

**Canadian
Academy
in Rome**

**In Conversation with
Peter Harris**



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SPECIAL THANKS

Peter Harris

more information at www.peterharris.ca

CONTRIBUTORS

Interview: Alex Willms

Design: Alex Willms & Stephane Gaulin-Brown

Peter Harris is an artist currently working on an ongoing series of urban landscape paintings.

He has won several awards, and his work can be found in private collections in Canada, the United States, and Europe.

In February 2016 I dropped by his Toronto studio for an interview.

Canadian Academy in Rome:

You pretty much worked as a painter from the beginning, right?

Peter Harris:

Yeah, kind of; it was pretty slow in the beginning. I mean, I had a part-time job. And whenever you talk to artists, there are two philosophies on part-time work. Do you use your creativity and get a job where you can be creative at work? Or do you just get a Joe job where you don't need your creativity at all, and then all your energy can be put in later on in the evening? And that's what I did.

CAiR: The Einstein strategy.

PH: Yeah, and I find that most of the people that go for creative jobs get jobs that suck up all their energy and time.

CAiR: I read that you worked in a brew-your-own beer pub...?

PH: Yeah, that was the ultimate crappy job, basically. But it paid the bills, which were nothing at the time because I maintained my student lifestyle for the first couple years. When I graduated I said to myself, naively, I'll give it a couple years, I'll give it a shot, I'll see if I can do it. I'll reevaluate in two years and if I haven't made it – and I don't think I really put a definition on what "made it" was – but I

had this vague idea that if I hadn't made it in two years, then I'd re-evaluate. In two years I was nowhere, but I was still enjoying it and so I just kept going from there. It builds up slowly. I wanted to try it. You know, I'd gone to art school so I wanted to try to be an artist.

CAiR: Makes sense!

PH: For me it made sense. Whereas other students immediately went on to teachers college or said, I'd better get the day job lined up or get the fallback plan in place or whatever.

CAiR: I'm always curious about how people arrive at a set of interests. It seems like an artist has a collection of things that they're interested in at any given time, and this collection changes or evolves over time. I know you're trying to find some way of working that allows the work to evolve – that doesn't just hit a dead end every so often. So how did you arrive at your current set of interests?

PH: It was in a pretty roundabout way. When I first started it was exactly like that... I was trying to find who I was as an artist. I think, as an artist, the best version you can be is an expert on yourself and what your own interests are. When I first started I was sort of throwing paint at the canvas in any way I could. I would do a series of abstract paintings, but it would run its course. I'd do ten or twelve paintings and the idea would just sort of hit the wall. And then I'd do a series of still lifes... but I could never develop enough depth there to keep going. I was just scratching the surface of all these things. I did a series of figurative works as well. I was trying it on – I was trying on these identities as a painter, but they weren't really working for me.

The urban landscapes came very slowly, and they came more from the abstract side of things. One of the first things I was doing was

just looking at the city lights at night, playing around with my old 35mm camera, throwing things out of focus... at my old studio that I had in downtown Kitchener. And you get these interesting light patterns...

CAiR: I used to do that all the time.

PH: Exactly, light trails and things like that. And then I just started to incorporate that as a contrast to the nature iconography that I was using. Because, at the time, I had been painting a series of tree forms. They were sort of abstracted – they weren't landscapes – just the shape and the icon of the tree as a metaphor for nature. And then I wanted to contrast that with the cityscape, but it was just very abstract at the time. It was like a painterly exercise to do spheres of light on a black background. I was doing a lot of diptychs, looking for things to contrast with the nature. So I had this whole series of diptychs that evolved. Eventually I just started developing the idea more and got more interested in the urban landscape itself.

