

A photograph of a building at night. The building has a grid of windows. One window in the center displays a painting of a red building in a snowy landscape. To the left, there are two glowing yellow spherical lights. In the foreground, a car is partially visible, and the street is dark. The overall scene is dimly lit with some warm light from the building's interior and the spherical lights.

Doug Kirton  
STILL WATER AND RAIN

September 14, 2007 - January 6, 2008



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KITCHENER - WATERLOO  
ART GALLERY



DOUBLE CADILLAC PALACE THEATRE (SKETCH), 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 28" X 22.25"

*DOUG KIRTON*  
*WHEN ART HAPPENS: REFLECTION AND*  
*EXPERIENCE IN PAINTING*  
// RICK NIXON

Doug Kirton's recent large paintings offer street level views of urban buildings, from Chicago specifically. In the main they capture a series of reflections and refracted views through windows on a rainy day, creating an ethereal array of surfaces and transparencies, a place where reality is transformed into a visual puzzle. The accuracy of the perspectives and the depth of focus are proof that the images are sourced from photography. Pictures like this compel the viewer to find a position where the properties of vision enable us to decipher objects and surfaces in space. But the moment we suss out the complexity of the conundrum and fall into that place in front of the artwork where representation makes sense, Kirton's painting gestures and effects disrupt the visual



INTERSECTION, 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 78" X 78"

register of photography, shifting our position of access toward the realm of painting. Once this level of awareness is activated, our grasp of representational space loosens, and Kirton's programme—the teasing out of abstract gestures from the substructure of photography's apparent reality—hits us like a discovery.

Discovery is a hard won accomplishment in the business of serious painting, but Kirton's ideas arise from a deep curiosity about the metaphoric and psychic possibilities regarding reflection and visual perception. Ours is a time when perception is once again

open to change. Technologies, such as the digital photography that Kirton uses to approximate his final paintings, have created the possibility of images that were unimaginable until recently. Between the camera and the studio, he selects the images that exhibit a kind of art historical awareness: what starts out as a passive scroll through an image cache produces associations with other paintings he has seen and probably admired. These associations are mainly abstract painting gestures. It is a tricky point in the development of his work since Kirton has to acknowledge that his affinity with the paradigmatic culture of painting is inflected with his subjectivity. His main project is to translate the increments of perception into legible matter. It is important that his selection process places value on recognition and acceptance of art history's standard without overwhelming the viewer or himself with a slavish reference to other painters. Therefore, he translates his observations with sensitivity and nuance, a generous form of ambivalence that offers the viewer an object lesson about the range of possibility between optical and tactile understanding.

Once in the studio, he establishes a satisfying uncertainty regarding the elision between representation and abstraction (annexed with his huge catalogue of painting effects and marks). In the final stages he adds the subtlest forms of colour modulation



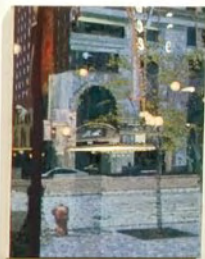
DOUBLE CADILLAC PALACE THEATRE, 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 106.5" X 84"



as a counterpoint to his intensified highlights by placing slightly different hues of grey side by side in some of the peripheral zones. In a painting like *Double Cadillac Palace Theatre (Large Version)*, 2007, the viewer is met with the *trompe-l'oeil* effect of flat areas pushing and pulling on the edges of the visual plane. This optical modulation, a technique that is arguably unreliable in any other medium, seems to reinforce the primacy of painting as the only discipline capable of clarifying and unpacking perceptual understanding in the world of images.

