

**Jordan
Broadworth**
Paintings

Jordan
Broadworth

Art Gallery of Peel 11 January – 15 February, 2009

Introduction: Speaking of Painting

The Art Gallery of Peel has had a longstanding commitment to showcasing the work of Canadian Modernist painters and the institution's Permanent Collection boasts a strong component that traces the movement's evolution through pivotal groups like the Painters Eleven and Les Automatistes to diverse contemporary practitioners. A passionate advocate of Modernist painting, Curator David Somers has featured major exhibitions by David Urban, Ric Evans, Chris Cran and Harold Klunder in the Gallery's schedule during recent years. *Jordan Broadworth: Paintings* continues in this tradition. David Somers and Assistant Curator, Judy Daley, recently discussed Jordan Broadworth's work and painting in general.

DS In 2007, I visited the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo to view an exhibition of work by Francis Bacon. All of the works were portraits and the show even included some very rare drawings, especially rare for Bacon. The drawings were fascinating but the meat of the exhibition was the paintings – they all surged with the force of Bacon's particular genius. I remember a comment that you made, Judy, after you had seen the exhibition a few weeks later – you said it was “a show made for people who love paint.”

JD It was the kind of exhibition that made me wish I was a painter.

DS That remark came back to me when I started looking at Jordan Broadworth's recent paintings: these are works for people who love paint and I'm one of those people. Bacon and Broadworth may have far different motives when it comes to picture-making but they share a fascination with the painted surface and the physical application of a medium to canvas. Jordan is using a variety of methods – drips, swirls and loops, to create some of the most painterly and elegant works produced in this country over the past several years.

JD David, one of my favourite stories of yours concerns a time when you were working at the Art Gallery of Hamilton as a security guard, your brief apprenticeship before quickly climbing the curatorial ladder. You'd noted that from time to time the Gallery provided a warm haven for some of Hamilton's homeless population, and on this particular occasion, while patrolling the exhibition areas, you had your eye on one of them. This man, drunk, deranged or who knows what, walked up to a painting (it was a David Craven, right?), and proceeded to lick its surface. And you, unflappable as usual, approached him and said, “please don't lick the paintings, sir.”

DS It's completely true! And it was a David Craven painting.

JD That story, bizarre and hilarious though it is, came to my mind when considering Jordan's work. His surfaces draw us in, absorb us — they seem to invite something beyond mere visual examination. And so I like to think that the gentleman at the Art Gallery of Hamilton had exactly the right response to the David Craven painting. Maybe he'd be similarly inclined if confronted with the presence and power of Jordan's recent work — sometimes just looking doesn't seem to be enough.

DS It's also refreshing to view Jordan's practice within the context of media like film, photography or video, media that at present, the art world is largely focused on, and that all employ technology to one degree or another. His is a practice based on tradition, but it's a tradition brought forward in contemporary terms.

JD Jordan addresses technology in his statement and speaks of "our loss of the authentic in an increasingly technological world," positing painting as one means to bridge the gap between "immediate and mediated experience." That could summarize his approach as well: his careful control and manipulation of paint that still retains inherent gesture and spontaneity. It's a sort of perfect balancing act and the resulting works possess that immediacy of which Jordan writes.

DS With the Art Gallery of Peel's large, varied and important Permanent Collection of paintings, we're a fitting venue for the works of Jordan Broadworth. His is the kind of painting that ensures Modernism continues to engage the public and find new audiences. It's for all of those people who love paint.

There are several people who have contributed to the success of this exhibition and in particular we wish to thank Sara Soskolne for overseeing all aspects of the catalogue's design and production, and Daniel Baird for his insightful look at Jordan's work. At the Peel Heritage Complex, Diane Allengame and Maureen Couse have provided invaluable help in mounting the exhibition and special thanks are owed to photographer Niwah Visser and preparator Brock Gerrard. The Gallery is also indebted to its many members and supporters as well as the financial assistance of the Ontario Arts Council. Lastly, we wish to thank Jordan for his commitment to the project — it has been a pleasure to work with him on this exhibition and bring his work to a new audience in our community.

