



**Martha Eelen**  
**HISTORY OF THE FUTURE**  
*Curated by Dorothy Caldwell*

**Ah.**

# Martha Eleen

## QUOTATION AND BLISS: NEGOTIATING MARTHA ELEEN'S HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

The "quotation-bliss" distinction in my title ("bliss" as in "*plaisir*") is from French critic-psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. When I lifted her phrase, she was talking specifically, in Norman Bryson's *Vision and Painting*, 1983 (p.142), about the "disruption of quotation by bliss."

Even though this is a usefully open idea, the word "Quotation" isn't quite right, of course, given the intensity of the intimate visual and anthropological *claiming* evinced by each of the paintings Eleen has made for her previous exhibitions.

The works comprising her *Into the 905: The View from the Car* in 2002-2005 [office towers, traffic on the 401 highway], her *High Tech Road* in 2007 [hydro towers and other emblems of industrial architecture] and her *The Necessities of Life* in 2009 [Big Box mall buildings and their signage], for example, have amounted almost to an ongoing proclamation by the artist that whatever the ostensible documentary value such pictures possess, her goal invariably folds the political, the sociological, the bristling matrices of culture-at-large into a view of the world that is personal, sensuously rendered,

and richly available. "An observational painting practice," she once wrote, "is less an accumulation of technical skills and more an increasing ability to be present."

I have always marvelled at the way Eleen accesses and receives the world (first) into her vision and (second) into her understanding. As Gaston Bachelard observes in his indispensable *The Poetics of Reverie* (1971), "It is not sufficient to receive; one must welcome." Eleen welcomes.

Lately—in such exhibitions as *I, Huck* (2011), *My Space* (2014) and *The Meaning of Things* (2015)—Eleen has welcomed into her perceptual field a realm of pictorial immediacy that possesses, as one might say about photography, a shorter focal length than before—but with no concomitant foregoing of her passionate claiming of what she sees.

*I, Huck* was made up of painted vignettes touching on the life of her ebullient, much loved and distressingly disabled son, Gabe (1976-2015). The exhibition mapped what Eleen called "the domestic space framing my relationship with my adult son." For it, she explored a newly centripetal movement within her environment (which had often been epically remote from her)—and the inexorable inhabiting of what she deems a "more subjective perspective"

# HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

This is where Kristiva's "disruption of quotation by bliss." comes into all this. Painting Gabe's array of touch-tone phones, the ceiling fan he gazed up at from his bed, the dark mountain of derelict ghet-to blasters he collected (there was genius here) is to be up too close for the tenets of documentary. Life disrupts and discharges documentary. Giving bliss in return.

Bliss, however—like "quotation"—is a tricky term. For her *My Space* exhibition, there are paintings of windows, closets, blinkered glimpses of the world outside, a door-jamb. In her artist's statement for the exhibition, Eleen noted that "although the work is representational, it is the abstract issues that are important: the significance of the relationships between objects and people that creates a place within the space, separate from the superficial or impersonal meaning of the objects." This is the "bliss" I purloined from Kristeva. Bliss lives in life's interstices, in its crevices and tributaries. Sometimes you have to look to one side to see it, like looking at a star.

Eleen might well have been reading her Kazimir Malevich (whose writings really ought to be read once a year): "A chair, bed and table, wrote Malevich in 1927, "are not matters of utility, but rather the forms taken by plastic sensations...."

This new opticality of Eleen's (Second-sight? Third sight? Undersight?) is close, in fact, to what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "Inscap" than it is to landscape or object-scape. "Inscap" is that with which, in the world exterior to us, we are, or can be, deeply infused. For Hopkins, Inscap cries out: "what I do is me: for that I came."

Eleen's wholly remarkable new work—the exquisite paintings making up her 2015 exhibition, *The Meaning of Things*—seems to be moving into a totalizing utopia of extrapolated form. She rather jauntily describes her newest work, which makes up an airy yet earthy "abstract investigation of space itself," as "paintings of a cardboard box."

What box? The ur-box, no doubt. The box folded, unfolded, hanging in space, emptied of space, occupying space, creating space. A corrugated cardboard house, studio, city, country, psyche. A box emitting colour, absorbing colour, offering colour. Eleen's boxes, tintured with the colours out of space, are so generous they represent a kind of danger. As Paul Celan writes in his poem, "Lyon. Les Archers," "The wide-open stretch we longed for / hits us head on."

—Gary Michael Dault  
May 31, 2016

## AH! Arts and Heritage Centre June 10 – July 3, 2016

Martha Eleen has, for many years painted directly from familiar places. She explores interior space and exterior landscape of her Toronto home and studio, her farm in Northumberland County, and the industrial landscape of the 401 highway that connects her two significant communities. Martha Eleen's paintings bring attention to the everyday environment and cause us to confront and reconsider our own familiar landscape.

—Dorothy Caldwell, curator

[www.ahcentre.ca](http://www.ahcentre.ca)

### Paintings

1. Waltz #1 2013, oil on wood, 20" x 20"
2. High Tech Rd. #3, 2007, oil on wood, 16" x 16"
3. September Haze #2, 2015, oil on wood, 20" x 20"

35 Church St, Warkworth, Ontario

Martha Eleen is interested in human geography and the relationship between culture and landscape. Her paintings have received critical attention in the form of curatorial essays, reviews and publication and have been exhibited in public galleries in Canada, U.S.A, Mexico and Japan. Eleen's work is represented in permanent collections including the Art Gallery of Ontario. She is an honours graduate of Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver. Eleen lives in Toronto where she teaches painting and drawing at Toronto School of Art and is represented by Loop Gallery.

[www.marthaeleen.com](http://www.marthaeleen.com)

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