I do not think Kirton would be comfortable authorizing any particular discipline, however. Painting is a natural means of discovering the world for him, and a durable research tool, but ultimately as much a technological prosthesis as photography. In addition, in order for the *experience* of perception to be grasped, and then understood, the pre-cognition of culturally inflected visuality needs to be shed, an impossible limitation given the prescriptive forces governing recognition; which is why Kirton deploys painting in the manner of revision, undoing the pretence of the factual content of the photograph, and in the process, troubling the certainty of documentary, media, and cultural consciousness. The ostensible ideologies that speak the fiction of truth telling methods are also brought into question. Kirton, who started with the gloss of reflection and refraction as a purely visual exercise,





EXHIBITION INSTALLATION





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THE CADILLAC PALACE THEATRE IN THE RAIN, 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 106.5" X 84"

has altered the discourse on visuality to exceed its gravity, and to think in the metaphoric, contemplative senses of reflection. In this way, he favours contemplative closeness over critical distance.

In fact, it seemed to Kirton that painting settled into a polite series of polemics during the thirty years that he has been working. As an artist and art professor, he is intimate with, and his work has been professionally subjected to, many of the debates regarding the discipline's official discourses. For example, earlier works like the *The Suburban House Series* or *The Toxic Pool Group* each signified the wasted surpluses supplied by consumerist failures (signalled by the alienation of suburban life) and polluted landscapes (yielding both the romantic pleasure of ruins and the critique of teleologies). His new paintings, such as *The Cadillac Palace Theatre (Large Version)*, 2007, apparently demonstrate similar traits regarding the discourse on excess: sources are overtly urban; the visual dazzle of the consumerist spaces echo the media-saturated consciousness of the viewer; and Kirton's specific gaze is trained on the seductive surface of reflections supplied by store-front glass and rain-wetted streets. Yet Kirton's transparency about his method credits the viewer with the ability to follow his dialectic. There is a smooth and legible transition between visual registers that naturalizes the shift, and brings into question the authority of signifying



TWO PRUDENTIAL PLAZA: CLEARING STORM, 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 78" X 78"



systems, the art historical project included. When he makes the tipping point between categories indistinct, he is suggesting that the external agents qualifying art have difficulties pinpointing *when* something is art. Put another way, the signifying structures of art are external to his role as prime generator of conditional conversions and alterations. No wonder that Kirton refers to framing, whether through an actual or an art historical lens, as “waiting for something to happen”. Perception actually happens: it is the material of experience. And experience is an index of self.

Rick Nixon is an artist and writer living in Waterloo working in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Waterloo. He has a Masters in Art History from York University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Waterloo. He has worked as a curator in various galleries in Southwestern Ontario.



EARLY SPRING WATERS, 2007  
OIL ON CANVAS, 28" X 28"

## ARTIST STATEMENT

*"The object of reflection is invariably the discovery of something satisfying to the mind which was not there at the beginning of the search". Ernest Dimnet*

The paintings in this exhibition were inspired by the abstracted images I saw reflected in the windows of rainy city streets and in bodies of water. I'm fascinated by the ways in which reflections suggest an ethereal virtual world where unexpected and exaggerated collisions of colour and shape momentarily transform the world, providing seemingly endless painterly possibilities. My job then, is to "pin down" these uncanny scenes in paint.

For convenience and immediacy I capture the compelling moment with a camera and work from selected pictures later. While the photographs usually provide a good approximation of what the finished painting will look like, they are never perfect - I try for that in the studio, where interpretation and invention go into the composition and process of painting. I often use digital image editing software to visualize effects that I may not have considered otherwise - similar to how a writer might use a thesaurus to suggest more colourful wording.

One synonym of reflection is contemplation. Similarly, painting for me is a form of contemplation. My work starts with the perception of things seen and sensations felt. Proceeding in the studio allows me to internalize and clarify all of this information in a personal way and in doing so I hope to convey the complexity of my experience. Above all, painting is my research tool; the way I discover the world and my place in it.

Doug Kirton  
Kitchener, 2007

Cover: *Intersection*, 2007, oil on canvas, 78" x 78".

Inside cover: *The Cadillac Palace Theatre in the Rain (Sketch)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 32" x 24". Collection: Toni Ellis, Elora

Exhibition installation photography: K.J. Bedford.

Images courtesy of the artist and KWIAG.

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*Still Water and Rain* was organized by the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

ISBN 978-0-9782669-7-4

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Design: C. Mowry



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