David Somers, Curator
Judy Daley, Assistant Curator

Art Gallery of Peel
Peel Heritage Complex

Jordan Broadworth: Paintings

DANIEL BAIRD

Jordan Broadworth's studio in the bleakly industrial Bushwick section of Brooklyn is as austere as a monk's cell: thick, raw concrete walls and floor, a narrow, grilled, rectangular window looking out on a street across which cement trucks rumble. A hot plate, a coffee maker, a cot, endless brushes and tubes of paint. "I've accepted that I'm not good at the domestic thing," Broadworth, who recently turned forty, tells me, buttoned up in an old sweater against the October chill. But leaning against the formidable walls of his studio is his latest body of work, black and white abstractions tinged with uncanny Prussian blue that have a haunted and luminous beauty and delicacy, his by now signature cursive, looping gestures darting and uncoiling over and under a blurry, ghosted, unstable grid. Broadworth's is a ruminative, interior art, but one that never devolves into emotional indulgence or solipsism; rather, it seeks a form of interiority that keeps in question the concept of interiority itself, and hones in on what Immanuel Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), a document that has had an inestimable influence on our understanding of modernity and enlightenment, called the "categories of experience." And unlike Kant, and with Hegel, we tend to understand those categories, those grids that keep our world comforting and knowable, as all too brittle and contingent.

Jordan Broadworth's work for the past decade has taken as its principal concern, and as the source of its governing metaphors, the nature of gesture and the character of the picture plane — more specifically, the relationship between figure and ground. "Gestural abstraction" (or what Clement Greenberg, referencing the work of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock, arrogantly termed "America-type painting") has typically been understood as either embodying spontaneous, demonic outbursts of emotional and spiritual energy or comprising a more formal movement by which painting is stripped of extraneous elements like figures and pictorial illusion, presenting the beholder with a pure, unmediated visual experience. But a subsequent generation of painters, notably Brice Marden and Gerhard Richter, have reinterpreted abstract painting as having a conceptual vocabulary, a deliberate, underlying grammar that occupies a space at the dynamic nexus between the artist's hand, the painted surface, and the viewer. In his landmark *Cold Mountain* paintings (1988–91), for instance, Marden explicitly evokes the taut, whipping lines of Pollock's drip paintings as well as Kline's explosive calligraphy, but does so with meticulously rendered descending bands that have an almost classical reflectiveness and serenity. And in the 1970s, Richter began fashioning sumptuous abstractions that are part painterly process and part alchemical

transformation. Incredibly, he then set about reproducing details of those paintings with photo-realist precision. Both bodies of work simultaneously engage and scrutinize the language, iconography, and pictorial spaces of abstract painting as it evolved through the twentieth century. Both turn in on themselves and look out toward the world. Jordan Broadworth's work is solidly within this tradition.

In the early *bully* (2001), for instance, phosphorescent bands loop through an architecture of patches and horizontal striations against a ground of deepening magenta, resolving near the canvas's lower edge into drips Broadworth carefully applied with a syringe — accident and gravity marshalled with medical precision. In *mind* (2004), the knotted gestures recede farther and farther behind a fractured, horizontal grid that has been scored and pulled across the canvas, and in the lavish and aggressive *vent* (2006), thick strokes tear through a grid of alternating electric red, yellow, and blue like the shimmering traces of the movements of some mysterious beast. Despite the glossy, sometimes high-keyed use of colour, these paintings have a smouldering remoteness and melancholy. It is as though, with their deep, woozy vicissitudes, they are trying to hone in on a structure, a process, a truth they can never quite reach. And unlike much contemporary abstraction, especially in Canada, they are very urban paintings, urban in the way Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) is urban. But unlike Mondrian's joyous, jazz-inflected New York paintings, Broadworth's are informed by the centreless, unstable, global post-9/11 world, a twenty-first century in which the individual is endlessly mediated and hollowed out and the public sphere has been dominated by lies, terror, surveillance, war, and financial collapse. It is a world where our fates are determined by forces we not only don't control, but often cannot even understand.