**“I'd gone to
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So I would do a tree on one side, and then light standards. And as I was doing that I was building my skills as well. I was building my skills in realism, my ability to portray what I was seeing in real life – whereas before, I was just trying to make good painting, and was sort of involved in the paint and the colour and the application and a lot more texture. But the more I painted, the more I wanted to use realism as the genre that I was involved in. So it became easier to do more detailed paintings of the urban landscape, and that sort of

fed into this loop: the better I got at painting these things, the more interested I was in exploring the landscape.

So now I realize that I've been doing it for over a decade. It's been a long time now. I find that I'm still interested in the subject matter; I'm still finding new things to say. I'm always trying to push myself and evolve but I don't want to abandon the topic just for the sake of abandoning it.

CAiR: I had a similar thought. You can grow up in suburbia and you don't start actually seeing it or getting interested in it until much later. Developing this kind of interest is almost like traveling within the same place you've always been, just by exercising the way you see it, changing your perception over time.

PH: Exactly. And that's what I found when I started showing this work. I'd be doing shows and I'd be there every year. I'd run into people, meet them, talk about the work, and then a year later I'd see the same people. I was doing a series of highway overpasses and I would have people come up to me and they would say, literally, "Why are you painting this? I just don't get it."

CAiR: I thought you were going to say that they said, "That's exactly how I see highway overpasses!"

PH: You know what? People would say that, but sometimes it would be the same person a year later. They would say, "Peter, I saw your work last year and I thought about it, and one day I was driving on the 401 and the light hit this overpass and I was like... Oh my god it's like that guy's painting! I get it now." And so I found I was starting to have this conversation with people, and I realized that what I was doing for them was what I was doing for myself as an artist: concentrating the attention on these things that we see so often, that are so ubiquitous,

so common, that you don't notice them half the time. Slowing down, focusing the attention, and getting people to notice what's around them.

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I think if you're doing painting, that's different than photography. People understand that you can take a photo in 1/60 of a second. But if you're going to make a painting, people ask why somebody would spend two weeks making a painting. An oil on canvas painting has this sort of durability. It's going

to be around for decades, if not centuries, and why the hell are you making a painting of an overpass or an empty parking lot? It doesn't make sense for a lot of people. But it's like this spot of meditation if you make a painting of it, versus a photograph.

CAiR: Although you take pictures for reference, you ultimately choose the medium of oil painting. If you think about portraying some of the same ideas with photography alone, it's an interesting comparison. For example, when I take a picture of a certain composition in the city, sometimes my instinct is to remove some of the elements, like text and symbols, that distract from the abstraction of what I'm interested in – planes, textures, shapes, colour, and so on. Because you're painting, though, it seems like those instantly-recognizable elements, like a caution sticker on an automatic door, are a kind of counterpoint to the abstract qualities in the work.

PH: As I'm working there's always a push and pull between the

abstract formal elements building the composition and the realism that's there. For me, the right level of detail needs to be there to sort of clue people in that this a real scene, that it's something they've seen before. And on the flip side, I still need to make an interesting painting in and of itself, not just a copy of reality but a new reality, a new painting that hasn't existed before. So if something needs to be cut out of a scene, I'll edit it out as I'm painting. If something needs to be added in, I'll do that as well. So I definitely go back and forth on that level of detail – whether to include something or leave it out.

CAiR: It seems like just striking that balance could easily occupy many years worth of work.

PH: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, some of them do become more abstract in a way – these large colour fields. A couple years ago when I was doing ones with larger areas, larger masses of, like, an empty parking lot or a large empty sky, they became almost like a Rothko painting. You can make those allusions to other painters in abstract art. Whereas these [recent] ones – because they're a little bit more focused in – you have the large planes, the large flat areas of colour, which are kind of like a Mondrian type of abstract painting, with these detailed areas to move the eye around the canvas.

**“Work
begets
work.”**

CAiR: You have various groups of paintings. At first I thought that these groups themselves were chronological, but it appears from the dates that they're all evolving in parallel.

