OREGON ARTSWATCH
ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

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Palimpsest: Stephen Hayes at Elizabeth Leach Gallery

By Prudence Roberts
NOVEMBER 17, 2025

Visual Arts

In a series of large-scale paintings, the artist wrestles with devastation in Gaza through abstraction. New monotypes explore memory and the landscape of the Columbia River Gorge.

Install image of *Stephen Hayes Elegy* at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Mario Gallucci

In recent years, Stephen Hayes has turned increasingly to abstraction in his landscape paintings and monotypes. There is a reason for this. He has spent the last decade or so thinking about the land as a witness to history and politics.

Boundaries shift, places are named and renamed, and maps are redrawn. Land is bought, sold, worked, exhausted, and fought over. It remembers everything and the events that unfold at a particular site become part of its permanent record, even if that record is unseen and mute.

In 2016, Hayes exhibited a series of paintings titled In the Hour Before. These landscapes relied on the aerial and satellite photos he found on Google Earth, drawn from its “street view” function, allowing him to look at images of places that had been witness to mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and other catastrophes. Abstracting from this source material, he made landscapes of these often mundane scenes. In each, he sought to create a visual memorial to a place and to the people who died there.

Stephen Hayes, *Ahada’ashara (11)*, 2025, oil over canvas on panel, “60×60” Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Samuel Slater

This year, Hayes set himself a more daunting, but related challenge: to create a cycle of paintings that could in some way acknowledge the enormity of what has occurred in Gaza. This was not what he had envisioned when he determined that he wanted to make large-scale paintings for an autumn exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. He embarked on the paintings, not sure what would emerge, but certain that they would somehow reflect the unrest and despair that the world is experiencing and his own sense of helplessness. He only realized that he was making work about Gaza when he was already into the process.

As an artist, how do you approach this? How can you represent such an abyss? The impulse for Hayes, as it has been for many artists, was to turn to abstraction when he needed to face such inexpressible horror and sorrow. In abstraction, the artist is not tied to a literal representation, one limited by temporality or specificity. There is, instead, the hope of creating something universal and timeless that can commemorate a place or an event but can also speak to other events and other sites.

Although he did not rely on aerial images for these paintings, Gaza itself has become an abstraction of a place, no longer a landscape as we know it. In its devastated state, it is a modern-day symbol (one of many worldwide) of intractable conflict, seemingly without end or resolution. As seen from satellite images, the site itself is flattened, burned out, devoid of vegetation or color. As I write, more than 69,000 people have died there.

In the end, Hayes produced twelve 60-in.-square paintings that, he writes, “act singly and collectively as poem, placard and prayer: an Elegy for Gaza.” All were completed in a few months, as Hayes moved from one canvas to another, working in controlled haste. He had begun with six panels, but as the enormity of what he was doing became more apparent to him, he doubled that number. He talks of deliberately scraping out any representational imagery, of not relying on habits, and of seeking discomfort and a state of intellectual unrest as he painted.

Stephen Hayes, *Sab'a (7)*, 2025, oil on canvas over panel, "60×60" Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Samuel Slater

Now installed at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, along with Wild Beauty-Remembered (more on that later) the paintings in Elegy are arranged in pairs alternating with single canvases. While their titles are the Arabic words for numbers one through twelve, they are not intended to be seen as a sequence and will be reinstalled at least twice during the run of the exhibition, so that each diptych will change. Like history itself, the works cannot be read as a single, immutable narrative: there is no master narrator and, in fact, the number titles also do not refer to a maker's sequence, since Hayes worked on all but one at the same time.

Walking into the gallery on a gray day, the brilliant color of these works is compelling. So, too, is the sense of solemnity that comes from the size of each painting and their complexity as you look more closely and discern the dense underpainting beneath the topmost layers of blue, lavender, pink, yellow. These are all-over paintings whose elegant, calligraphic brushstrokes direct our eyes from spot to spot. Here and there, bits of the underpainting break the surface, creating a sense of greater depth and of the passage of time. I thought of some of these shapes and colors as objects or blood projecting from rubble.