So it should come as no surprise that Broadworth's most recent body of work is in an austere black and white, sometimes with a last-moment-of-twilight blue, its aesthetic, and its ethos, that of subtraction and erasure. These paintings are not so much a sharp departure from Broadworth's earlier works as they are a deepening, a philosophical refinement, of his themes and techniques. Notably, his familiar looping and skidding gestures are now sampled from personal signatures he has acquired from a wide variety of sources. In an age of retinal scans and digitized fingerprints collected in vast databases by US immigration (not to mention an age of rampant identity theft), the swiftly scrawled personal signature has become a curious and seemingly archaic phenomenon. A hallmark of individual style and identity, it is a kind of controlled, willful gesture that eventually becomes second-nature whether applied to the back of a cheque, a lease, divorce papers, or a will. And unlike retinal scans or fingerprints — or DNA, for that matter — it can be skilfully forged: the personal signature is one of the last vestiges of the idea that our public selves can be presented through idiosyncratic



bully, 2001



mind, 2004

expressions, and it is increasingly being supplanted by new technologies, by a sea of information and computation, in which the self is out of the equation.

In *change* (2008, fig. 12) there is a central figure, perhaps a cursive “S” or lopsided “D” anchored to the lower horizon of the canvas as though to the rule of a page, tilting, even lurching across the picture plane. Behind it are the quick, broken, feathery traces of other gestures, other signatures. As elsewhere, there are the floating rectangles that form structures in taut disequilibrium. They often seem like roving lenses that magnify deeper, more chaotic spaces, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that the painting's surface has been torn across, excavated, and that the palimpsest of lines has not so much been drawn as revealed. In the larger *text* (2008, fig. 01), the congested tangle of bands presses close into the foreground, and while, like those in *change*, they evoke the formation of letters, they are more like attempts to write a signature that cancel one another

out, a frantic hand that cannot arrive at a signature line — a signature defined by its own failure. And just as the painting's figure and ground reverse and re-reverse, so the gestures pulse between the readable and unreadable, and the entire painting is on the verge of imploding inward into seething white noise. Broadworth's recent paintings operate on a principle of dynamic and unresolvable uncertainty, which is perhaps why they feel as though they exist in an instantaneous, ruminative time: uncertainty of gesture, of structure, of identity, of space.

In *fix* (2008, fig. 13), which is almost a companion piece to *text*, the dissolution of figures into the ground's white noise is nearly — but not quite — complete: the long, roiling bands, in places pure white, boil up from the indeterminate spaces underneath, threatening to overwhelm the painting's fragile structure. The bands in *text* have a raw,



vent, 2006

declarative negativity, as though lineaments of text are undermining the conditions of writing, as though figure and ground are abolishing one another. Nonetheless, many of the paintings in this exhibition are intimate, moody, and lyrical. In *pool* (2008, fig. 07), for instance, bands whip and blur; they look like a strange, ephemeral incandescence in deep night air. In *rain* (2008, fig. 08), the bands torque and disintegrate in an aqueous space eddying in a rapid, sidelong motion. And, finally, in the evocatively titled *tunnel* (2008, fig. 04), a curving, interrupted gesture pushes out into the temporary clarity of the foreground, while behind the vaporous, stuttering lines recede into an illusive tunnel. These paintings have the intimacy of consciousness grasping, glimpsing, and navigating events in matter and in time.

