

## VISUAL ART

## Monica Tap

by Daniel O'Quinn

Monica Tap's current exhibition at MKG in Toronto is comprised of nine paintings that are linked by subject matter and theoretical concern. All nine landscapes offer views of zones where water meets land and are thus quite literally paintings of reflections on watery surfaces. Two facing paintings, both aptly titled *Amnesia*, in the smaller front space establish the visual economy that will be radically contravened in the gallery's larger back space. The *Amnesia* paintings are memorable for their sumptuous palette, their lush mark-making, their compositional equanimity. As effective as these paintings are, my sense is that they are what must be forgotten as you cross over to the second part of the exhibition. They are what is overcome and yet their disappearance isn't felt as a loss, because the remaining pictures require that we remember what has been forgotten.

In the large back space of MKG, all but one picture, *Dragonfly for David*, have a hard horizon separating water from land, reflection from projection. I say "projection" because rarely does the reflection mirror the optical world above. More frequently there is a complete disjunction that raises a host of questions about what we are looking at. A painting surely, but not just a painting, because the reflective disjunctions are exacerbated by a deliberate shredding of space that is deeply citational. Even a cursory viewing of the paintings in the larger second space of the gallery reveals that each painting is comprised of segments or sections of almost instantly recognizable landscapes by Giorgio Morandi, David Milne, Pierre Bonnard, Lois Dodd, Helen Frankenthaler, Emily Carr and

David Hockney, and passages in the style of Philip Guston, Odilon Redon, Milton Avery and others. These fragments are arranged in a collage-like fashion, but there is no actual cutting, tearing or gluing of canvas, rather a painterly simulation of collage effects to mimic a series of shoreline views. Tap has given us seven rather strange ponds whose ultimate objective, I think, is to reflect upon how our visual memory of landscape painting not only deforms our understanding of physical space but also informs our understanding of how painting itself has evolved as a medium. Each "reflection" brings together citations of works from distinct moments in 20th-century painting and each assemblage makes a different argument about what painting does. The smallest painting in the grouping, *Helen's Pond*, is most obviously an homage to Helen Frankenthaler's decisive deployment of vast swaths of ultramarine paint, but here the force of Frankenthaler's pools of colour are attenuated by transparent small washes of pink and everything is put in tension by that crucial reflecting line. Tap seems to be pointing out what makes a Frankenthaler a Frankenthaler while forcefully making an image of her own.

This citational strategy operates with increasing levels of complexity as you move deeper into the show. *Odilon's Rhododendrons* is a rendering of a pond in a rhododendron garden, but that might be the last thing that comes into focus. Garish yellow and pink patches of paint about one another in hard-edged arcs that appear nowhere in nature, but show how the rendering of trees that defines Redon's landscape practice can be dialled up in ways that evoke Hockney. The literal reflection in this



painting is particularly significant because it is as if two separate Redon paintings have been cut out, turned upside down and pasted together to simulate a reflection on water. The muted pairing is incommensurate and yet it is this incommensurability that allows this passage of the painting to hold its own against the vibrant, almost acid presentation of the flowers on the shore. I think what becomes clear here is that the visual interest in these paintings is both sensuous because the sheer exuberance of the colour can't be denied, and historical because the constellation of fragments from the history of landscape painting demands the engagement of visual memory in order to understand how each of the passages interact. I'm using the word "constellation" advisedly because the strategy is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's remarks on the dialectical image—a constellated image that draws together incommensurate parts to disclose something about the present. In this case that present

has to do with painting's capacity to retain some purchase on the world at large, a world that, we are increasingly informed, has superseded painting's remit.

In that regard, Tap's citational strategy acts as a form of counter-memory, insistently directing us to the past, to our own sense of how space was and is represented, and how the shredding of space can be a productive act. This is nowhere more evident than in the large painting at the far end of the gallery. *Dragonfly for David* is both the most fragmented image and the painting where the pond reflection trope has the least hold. The reflecting line is there, but it is almost overwhelmed by the other meaning of reflection here instantiated by the proliferation of citations: a spectacular pink Hockney tree, a Bonnard blur, bits of Milne, a goofy cloud, sections that could well be abstraction but probably aren't. Standing in front of this painting, I am contemplating how all these different



practitioners rendered space to fit their own needs. And I'm struck by how they have been repurposed to fit Tap's desires. That movement back and forth between past need and present desire sustains deep reflection and points toward a new future for Tap's practice. ■

"A Place in the Country" was exhibited at MKG127, Toronto, from March 16 to April 13, 2019.

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1. Monica Tap, *Dragonfly for David*, 2018, oil on canvas, 78 x 78 inches. All photos: Toni Hafkenscheid. All images courtesy the artist and MKG127.

2. *Garden: Odilon's Rhododendrons*, 2018–2019, oil on canvas, 46 x 41 inches.

3. Helen Marten, *All mother (after James Ensor)*, 2018, nylon paint on fabric, ash frame, aluminum, airbrushed steel, 310 x 240 x 8.5 centimetres. All images courtesy the artist and König Galerie, Berlin.