Stephen Hayes, *Ithna'ashara (12)*, 2025, Oil on canvas over panel, "60×60" Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Samuel Slater

In a recent gallery conversation with David Naimon, Hayes discussed one of the paintings, Ithna'ashara (12), in detail. It is something of a stand-alone piece and perhaps the most directly elegiac of the works. The work first reads as ghostly white, as though a scrim or translucent veil were concealing information just below the surface. Hints of black gradually emerge. They are the barely visible remnants of 60,000 black marks Hayes made within a grid of four hundred three-inch squares, painting each vertical line as he counted aloud, acknowledging and mourning the steadily rising death count in Gaza. He had just listened to the audiobook of Omar El Akkad's One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This (Alfred A. Knopf, 2025) and to Naimon's podcast interview with El Akkad. The book is part memoir and part indictment of the Palestinian genocide.

When he reached 60,000 brush strokes, thereby completing an all-black painting, Hayes returned to its surface and covered it with corresponding strokes of white, as if enshrouding each black stroke. It is not necessary to be aware of these facts when studying the painting, which has its own gravitas. This was the work that I looked at first, drawn to its enigmatic presence and the complexity of its surface. And while it is not intended as a summation, it could be interpreted as such.

Stephen Hayes, *Wild Beauty – Remembered – Inlet 1*, 2025, monotype print on Somerset cotton rag, variable edition 1/3. Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Samuel Slater

Hayes also looks at a contested landscape in Wild Beauty-Remembered, a series of eight recent monotypes. These are installed in the smaller room of the gallery. They are based on the photographs in Wild Beauty, a 2008 exhibition (and accompanying book) at the Portland Art Museum. Photography Curator Terry Toedtemeier (1947-2008) brought together more than 100 photographs of the Columbia River Gorge made between 1859 and 1959 that traced its transformation as the river was tamed and commercialized and its original inhabitants displaced.

The last photographs in the 2008 show date from 1959 when The Dalles Dam was constructed, thereby destroying the rapids at Celilo Falls and erasing all that the site had represented as a vital center of culture and commerce for untold generations of Indigenous people from around the Northwest. Hayes's study of the photographs in the exhibition and trips to the Gorge led to this homage. In the monotypes, Hayes has selected some of the more dramatic and recognizable basalt formations—cliffs, promontories, stand-alone rocks– that appear in the photographs and placed them in brilliantly-colored, abstracted landscapes that evoke but do not literally represent the Gorge itself. As with the paintings of Elegy, you do not need to know the background to appreciate these compositions which, because they are not specific, are removed from a particular point in time.

Stephen Hayes, *Wild Beauty – Remembered – Passage 1*, 2025, Monotype print on gampi and kozo mounted on Somerset cotton rag, variable edition 1/3. Image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery, photo by Samuel Slater