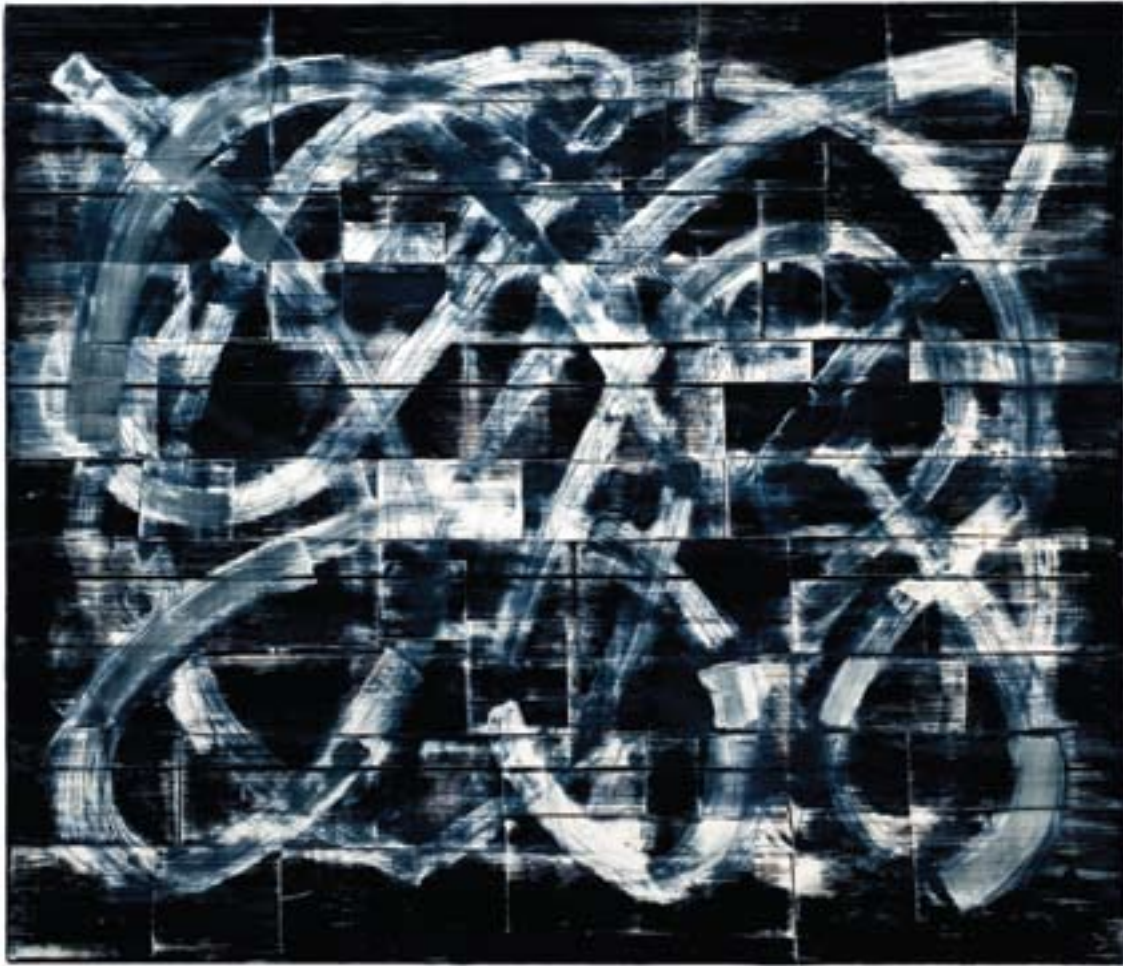
The relationship between figure and ground is a fundamental issue in modernist painting, from Manet's nudes to Morandi's still lives to Pollock, Kline, and de Kooning's expressive abstractions to the more recent and conceptually deliberate explorations of Richter, Marden, and even David Reed. Broadworth is acutely conscious of this history. While part of what is at issue here is specific to the aesthetics of painting as it has been practiced over the past hundred and more years, part of the ruthless self-scrutiny Clem-