PH: Some of it is chronological. I'll get on these little side-streets of the genre. I always think there's this large umbrella that I'm working

under – urban landscape painting – and within that, I have these different areas of interest, different subject matter, whether it's the buildings or the parking lots or the highways, and then different lighting affects whether it's a day or night scene, whether it's the exterior or the interior... and so this most recent body of work is a little bit more of a transition for me because there's less traditional foreground-midground-background. I've come right into the building, so it's a look at the interior of the building, but still from the outside, and using all the doors as framing elements.

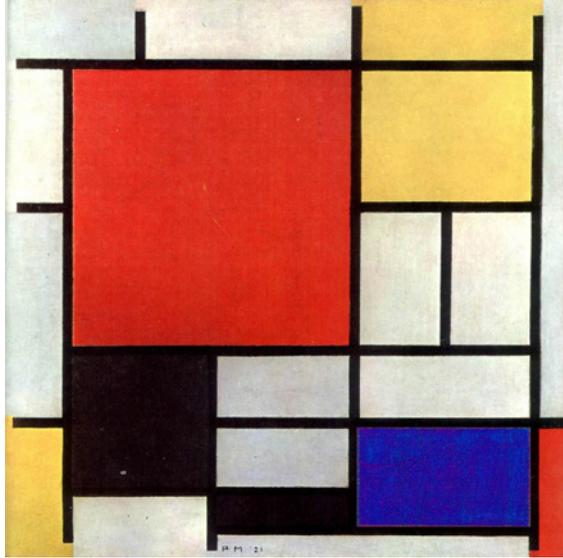
CAiR: There's a lot of sub-framing going on with these. Even the paintings on the walls are other frames, which sometimes themselves contain yet more windows...

PH: Exactly, it's like this little house of mirrors going on. But realism always plays in this square format. It's the idea that the picture plane is a window into reality; you're creating this window, and so [these paintings are] almost a literal take on that, where I've literally created the window that you're looking into, with a three-dimensional effect.

CAiR: It seems like a pretty appropriate evolution of what you've done so far. Do you have any tentative ideas of where to go next?

PH: You know, I try not to plan out too much. I don't think it's really possible to plan out where the work is going. I just know that as I'm working on one painting I'm always thinking about the next painting. For me, work begets work, so I get more ideas while I'm painting than when I'm not painting. So I just get busy and start painting and then things start to happen. I'm reacting to the work that I'm doing and where I want it to go.

So this new work – where I've gotten closer to the subject matter and started looking more at the interior – was sort of a reaction to one of



(iv)
Piet Mondrian
Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow,
Black, Grey and Blue
1921



(iii)
Mark Rothko
Orange and Yellow
1956



(i)
Max Beckmann,
Night
1918



(ii)
Max Beckmann,
Before the Masked Ball
1922



*Installation views of
Conversations with Hopper
Galerie D'Este, Montreal, 2016*





Peter Harris,
West to London
2008



Peter Harris,
Parking Entrance (Westwind)
2016



*Peter Harris,
Parking Garage 3 am
2013*



*Peter Harris,
Deutsche Bank (Nighthawks)
2016*



*Peter Harris,
East on the 401
2009*



*Peter Harris,
Midnight on Birmingham
2011*

the restaurants that I was painting before. They still had the classic foreground-midground-background but I had spent a lot of time on the interior spaces, just to really light those up. I became interested in the interior and wanted to develop that further. So that was a reaction to work I'd done previously; it was a slice of an idea within those paintings that I wanted to expand and make greater.

CAiR: It's almost like in these recent works, the paintings on the walls have replaced the more distant interior spaces in the previous works.

