

# THE DAILY COURIER

## Painting art in a digital age

THURSDAY, 09 MAY 2013 02:00 PORTIA PRIEGERT

At quick glance, Jordan Broadworth's oil paintings at the Kelowna Art Gallery look almost like a series of digital printouts. But this isn't a case of lazy viewing for on closer inspection, elements in his abstractions do, indeed, push the mind toward the digital realm.

First off, the work's size and format - 14 inches high and 17 inches across - is not unlike a computer screen.

Then there's the unusual substrate of the works, which are mounted on white mattes and left unframed. By painting on Mylar, the trade name for a thin plastic film used in various commercial applications, including packaging and videotapes, Broadworth achieves a remarkably luminous effect.

And since Mylar is non-absorbent, it also offers a clear view of his mark-making techniques.

Most of the works include an underlying rectilinear grid of thin lines - dare we say a screen - that also suggests both pixilation and the guidelines of graphic design software.

Many also have a lighter central core that emerges from a darker periphery, and some also include smaller boxes - or windows - of contrasting colour or technique.

Individual passages in some pieces have an out-of-focus quality that's reminiscent of a quick printout of a low-resolution image.

Other passages prompt thoughts of medical imaging, perhaps an ultrasound, with its grainy white streaks against a dark screen.

Yet, along with these various technological cues are painterly passages that reveal a complex inquiry - addition and subtraction, push and pull - using different techniques from brushwork to scraping.

Most pieces include a coiling element that turns in and around on itself, so much so it almost evokes the convoluted folds of the cerebral cortex, even as it remains completely abstract.

It's almost like the meandering flow of thoughts. At times, there's even a quality suggestive of graffiti tags, the proclaiming of the veiled self in the alleys and dark corners of a gritty urban world.

Yet Broadworth's energy seems subdued, never quite lifting into the dynamic painterly gesture of the abstract expressionists. It's more reflective of the "dude, like, whatever" shrug of the current moment than the passion of the past.

In short, these 25 paintings are sophisticated in their evocation of how we see now - through the haze of screen-time and experiences mediated by technology, our lives part of the great corporate and technological experiment unfolding around us.

Broadworth's artist statement sums up his mission with pithy intelligence: "My work functions in the gap between the immediate and the mediated - informed by displacement as much as by the corporeal and natural."

It's this gap that allows reflection on the continuing role of painting in an increasingly technological age.

While some maintain that painting is dead in a world where photography and video can do everything better and quicker, Broadworth advances an argument about human touch, however subtle, that seems at the root of painting's phoenix-like talent for resurrection.

Dennis Reid, the former longtime curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in the latest edition of his scholarly book about the history of Canadian painting, suggests that painting will remain relevant well into this century.

Painting's longevity, he says, is due to its ability to connect with traditions while proving itself "adaptable to new issues and approaches introduced through a range of new media."

Ontario-born Broadworth, who trained at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University in Halifax and now lives in New York, said paintings today have double lives.

"Every flesh-and-blood work spawns a pixilated and highly itinerate twin. How we read and interpret paintings has changed through the experience of viewing work online."

His process is both physical and orderly, following a step-by-step production scheme in which each layer bears a particular grid, geometric form or gesture, all carefully timed to optimize drying.

Curator Liz Wylie praises the "sheer loveliness" of Broadworth's work, noting it functions like a visual parallel to the cacophonous noises of crowded city streets.

"If they depict anything, it is as witnesses to the processes they have undergone to reach their finished states," she writes in the exhibition essay. "The works actually look somewhat impersonal, industrial even, with the feeling of having been formed as accidental accretions through some non-human means."

"There is no expressive, authorial touch muscling its way into these pieces. But the traces and vestiges are, of course, from human activity, human thought, energy and labour."

Vital Binaries: Recent Works on Mylar continues to June 16.