in flux. Standing before these canvases, which could just as well be windows to the external world as screens to a digital one, viewers question whether the sometimes-abstract shapes are coming into focus or falling apart.

If there were not such attention to detail, such elegance and delicacy, the paintings in this collection could be considered rogue images documenting digital trespassing as a proxy for a physical breach of boundaries. They are landscape portraits (this hybrid is possible) of sites normally off limits or overlooked due to their mundanity or instrumentality. For example, a shipyard made identifiable through the distorted form of an ocean liner is the subject in *Plasma Port* (2021). It is a curious play on the enduring pictorial maritime tradition; in this case the sky, rather than holding the atmospheric accoutrements of clouds, is an unmottled shade of red—a colour equated with alarm. Meanwhile, *Remote Sensing* (2022) captures a nondescript agglomeration of brutalist

Matt Shane

Plasma Port, 2022.

Eclipsing Variables, 2022.

Photos : courtesy of the artist & McBride Contemporain, Montréal

Solastalgia, exhibition view, 2022.

Photo : Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of McBride Contemporain, Montréal



architecture, backgrounded by the Romantic trappings of majestic mountains. The composition is like a message to be deciphered via a code of muted greys and pinks; a vibrant green triggers a remembrance or conjuring of humid West Coast forests. What betrays the idea that these images are hurried snapshots taken with the adrenaline of trespass is the lack of optical blur—the signature of authenticity of the documentary image—which here is replaced by the representation of processes of melt and disintegration rendered in crisp painterly technique.

The paintings in the collection are, like the satellite photographs on which they are based, composite imagery. Shane uses layering strategies in both the source and the output of the project. Taking a geographer's approach to reading the Google Earth images on his computer screen, he controls the layers of information made available in this digital mapping platform, and then translates one stratum to canvas (another screen), while retaining vestiges of cartographic graticule and digital framework. The brooding *Pixel Storm* (2021) is a competition of such linear elements. White gridwork, dividing the starry blackness of deep space from the ground below, reaches forward, as an undulating proxy for land awash in yellow and green in the foreground pushes against the momentum to force architecture and landscape features into the gulf of the background. Magically, there is no vanishing point to mark this collision of energies. This is one example of Shane's impressive perspectival skill: he has rendered an oblique aerial perspective on a perpendicular plane, and we are all here to believe it.

If the references to painting, photography, landscape, and portrait have yet to convince you, then I will announce how profoundly and effectively hybrid *Solastalgia* is. It is the hybridity of media and content, drawing on both painterly technique and digital syntax while juxtaposing built

environments with the natural world (remember that?) that makes the collection so relevant. This combination also makes the collection viciously beautiful. These works are guaranteed to maintain their relevancy for years to come thanks to a world (itself viciously beautiful) caught up in a tailspin of climate change, war, and asymmetry of economy, lest the tailspin itself come to its own fiery end.

Tracy Valcourt

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