PH: Yes, in a way, yeah! You're really looking in, going deep into the work to find these other works of art. So we'll see where it goes. The idea of putting somebody else's work inside my own was another thing that just came up very casually. I'd been painting a strip-mall type suburban area and there was this office window at night that I wanted to make a painting of, and it had this really tacky kind of Tuscan-inspired office art on the interior wall. I loved to look at it; it was kind of cheeky and ironic so I did the painting of these cypress trees and things... at the time I didn't really recognize that it was going to be an idea that I could expand on; it was just something that was there in the urban landscape. When I painted it I thought, oh, that's an interesting contrast between the exterior hard concrete elements of the urban landscape, this sort of cheap, you know, 1970s low-rise building, and this idealistic romantic painting on the inside – like, you're driving in the suburbs every day

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to get to work in this crappy suburban plaza and there's this dream of another world, the old world, in the window.

CAiR: Yeah, there's something weird about the fact that the worse the restaurant is, the more lavish the landscapes inside are. A cheap shawarma place always has the best picture of an island.

PH: [Laughs.] Yeah, that's right.

CAiR: So I guess the natural extension of that, then, is... well, if I'm going to paint somebody else's painting within this painting, why not make it something relevant or inspiring or...

PH: Well, I think the relevancy thing is the most important. When I started the first painting after [the painting of the office window], I started to think about Canadian landscape painting in general and how I fit into both the genre and the history as a whole. So I started using the Group of Seven and some of their more iconic imagery, and thinking a lot about – which I've always been thinking about – what is the Canadian landscape? What makes that up? What is the idea that we hold in our head about what Canadian landscape is, versus what's really out there right now? And so, I used this anachronistic idea of the Canadian landscape from well-known painters from the past – who, since the beginning of their careers they're put on this pedestal by the National Gallery as representing what Canada is, or the idea that we want to sell to the rest of the world, which is very effective.

CAiR: The one Canadian art thing that you learn about in elementary school has to be the Group of Seven.

PH: Exactly, everybody knows them, because the Canadian government promoted the hell out of them during their careers. They

had massive shows at the National Gallery, they were put on the postcards, the CN Rail propaganda stuff, the advertisements, they used it all over the place. It's such a part of our identity, thinking that this is the quintessential Canadian landscape.

“What is the Canadian landscape?”

So for me that was like the ultimate contrast. Here I have the previous painter's version [of the landscape], people who – like Lawren Harris lived in Toronto, and he traveled outside to find landscape that he wanted to paint and bring back to the city and develop as larger canvases. Whereas I'm going literally sometimes three steps

out my door and seeing something which says, to me, this is the Canadian landscape right here. So, that silly little idea of putting this idealistic Tuscan landscape into this banal urban setting became this whole idea that developed and took off from there.

CAiR: There's one Lawren Harris painting that is an image of a typical Toronto street with dappled sunlight. He clearly had some interest in what was right outside his door, but maybe he didn't ultimately go that far with it.

PH: What they were doing was apparently fairly extreme at the time – their style of painting, at least. And even the landscape itself. People probably didn't think of Algonquin park as being worthy of landscape painting because it wasn't the idyllic scenes that you would have gotten from England at the time, mainly.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario they have a couple nice paintings which sound very similar [to the one you mentioned] of the light

filtering through the trees and the red brick buildings, probably in Cabbagetown for Lawren Harris. So yeah, they exist, but it's not what got promoted. And I don't even know from his own point of view as an artist if he would have liked to pursue that further.

CAiR: It would be interesting to figure that out somehow.

PH: Yeah, I guess you'd have to map out the chronological order of the paintings and line that up with the kind of attention that he was getting at the time.

CAiR: We're getting way off topic now, but you could almost say that those Lawren Harris paintings of the city are done in a style more typical or more expected of landscape painting, and then some of his landscape stuff is painted with an extreme smoothness, more like your paintings of the city.

PH: Yeah, especially the later iceberg works, which are so abstract in a way, and so cold and linear.

CAiR: I also wanted to ask about any other influences that may not have been obvious. There's Hopper, clearly, and then I would also guess Colville, Christopher Pratt maybe...

