

## **Notes on the landscape painting of Erica Shuttleworth**

It might be wise to record that first come the “sticks +stones” – simply attached and fused to the background panel by a thick clotted cream encaustic. Then a series of horizontal small wood panels depicting trees which in time were succeeded by a larger vision. The individual trees extend themselves into a stepped back broader view. Presented on a thick horizontal solid plane, a series of “tree” incidents dances in rhythmic placement. The fully mature series engages a number of landscape views. As they develop there is a clear direction towards abstraction and stark graphic line. Floating, pale land masses blocked over by pigmented wax whose edges remain ambivalent, a floating hazy colour over and about but never quite fixed on the passage it evokes. In the most recent works an electric-wire line of charcoal black snaps and dances, broken and jagged across the horizontal plane.



***Escarpment***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 3 x 6 feet

This exhibition is entitled *sticks + stones*, and as yet I have not embraced the earliest works in the series that simply attached sticks and stones to wood panels and melded the whole in a coating of creamy encaustic. One work depicting a large moon-like rock surface particularly irritates me (and that is always a good place to start). The rock face reminds me of Courbet's cliffs and caverns and also his female model's naked buttocks. There is something "right" about the willful materiality of Courbet's insolent surfaces whether rockface or flesh. And so Shuttleworth's galling, in-your-face, rock obstruction deserves mention because it demands attention, refusing to capitulate. In its own small way, it testifies to something done right.



**Stone I**, Encaustic on panel, 2002, 12 x 12 inches

There is an expressionist anger in the work that depicts a black dripping sky and a collision of sea forces. At first I thought of this image as an Apocalyptic vision but later it came to me that it was an acknowledgement of Nature's unpredictability and chaotic power. In this rapid sketch, Shuttleworth has achieved without rhetoric, a sublime acknowledgement of elemental forces.



**Seascape I**, Encaustic on paper, 2003, 12 x 15 inches

Trees obviously obsess Shuttleworth- engage her as a persistent concern. We see a sympathy for their dignity, their steadfast endurance through seasons, decades of nature's chaotic incident, their very breathing (our breathing too). Mute – asking nothing; without making a spectacle of themselves. Erica has chosen to take trees up in conversation. The dialogue, having become visually attractive, acknowledges their diversity of opinion, character, and essential difference. The message: ignore nature at your loss, for she stands there offering sumptuous gifts to the simply curious – no charge but your attention.



***The Tease***, Encaustic on linen, 2003, 3 x 6 feet

Several little panels have an urgent, aggressive upward-thrusting disposition. Sticks reaching skywards. Arms uplifting, joyous, yearning, a submission to a higher power. Wait for the delivery. You have to listen (visually, with time) if you wish to hear the tree's song.



***Landscape Study 2***, Encaustic on panel, 2002, 12 x 18 inches

They are not particular, these views, rather a suggestion of landscape's power for a surreptitious embrace. The panels' physically insistent horizontal planes ground an image whose floating forms appear to block each others' passage; forces asserted but not confronted to the point of oppression. To live with these landscapes would result in a conviction that they are more 'real' than an actual view. Art's trick is to make evocation carry more intensity than the reality. How is it possible that the artist's felt experience, focused and distilled, carries more weight than the experience of being present? Memory's gift?



***Pointe-au-Baril I***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

For the first large landscape *The Dance*, the trees as individuals became subordinated to the abstract expressionist rhythm. There is a gestural dance that has yet to resolve into a static fixed whole. As these landscapes progress, they exhibit a will to move away from the placed composed certainty of the European tradition of Claude and Turner. They take a broader view, breathe and contemplate a vaster, less humanized, North American experience.



***The Dance I***, Encaustic on linen, 2003, 3 x 6 feet

What I like about these landscapes is the plane asserted as a confident unity. The whole thick plane constitutes a view. This despite the fact that the whole is not composed in the traditional sense. Rather it is as if 'taken in' on a walk. The snapshot view could be extended beyond the panel edges. There is no classical framing device (as with Claude and Turner) that shuts down to a calculated conclusion. No narrative but the suggestion of an existence that breathes and lives with a force and will of its own. Shuttleworth presents, but attempts not to construct, a seemingly uncalculated view of the forces and swings of the land as it exists in itself unedited.



**Winter 2**, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches



A FEW SCRATCHY LINES dancing horizontally across the panel. Above a creamy wash of back-lit sky; below a thick cheese crust of snow laden field. The electric energy of the charcoal line sings.