ent Greenberg identified as being integral to modernism, it also opens out onto deeper and more fluid metaphors for our experience and knowledge of the world, and more specifically of our globalized, information-saturated, turbulent twenty-first-century world. What is a figure and what is a ground? What is a signal and what is noise? What is order and what is disorder? Broadworth's paintings suspend these questions, these dichotomies, into a state of thrumming uncertainty, probing the ways paintings mean and thereby the way we experience the world as meaningful; to use Kant's phrase, they explore the transcendental "conditions of experience." Yet despite the epistemological uncertainties these paintings relentlessly propose, they are by no means pessimistic. Rather, they are sustained by an open, reflective beauty in which the aesthetics of painting and the confusing demands of experience intertwine. And while the work of many artists covering similar territory often feels postured and rhetorical, Broadworth's paintings grapple with the shifting indeterminacies of our era in a way that is by turns nuanced, analytical, direct, and honest; the paintings give the viewer the sense of participating in a discrete passage in an ongoing investigation.

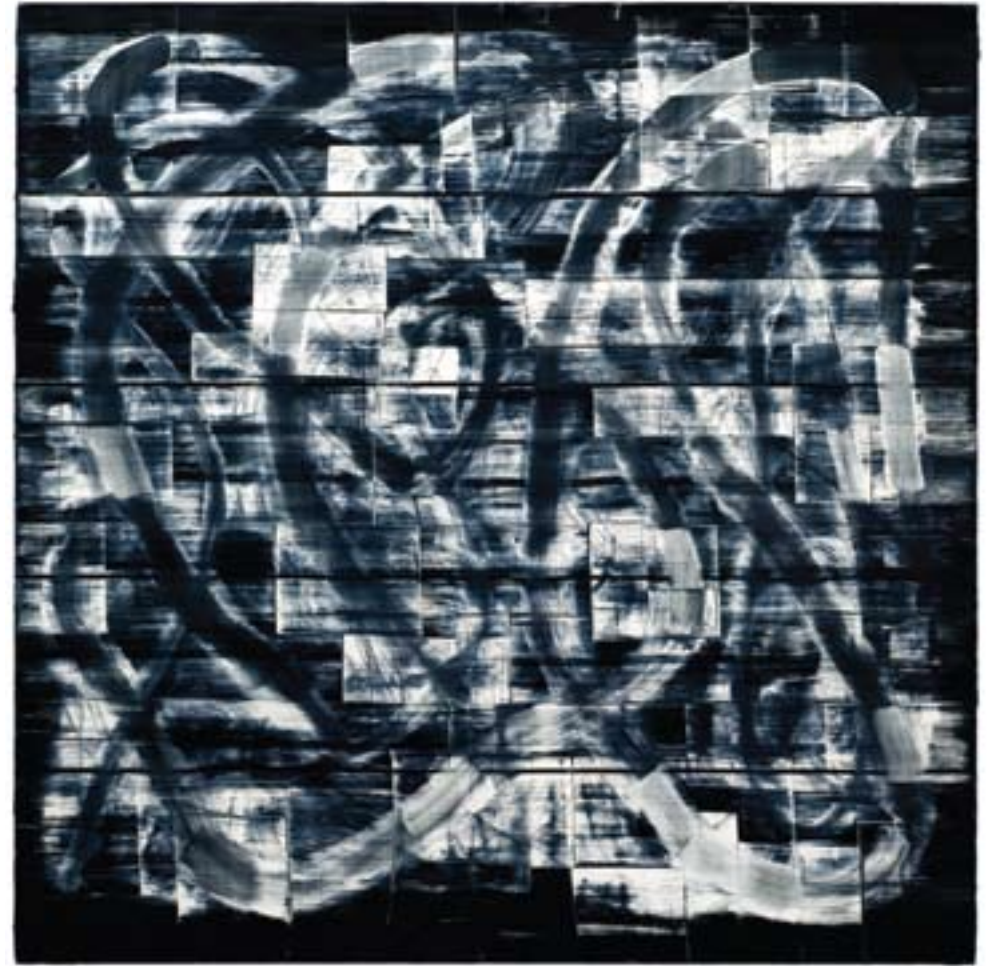
Educated at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (BFA 1992), The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the University of Guelph (MFA 1997), Broadworth has at various times maintained studios in Halifax, Toronto, Vancouver, and London, Ontario, but it makes sense that this most recent body of work was created in New York City, symbol of much that has been demonic and tragic about the twenty-first century thus far. From between the low, razor wire-festooned, graffiti-covered industrial buildings in Broadworth's Brooklyn neighbourhood, one can in places see all the way down past the Williamsburg bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, the East River, and the length of lower Manhattan to the shimmering absence where the twin towers once stood, and to the still-standing towers of a discredited and collapsed Wall Street. Once the imperial centre of financial and cultural power — it is hardly surprising that New York produced some of the most heroic and romantic paintings of the middle of the twentieth century — it is now a place of unease and uncertainty. Perhaps it takes the reserve and discipline of a Canadian painter, a migrant outsider, to encompass the complexities and uncertainties of a twenty-first-century world that are hardly specific to New York, or America. Perhaps it no longer really makes sense to think of painters as American or Canadian, but only as North American — that ambivalent continent of endlessness that has, after all, never been certain of its signature.

