

Derek Root

Every Picture Means Goodbye, 1998

wax on canvas

306.0 cm x 244.0 cm x 7.5 cm

Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition
Fund with financial support of the
Canada Council for the Arts
Acquisition Assistance Program
VAG 98.73



Derek Root

Every Picture Means Goodbye, 1998

Artist's Biography

Nationality: Canadian

Born: 1960, Vancouver, British Columbia

Derek Root was born in Vancouver in 1960, and received his BFA from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1985. Since graduation, he has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions throughout North America, including exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1985; 1998), the Contemporary Art Gallery (1994), Monte Clark Gallery (1998) and P.S. 1, Brooklyn, New York. Originally working in an expressive, figurative idiom reminiscent of the work of German neo-expressionist artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz, Root's recent work has shifted toward a brightly colored decorative abstraction.

Through his invocation of the language of modernist abstraction—its geometric shapes and pure, primary colors—Root suggests affinities between his works and those of quintessential modernists like Piet Mondrian. But whereas artists like Mondrian and Noland maintain the integrity of the picture plane's flat surface, Root's recent works play with visual and physical "depth," suspending different layers of colored pigment between layers of translucent encaustic. The works take on the appearance of bubbles or other geometric shapes suspended in water—rising, falling, and engaged in chaotic motion at odds with the ideals of classical purity, universalism and timelessness often believed to conceptually support advanced modernist abstraction. The paintings are also titled ironically, some bearing the names of Root's favorite films, creating ironic disjunctions between the narratives of the films' storylines and the somewhat less specifiable content of the pictures' surfaces.

Source: Acquisitions Justification

Artistic Context

Nationality: Canadian

Training: Emily Carr College of Art and Design

Peers: Attila Richard Lukacs; Angela Grossmann; Graham Gillmore

Group: Young Romantics; Vancouver Group of Five; Abstraction; 20th Century; 21st Century

Provenance: purchased from Monte Clark Gallery; the artist

Subject: nature; landscape; myth; geometric abstraction

Other Works in the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

Derek Root

Sunken

oil with collaged steel element on canvas

Gift of Erwen and Patricia Smith

VAG 93.35

Derek Root

Every Picture Means Goodbye, 1998



Bibliography

Weak Thought

Publication

2000

[transcription of excerpt]

spectatorial uncertainty

Patrik Andersson

The paintings Derek Root has chosen to display in *weak thought* are not deep. In fact, they are shallow geometric abstractions. With shallow I want to suggest that they do not simply recede into a narrative spatial depth nor result in a decorative flat surface. The "push and pull" of Root's paintings can be likened to the opening of Emile de Antonio's 1972 film *Painters' Painting*—viewed backward. In de Antonio's film, the camera gradually pulls back from what looks like an Agnes Martin painting, only to reveal that this minimalist abstraction is nothing less than the concrete external surface of a New York skyscraper. Operating as a documentary of the New York School painting scene, de Antonio's film sequence is still a powerful reminder of the spectatorial uncertainty and existing tensions between a modernist inward drive toward ontology, and extensions outwards into the world of popular culture and corporate culture.

Towards the end of the 1980s, a shift became apparent in Derek Root's artistic production which suggests a similar interest to de Antonio. Replacing the expressionistic concern with nature and myth that has characterized his work in exhibitions such as the Vancouver Art Gallery's *Young Romantics* in 1985, Root's paintings began to take on an increasingly detached aesthetic vocabulary grounded in architecture, archives and geometric abstraction. For instance, *Voice and Monuments* (1989) confines Root's gestures within the projected image of architecture and reduces the treatment of his subject (theatre/auditorium) to a monumental form of power. It is this *form* that Root seeks to investigate. As if to announce the constructed nature of the painted surface, Root also

turned his attention toward the structural support of his pictures. Exaggerating the relationship between his paintings and the gallery space, a piece such as *Untitled* (1989) [fig. 1] made literal the theatrical staging of the work. Held together with metal rods, these "archival" images pushed the boundaries between abstract painting and sculpture toward their rationally constructed meeting place. But as Douglas Coupland poignantly observed in a 1989 review, despite this seeming abandonment of "romanticism" in favour of "bloodless precision," Root's technique would continue to betray the "calculated alienation" that his new colder subjects and forms proposed.

Looking at the work Root has produced since 1991, a large and consistent sequence of geometric abstractions comes into focus culminating in the work exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Prior to *weak thought*, the most recent showing of these works were seen at the Monte Clarke Gallery under the title *Playtime*. Making a filmic reference to Jacques Tati's 1967 critical-comedy, Root's latest paintings call up the alienating post-war terrain of reconfigured time and space. Expanding on this project, this work continues to probe the unsettling history for the decorative ruins of art and design which today meet interchangeably on the pages of *Vogue*, *Wallpaper* and *Flash Art*.

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Establishing his own encaustic technique, Root's current pictures present meta-sediments from an archeology of modernism. Abstract painting has been flipped on its side and cross-sectioned to reveal open and spreading style-conscious patterns which appear flat and purely ornamental from a distance, but heavy, fragile and temperamental upon closer inspection. These drill-core like patterns, suspended within a palimpsest of soft waxy pools sensitive to extreme conditions, call up a history of modernist painting subordinated to a social and economic climate while simultaneously equating style-obsolescence with the intellectual veneer of structuralism. Despite the fact that the grids, circles, rectangles and squares in paintings such as *In Every Dream Home A Heart Ache* (1998) emphasize seriality, the subtle mechanics of these works (the painted surface) has [have] managed to retain an obstinate individuality.