PH: I show at the Mira Godard Gallery, which has been their art dealer for many years now. So we're actually at the same gallery. I wouldn't have ever said that they were influences when I was younger. Christopher Pratt I've come to appreciate a lot more now, with some of his later works. I appreciate the geometry in the work but a lot of his work is almost too sterile for me. It doesn't have enough tension to really appeal to me, and I love work where it feels like there's a presence, like something is about happen or just happened – there's a human presence. Whereas some of his work, especially the ones

with of the east coast – the side of a building and the light – for me there's just not enough to really capture my interest; it's a geometric exercise.

CAiR: Maybe because he doesn't deal so much with the interior.

PH: Yeah, maybe. I've seen some of his night scenes, and they're quite interesting, but some of them are a bit cold. And Colville – I remember seeing his work; he had a show at Waterloo when I was a student there. It was a great show and he gave a nice talk as well. It was all of his preparatory drawings. He's quite well-known for developing massive amounts of drawings while he works out the figurative aspects of his work, so... but yeah, when I was in school I was much more interested in, sort of, painterly painters. Max Beckmann was a huge hero for me, and I saw his work when I went to New York City. They just happened to have a show of his work at the Guggenheim. I loved in his work the idea of an open-ended narrative. He was a German expressionist. He did a lot of triptychs – figurative work – fairly paint-heavy, brushy... and there's all sorts of weird symbolism involved, and reaction to Nazi Germany at the time. Just the kind of work I could spend hours looking at, both from a painterly point of view but also just trying to figure out the narrative. He seemed to be telling a story but it left more questions than answers, and that's something that I really gravitated towards and it influenced the work that I was doing as a student at Waterloo. I didn't want to tell people what to think inside the work; I wanted to leave lots of questions. So that was highly influential, the idea that you could have this open-ended story that really relied on the viewer coming to the work and offering their own opinion; having this dialogue between artist and viewer, as opposed to other works that seemed so resolved and so sure of themselves that they were difficult to interpret in any way other than what the artist wants you to see. Even though Beckmann was doing figurative work – and I

dabbled in that before I completely abandoned the figure, basically – the emotional feeling I got from looking at his work was pretty strong.

CAiR: It's kind of like how certain film directors will guide your hand less by cutting less, moving the camera less or having a wider shot – they're not just telling you to look here, here, here... it opens the narrative, I think.

PH: Yeah, there's definitely more room in the work for you as a viewer coming from the outside.

CAiR: There's always the classic question of "any advice for students?" It's almost over-asked but it's also a good question, especially for an artist, because when you're an artist nobody really tells you what to do.

PH: I've always thought about the question of isolation versus exposure. I went to school at the University of Waterloo – not known as an art school. Architecture, engineering, computer science, math... The art on campus is isolated, on the other side of the tracks, in this little building... and you're in Waterloo, which is not Toronto, which is the largest art centre. You're not at OCAD, which is the largest art school in the country. So you're very separate from everything else that's going on. I think for me, at the time, that was actually valuable because it allowed me to develop on my own. I had influences but they didn't exert as much strength over me as they would have if I was in downtown Toronto.

CAiR: It's not like there's a scene for you to be swept up in.

PH: There's no scene, to be frank. [Laughs.] No scene whatsoever. You had to create your own interests and really seek out artists that

you enjoyed, and try to make a connection that way. Because I do notice – it probably happens in every art school – but I certainly know in Toronto, I can typically see who graduated from OCAD, if it's been in recent times. You see a lot of the same ideas making the rounds. And that can happen within a school, within a city, or probably within a country as well, or a region. So isolation in a way worked well for me earlier on in my career because I could just focus on my own work and ignore everyone else and... probably stick my head in the sand a little bit and be a little bit ignorant about what else

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was going on in the art world. But that naivete propelled me forward because I just didn't know any better. So I just kept painting, because I wasn't comparing. If I had compared myself to what other artists were doing at the time I probably would have had my hopes crushed, because I just wasn't good enough in the beginning. But because I was

a bit naive and a bit isolated I had the gumption to keep going. It probably depends on the personality, but if you drop yourself in the middle of a big art scene it could easily overwhelm a young artist who doesn't have enough of a sense of self-identity. Some young artists have that, and they forge a path forward that's completely unique, and has lots of integrity, and they don't fall prey to copying or being overly influenced by other people. For me, that would have been a problem.