Daniel Baird studied philosophy at University of California, Princeton University, and University of California, Berkeley. Baird lived and worked in New York City from 1989, where he was art editor and feature writer for the The Brooklyn Rail, a publication he co-founded. Since moving to Toronto in 2000, he has written for numerous Canadian publications, including Canadian Art and Border Crossings. He is currently an editor for The Walrus.

Paintings



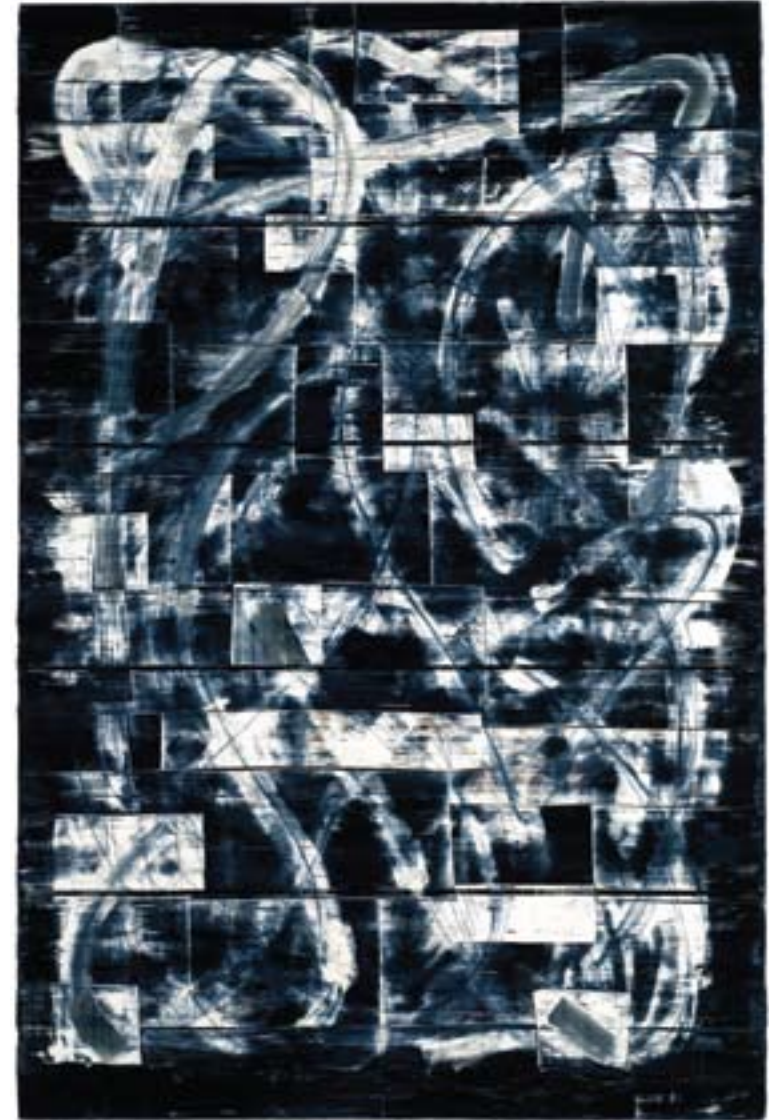
01 text 2008 oil on canvas 182.9 × 152.4 cm / 72 × 60"