With a number of different versions of the *No. 1 Painting in Heaven* (1998) on display, Root offers his audience a democratic dose of redemptive art. Like organic roots dipping into or extending beyond the borders of the canvas, these latest paintings implicate the gallery space itself as part of the painted surface. In this regard, these new pictures, like his paintings from the late 1980s, aim to dissolve the traditional segregation of work and viewer and provide them with a sense of movement in time and space. Signaling the contradictions and ambiguities of spatial consciousness, these paintings embrace the uncertainties of the painted moment.

1 Douglas Coupland, "Ground Zero," *Canadian Art*, vol. 6 (Summer 1989), pp. 74-75.

Further Reading

Future Traditions in Canadian Art. North York: North York Art Gallery, 1994.

Graham Gillmore, Angela Grossman, Derek Root. New York: 49th Parallel in association with Diane Farris Gallery, 1989.

Important Canadian Art. New York: ZieherSmith, 2004.

Taken From Nature. Peterborough: Art Gallery of Peterborough, 1998.

Young Romantics. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1985.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Weak Thought. November 14, 1998 - January 31, 1999.

Recollect. October 16, 1999 - January 23, 2000.

75 Years of Collecting: The Road to Utopia. September 16, 2006 - January 1, 2007.

Derek Root

Every Picture Means Goodbye, 1998



Archival History

Acquisitions Justification

Acquisition Record
1998

[transcription]

Derek Root b. 1960, Vancouver

Every Picture Means Goodbye 1998

oil, wax, canvas on wood
305 x 244 cm

Vendor: Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver

Provenance: the artist

Exhibited: *weak thought*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Nov. 1998 to Jan. 1999

Derek Root was born in Vancouver in 1960, and received his BFA from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1985. Since graduation, he has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions throughout North America, including exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1985; 1998), the Contemporary Art Gallery (1994), Monte Clark Gallery (1998) and P.S. 1, Brooklyn, New York. Originally working in an expressive, figurative idiom reminiscent of the work of German neo-expressionist artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz, Root's recent work has shifted toward a brightly colored decorative abstraction.

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This work will amplify the Gallery's commitment to collecting abstract art. Root is primarily concerned to elaborate important differences between modernist and postmodernist painting, as are other artists represented in the collection such as Allyson Clay, Robert Youds and Mina Totino. Root's invocation and subversion of the languages of modernist abstraction also relates to discussions around the development of contemporary abstract painting, represented in the Gallery's collection of works by Eric Cameron, Gary Kennedy, Agnes Martin and many others. *Every Picture Means Goodbye* is particularly important because, if acquired, it will enable the Gallery to better contextualize its holdings of Root's earlier, more expressive work, thereby tracing the development of his practice from 1983 through to the present.

Recommend purchase.

Grant Arnold
Associate Curator

Research: Christopher Brayshaw
Curatorial Assistant

Derek Root

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Exhibition Label

Miscellaneous History
1998

[transcription]

weak thought

weak thought, n. (*il pensiero debole*) attr. Gianni Vattimo. to accept, to go beyond, to deepen, to recuperate, to prolong, to distort, to destructure, to cure, to twist, to dilute, to deform.

Neil Campbell
Renée Van Halm
Robert Linsley
David MacWilliam
Elspeth Pratt

Derek Root
Ken Singer
Jeremy Stanbridge
Todd Tedeschini
Brian G. White



The ten contemporary artists in this portion of the exhibition offer diverse and sometimes contradictory models for the production of contemporary abstract art. Despite their differences they seem to share a common belief that the language of abstraction only comes into meaning when it is inflected by the languages of the everyday world — the language of design, architecture, leisure, domesticity, pop culture, urban life or art itself. While some might claim this as a model of hybridity or dialectical progression, we propose that this work might more accurately be addressed through the model of "weak thought".

The title "weak thought" is an intentionally polemical term that is used to describe both a process and a relationship to abstract art. Since early in this century, modernist abstract art has been characterized as a powerful, innovative language intended to bring about a revolution in modern aesthetics and cultural life. Invention, originality, aesthetic detachment, universality, idealism and truth — these were terms often linked

to the triumphant apotheosis of modernist abstraction in the 1960s.

The artists in this exhibition have adopted many aspects of the language of modern abstraction but have refused its rhetoric of overcoming and idealism. While acknowledging the significance of modernist abstraction, they have sought to go beyond the limitations of modernism by weakening it from within. Weak thought is both a recovery from and a resignation to modernism, it prolongs and destructures, it distorts, dilutes and deforms the ideals of modernism so that art might be withdrawn from the realm of truth and metaphysics and instead recognized as an event situated in the realm of the social.

Derek Root

Every Picture Means Goodbye, 1998



Derek Root Correspondence

Correspondence
1999-10-26

[transcription]

Oct 26, 1999

Dear Diana [sic],

A quick note of thanks to the curatorial staff at the V.A.G., especially yourself, Grant and Bruce for the support and care given to my work during the past year. Being part of the "Weak Thought" exhibition, the acquisition of the large painting, and finally inclusion in "Recollect" has been a wonderful opportunity and an honor. A heartfelt thank-you to all of you.

Sincerely,

Derek Root

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