Tin House

BETWEEN THE COVERS

WITH DAVID NAIMON

Between the Covers Podcast

Tin House Live: Stephen Hayes

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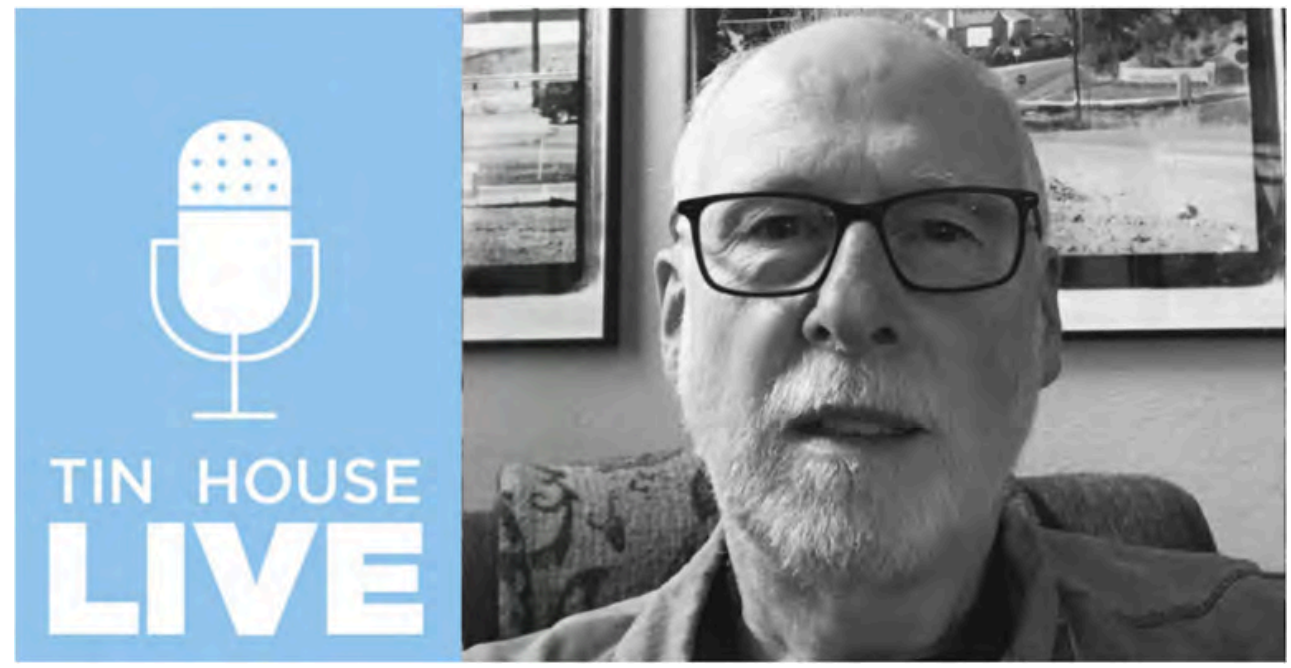

Painter Stephen Hayes latest exhibition, “Elegy,” consists of twelve abstract paintings that engage with the genocide in Gaza. One of the twelve paintings was created while listening to the Between the Covers conversation with Omar El Akkad about his book *One Day Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. Because of this, instead of asking, as he usually does, an art curator or fellow painter to be in a public conversation with him as part of the exhibition, he asked me to interview him. Much as our conversation was surely different than the others he has had about his work over his nearly half-century of being a painter, his invitation also asked me to step into unfamiliar territory, to meet Stephen in this third space, unfamiliar to us both, and make something new together.

The conversation was held at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon. Head over to the gallery website to see images of the “Elegy” exhibition and to this post on their Instagram page to see the specific painting that was created under the aura of this podcast.

If you enjoyed today’s conversation consider joining the Between the Covers community as a listener-supporter. You can find out about the potential rewards and benefits of doing so at the show’s Patreon page.