02 sight 2008 oil on canvas 152.4 × 152.4 cm / 60 × 60"



03-04 **spy, tunnel** 2008 oil on canvas 76.2 x 76.2 cm / 30 x 30"



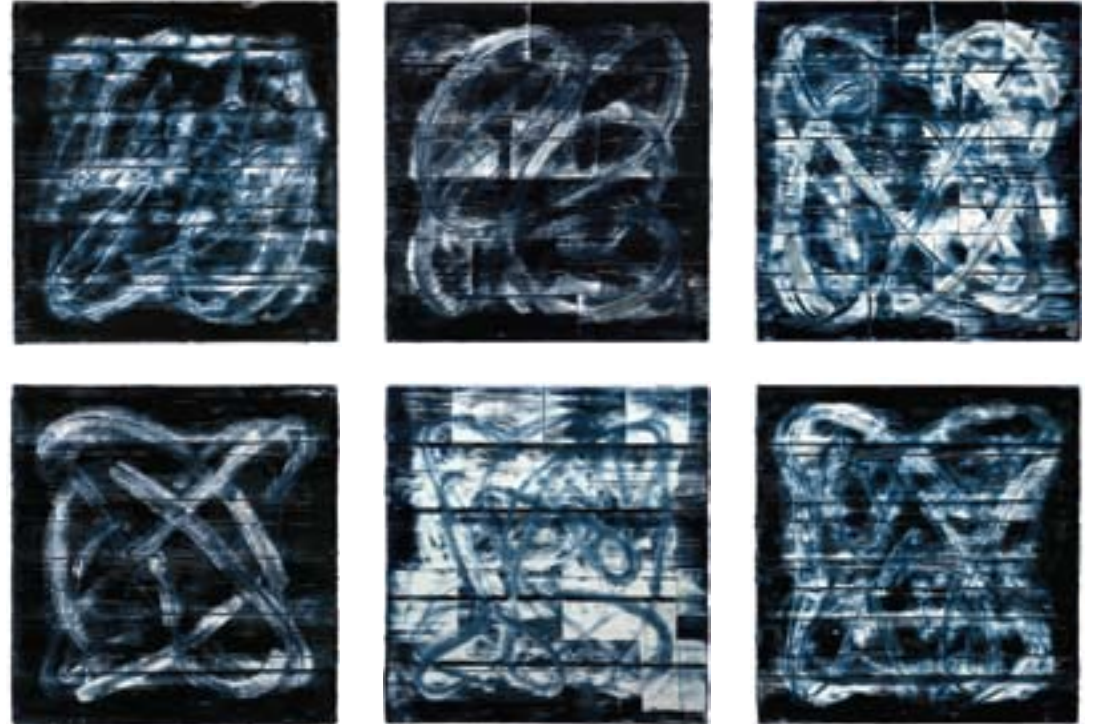
05 **shelter** 2008 oil on canvas 152.4 x 121.9 cm / 60 x 48"



gain (detail)



o6 gain 2008 oil on canvas 182.9 × 152.4 cm / 72 × 60"