So I think as a young artist you need to find a way in life to give yourself enough space and time to make art. At the same time you need to sort of balance that, learning about the larger arts

community and the art scene, but maintaining enough of a space where you can grown in your own direction and explore your own ideas without just getting swept up in the latest fads and fashions that go through the art world.

CAiR: At a very fast pace, at this point, it seems.

PH: Yeah, I mean, Instagram is a great tool but you certainly see these types of photos and types of art that sweep through Instagram, and everybody's doing the same thing.

CAiR: I'm guilty of that now and then... sometimes I take a picture and it's like, oh, that's one of those pictures! What are those pictures? This is a thing, somehow.

PH: Yeah, as if iPhone photography is a thing, for some reason. Why one specific brand of a tool defines a photographic outlook in life I don't quite understand...

So yeah, you've got to be aware of these things and sort of balance being part of it, being aware of it, but being separate at the same time. It's tough to do.

But also I recognize this whole idea of being innovative and original – you're really sold that in university, and in the art world as well. The top artists in the world are seen as the most innovative, the most groundbreaking. And that's a tough thing to try to accomplish or to work towards. I think you can only sort of be yourself, and as an artist it can sometimes be intimidating when you see someone else working within the same genre and they're doing fantastic work, but I think you just have to sort of feel like you have the integrity to keep working on your own thing, and if you keep doing that and using the cliché of being true to yourself as an artist, then you will be putting

something unique out there in the world, that nobody else is doing – even if there are superficial similarities. And that’s that isolation versus exposure paradigm as well – finding the right balancing act for that. I think naivete was my best weapon early in life.

CAiR: I wasn’t even going to bring up that word because a few of our recent projects have involved that topic for some reason. It’s in the title of the last interview we did.

PH: Really? That’s interesting.

CAiR: Yeah, there’s this whole world of “naive architecture” where the architect designs something that appears although they have unlearned their skills, and it’s almost childish. Instead of doing glossy condo renderings they draw something that looks like it was painted by Henri Rousseau, or is just collaged out of pieces of construction paper.

PH: Wasn’t it Picasso that said it took him a lifetime to learn to draw like a child? So there’s some of that [attitude] still around.

There’s definitely – unfortunately, especially coming out of the United States – there’s like an anti-expert, anti-academic, anti-professor [sentiment]. Like, if you’re somebody that’s studied a subject for a long time, what can you teach me, the average Joe on the street, about anything in life? And anti-science...

CAiR: Oh, don’t get me started.

PH: A distrust of institutions and academia in general – anybody calling themselves an expert. There seems to be distrust of that in certain parts of the world.

CAiR: Even though you would think that the point of going deeply into one subject is to learn about the world in general through that subject.

PH: Yeah.

CAiR: Well, don’t get me started on anti-science... Bernie Sanders 2016!

PH: [Laughs.] I would enjoy watching his rise. I can’t imagine that’s he’s going to go all the way, but...

I think the art world would probably do better under, like, Donald Trump, because we all love to fight against something. A little bit of oppression brings out the best in us, but from a human perspective –

CAiR: – and from a funding point of view –

PH: Yeah, from a funding point of view, Bernie Sanders might be better. ◆

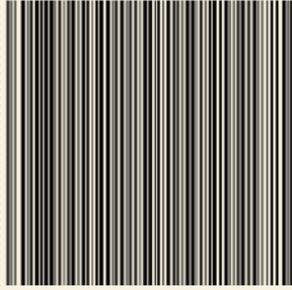
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