

The Landscapes of Peter Hoffer

By Lynn Moore, The Montréal Gazette

The landscape painting Peter Hoffer has described as his most autobiographical, *The Point*, features a lone tree, an individual far removed from the forest, much like the artist himself.

Elemental and contradictory at the same time. Personal yet universal. Accessible yet demanding of some analysis. Peter Hoffer's current crop of landscapes are, at first glance, clearly landscapes. We see broad, sweeping skies, plains, trees, and water falling over rocks and dramatic summer storms. Often there is a classical vanishing point. Yet there are other components that reflect Peter Hoffer's profound encounter with modernism. Large blocks of earthy grays suggest a somber reinterpretation of the Colorfield style of Mark Rothko. Gentle drips of paint seem to pay homage to Jackson Pollack and Abstract Expressionism.

A landscape by Peter Hoffer is about its subject - the lone tree, for example - but also about its context. There is geometry, texture and style. There is a sense of painterly surface and medium as well as of literary depth and meaning. While we admire the beauty of the work, we are aware of a modern artist asking us to consider process and the act of creation itself. Intriguing is an image that seems classical and modern at once.

An intuitive communicator, Peter Hoffer has nevertheless covertly fashioned a barrier - a glossy, transparent coat of resin - between his audience and his art. The barrier serves as the threshold to another state of mind. For an English-speaking artist based in Montréal, the notion of threshold is both a concept and a play on the word landscape which, in French, is *paysage* - a slur away from passage.

Peter Hoffer's works are sealed in layers and layers of resin, glossy resin that picks up reflections of light and ambient images. The landscape adopts its surroundings, reflecting them, becoming part of the landscape. Also part of this reflected reality are the people who inhabit the space, be they individuals viewing the work or people using its sheen as a mirror to preen. The curious have to step closer, change their perspective and look longer to get past reflections to see the details under the surface glimmer.

"That is what I want," the artist says. "That search. It's like that stage you're in the first two or three days after you've left the city and you're camping in the wilderness. You know you are enjoying being there but aren't in that zone yet. You're looking at that sheet-of-glass lake at dusk, and you're saying, 'that's amazing,' but you don't yet feel it."

While the resin stands in for the natural time/space transition inherent in moving to a different state of mind, another statement is made by its very artifice. Tough and protective, the resin has turned the painting into a package. Wrapped and sealed, ready for delivery, it's much like the goods sold in the big-box stores or urban North America.

"The painting has been encapsulated. It's been commodified," Peter Hoffer says. Or has it been shrink-wrapped like other organic produce? If Peter Hoffer uses plywood as his base, it's sometimes scratched or gouged. If he uses canvas, it

can be bunched up in spots or torn. Some of his works have spent time outside, exposed to the elements; they've cracked and twisted becoming almost topographic. Some have begun to decay.

But organic decomposition - a theme of Hoffer's earlier work linked to urban architecture - ceases with the application of the resin, a sealant. "The process itself is very technical, very meticulous. It becomes almost ceremonial. Once again, it's like when you are in nature involved in, say, the ceremony of the campfire." It's then, warmed and relaxed by the campfire, that you are in the zone.

"You start seeing the scratches and the ripped canvas and the blobs of pain and the drips and to me that's what is communicating the true landscape, the layers. That's what's interesting, the layers."

Also interesting is the investigation of the anomalies. What caused that break in the tree line on the horizon? Why is that tree alone? Did it resist the saw blades; was it left as a marker over sacred ground? What factors or forces or whims defined the topography? "Sometimes it's almost like the tree stepped aside because it wanted to be recognized. Maybe it was a bit self-absorbed and just wanted to be seen."

He wields brushes that paint broad and let go drips and blobs yet dance in detail along the edges of a big sky or under solitary trees.

Currently based in Montreal, Peter Hoffer sojourns in Manhattan. He appreciates great cities and has traveled as widely as his paintings but he retains country sensibilities and a strong sense of roots.

His works speak of the countryside of Northern Ontario, Eastern Quebec and, of the land of his forefathers, Hungary. But his landscapes aren't site specific. "I love landscape painting and one of the reasons I continue to do landscape painting is that these paintings are of nowhere specific."

"I wanted to do the landscape in a manner in which it is personified. Where the tree becomes the individual, even playing on some clichés."

He is keenly aware that Canadian artists, traditional or contemporary, are as closely linked to landscapes as are Canadians to winter and hockey. It's a birthright, emphasized by the fact that Peter Hoffer is a native of Brantford, Ontario where Lawren Harris, one of Canada's foremost landscape painters and a member of the Group of Seven painters, was born and raised and first worked.

The tradition of landscape is another cliché with which to play. In other times and other places, landscape painting was about ownership, Peter Hoffer notes. British landowners in particular wanted their holdings painted. American industrialists passing the Great Frontier followed suit.

One of artist's current interests is the changing state of material and elements. That interest is hinted at in the landscapes in which smoke rises from an unseen source, matter altered by fire, or perhaps explosion.

Most recently, Peter Hoffer is exploring water, capturing in his waterfall series, a frozen moment of the time, place and state. The works of Peter Hoffer

can be found in an array of corporate collections, public spaces and private homes. The Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, located in the provincial capital of Québec City, has included works by Peter Hoffer in its permanent collection.

Montréal's famed Hôtel Le Reine Elizabeth has a Peter Hoffer in one of its public rooms, as does at least one embassy. Loto-Québec is among the corporate entities which have acquired his works.

As exposure to Peter Hoffer increases, his fan list grows. At least one major Hollywood film star has snagged a Peter Hoffer after viewing the work while filming in Montréal.

Born in 1965 in Brantford, Ontario, Peter Hoffer studied painting and sculpture at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto and then at the University of Guelph. Following a period in New York City, he studied sculpture at Concordia University in Montréal where he obtained a Masters in Fine Art.

Peter Hoffer's work has been included in numerous exhibitions and galleries.