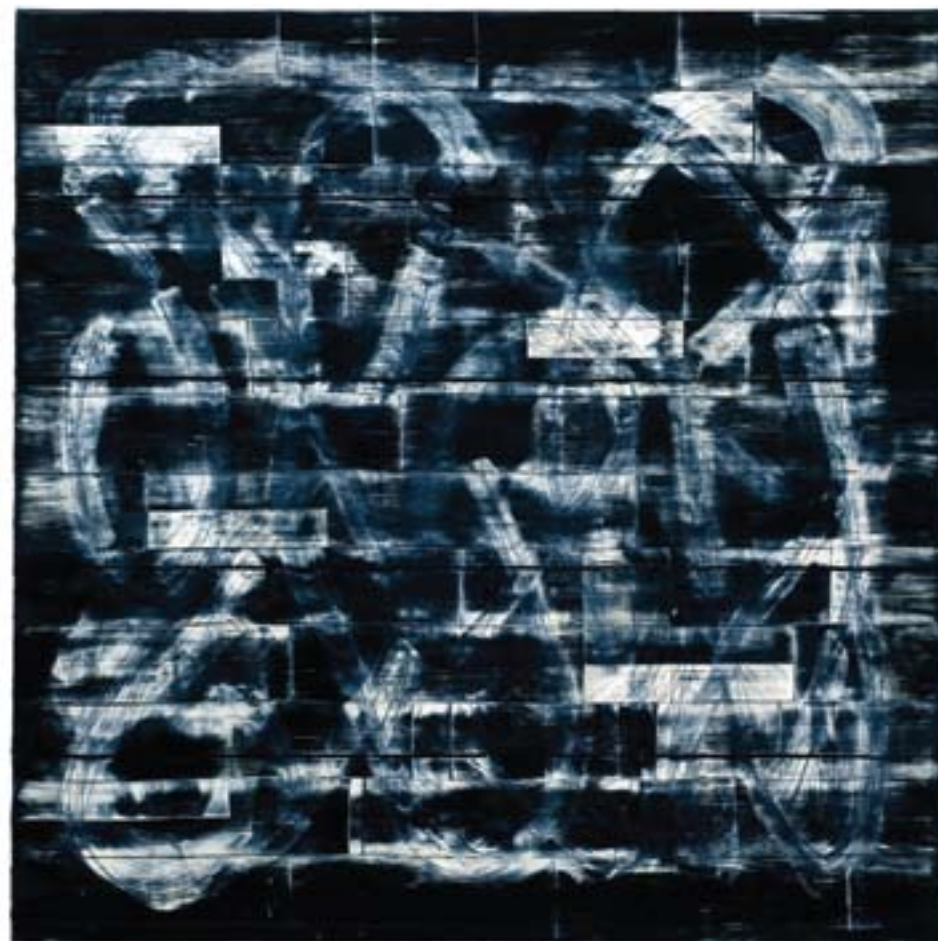
o7-12 pool, rain, fracture, fear, side, change 2008 oil on canvas 55.9 × 53.3 cm / 22 × 21"

change (detail)





13 **fix** 2008 oil on canvas 121.9 × 132.1 cm / 48 × 52"



14 **strip** 2008 oil on canvas 152.4 × 152.4 cm / 60 × 60"

List of works

182.9 × 152.4 cm / 72 × 60"	121.9 × 132.1 cm / 48 × 52"	55.9 × 53.3 cm / 22 × 21"
gain text	insert fix guide	side lock rain change
152.4 × 152.4 cm / 60 × 60"	76.2 × 76.2 cm / 30 × 30"	fear rank pool fracture
sight strip rescue drive	tunnel lodge vow prime link bundle	
152.4 × 121.9 cm / 60 × 48"	report spy	All works are oil on canvas, 2008.
screen shelter		

Essay images

bully, 2001, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 81.3 cm / 38 × 32"

mind, 2004, oil on canvas, 94 × 96.5 cm / 37 × 38"

vent, 2006, oil on canvas, 241.3 × 193 cm / 95 × 76"

All works courtesy the artist, except *mind* courtesy Harry and Mary Ellen Simon, NJ

Jordan Broadworth was born in Esquesing, Ontario in 1968. He has exhibited his work across Canada and in the United States. He is also a curator, writer, and educator. Broadworth divides his time between Wellington County, Ontario, London, Ontario and Brooklyn, New York. For more information visit jordanbroadworth.com.

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