***Anticipation***, Encaustic on linen, 2003, 3 x 6 feet

Where does “construction” come into these artworks? A few dancing vertical strokes in charcoal black, a few touches of colour ochre, orange, red, a hazy umber yields to purple. Pale washes of limey-green suffice for a bank of grass. If compared to traditional classical norms (think of Poussin’s structured compositions) a depiction is barely being attempted. These works are all suggestion. An abstract energy, rhythm and bounce convey the lay of the land. A dance of colour occurs amidst the trees. The whole panel reveals itself as a place of breathing life. When taken in, in contemplation, we are embraced as part of this world.



***Sideroad A II***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

How much can one do with how little? This is an issue these works pose. The non-sense distinction between Abstraction and Realism fades. Snow and ice-packs of a winter lake: colour defines plane, attaches and becomes mass. With minimalist means, the whole becomes alive. Does this magic realization lie solely in laying down of paint? The artist's touch is intensely evident because the luminous under-plane of the wood panel bounces the pigmented strokes of wax forward focussing attention.



**Winter 4**, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

Farm land with an indifferent woodlot – it doesn't get much less romantically provocative than this. A border of trees broken by the sky above a stand of ground edging inwards: the essentially Canadian view. Horizontal, the low plane of field spreads beyond the eye's capacity to embrace it. We have become so indifferent as not to see that this view is different than anywhere else. It is special – in its essential difference and our indifference. To see, to feel, to take this view in as something particular and to embrace what it has to offer, this effort of attention makes the landscapes little essays in appreciation. Economy, understatement, and a slow building punch.



***Sideroad A I***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

As long as I look, these landscapes take me in. With a few slashes of pigment laden strokes a landscape unfolds. Sky, hovering cloud bank, a haze-distanced spread of trees quivers. Beneath a field snow. Shuttleworth's application of paint recreates in its casualness this unmediated acceptance of the scene. The expanse before us simply breathes without calculation. The fields dance without orchestration. An economy of grace.



**Winter 3**, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

What I like most about these landscapes is their energy. There is a sense in these depictions of dancing sticks and stones of breathing life. The artist has been able to preserve the first touch of the stroke. The charcoal drawing is not over ridden, submerged, or effaced – the works original voice still sings true. Wax slathers of pigment deploy in agreement with the first sight. Passages of ice, unfrozen lake-water, snow laden field fight for position – destined to remain unresolved – because alive. Here Shuttleworth has achieved the breathing energy of space.



***Landscape I***, Encaustic on panel, 2002, 12 x 18 inches

I prefer the most abstract works where the charcoal drawing pushes through. Here the basic elements of congealed paint + colour + line jockey in a dance of dominance, shifting, none willing to subordinate. The most satisfying passages are to be found in the spaces that appear to breathe between them, evidence of tension un-reconciled.



***Landscape 5***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 12 x 18 inches

Taking in these views, there is a moment when they 'don't add up'. Landscapes that refuse to come together and compose out of their parts. The strokes of charcoal, the swathes of wax laden pigment remain simply that – just graphic elements lying on a plane of wood. Optically a view is mere chaos - nature just a disarray made up of sticks + stones that will not meld into a vision. The brain's organizing intelligence unifies this visual screen into a comprehensible navigatable situation. Am I pushing too far to propose that Shuttleworth attempts to remind us, as we see her building these paintings from such basic elements, of just that innocent moment of pre-cognition? My suggestion is that these works attest to that 'innocent moment of vision' when we glimpse the chaos behind what constitutes nature. It is as if the techniques Shuttleworth employs emphasize, by forthright simplicity, the pre-composed moment prior to crystallizing. Just reflecting on this pre-cognitive moment of pure perception is charged with energy and intuition. All is potential – to compose, to conceive elements and reconcile masses, strengths and declines, into the lay of the land. If there is a primal creative moment that contemporary painting aspires to grasp it is the freshness, energy and sincerity of the first touch, the unmediated gesture. Shuttleworth is struggling to render her first uncalculated intuition of the land. To feel this energy with her is to know she has succeeded.



***Lake Kagashagawigamog***, Encaustic on panel, 2003, 3 x 6 feet



Why is it that an artist can, with a few potent works, state what a critic cannot in as many pages? In conversation with the painter David Bolduc, he casually said 'Don't think you can convey the weight of the emotive feeling Erica's work does without a cultural depth of experience in reading, living and thinking – it just doesn't happen.'



***Landscape Study 3***, Encaustic on panel, 2002, 12 x 18 inches