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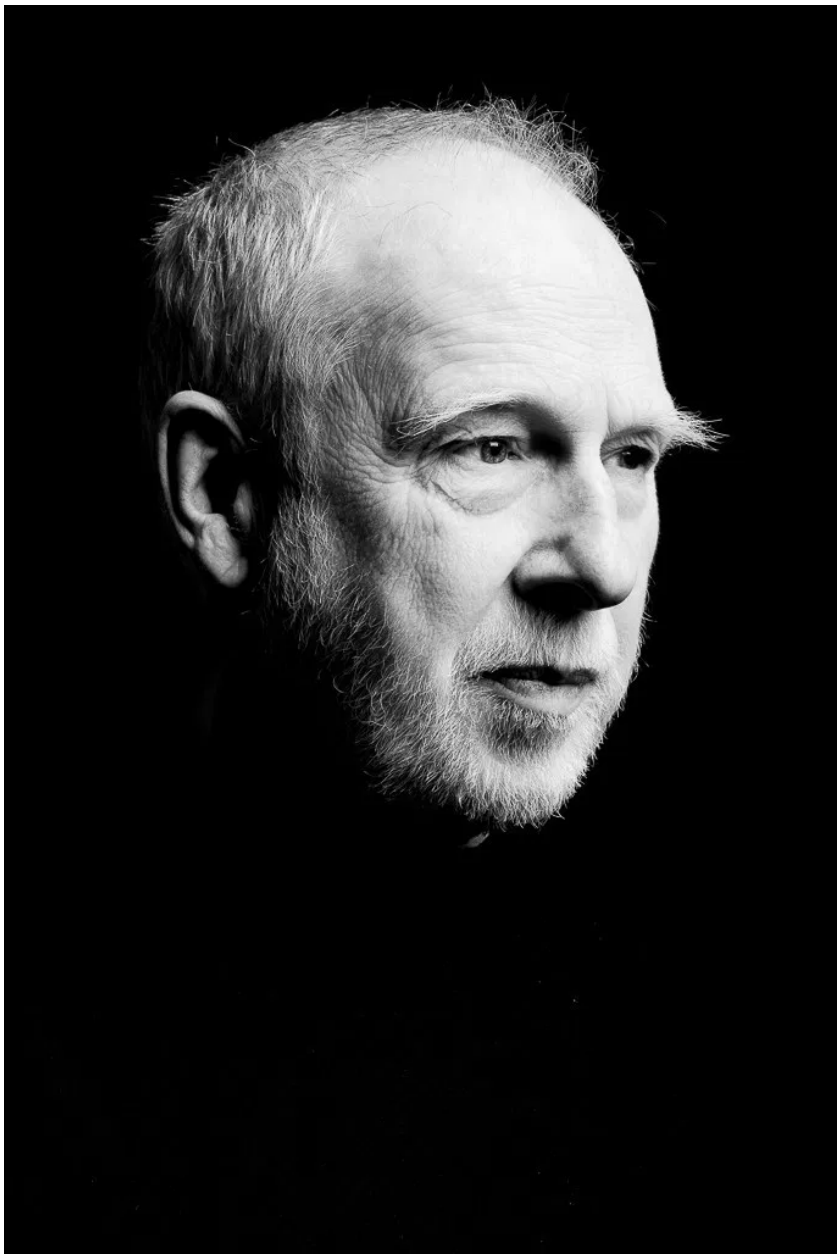
CULTURE

The Artists Series 4: Visual Artists

Ten more portraits in black and white by K.B. Dixon of Oregon artists who are helping to define what Portland and the state look like

JULY 27, 2020 // CULTURE, VISUAL ART // K.B. DIXON



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY K.B. DIXON

This is the fourth installment of portraits in *The Artist Series*. The first two focused on Oregon writers. Part 3 and this installment, Part 4, focus on visual artists—the gifted, award-winning painters, sculptors, and photographers who have made invaluable contributions to the cultural life of this city and state, people whose legacies are destined to be part of our cultural history. For an introductory look at their work, I refer you to their digital digs—their virtual ateliers.

STEPHEN HAYES: PAINTER

A "deft blending of representation and sheer abstraction underpins Hayes's eminence as a supreme kind of painters' painter in the Pacific Northwest." – Sue Taylor, *Art in America*.

Examples of Hayes's work can be found at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and at https://www.stephenhayes.net

Artist's paintings capture sites of shootings before violence strikes

columbian.com/news/2019/oct/17/artists-paintings-capture-sites-of-shootings-before-violence-strikes

Artist Stephen Hayes was preparing to speak earlier this month at a Portland gallery reception about "In the Hour Before," his series of paintings that imagine the eerie peace before gunfire erupts at the scenes of shootings.

Just then, news broke of yet another shooting, this one across the Columbia River at Smith Tower in downtown Vancouver.

It will probably be the subject of his next painting, said Hayes, who teaches art at Clark College.

His four-year project depicting the sites of shootings in oil paints began as something else entirely.

If you go

What: Artist Stephen Hayes' series "In the Hour Before: This Land ..."

Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave., Portland.

When: Panel discussion at 11 a.m. Saturday; gallery hours 10:30 a.m. to 5 :30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; Hayes' work is on display through Nov. 2.

Information: 503-224-0521; www.elizabethleach.com

In November 2015, Hayes was exploring the streets of Arles, France, through Google Street View, looking for the places that once inspired Vincent Van Gogh in 1888. His goal was to paint the modern sights of Arles using that image as the inspiration. Hayes did indeed make one painting of "a strikingly ordinary back alley" in the southern French city.

Then terrorists struck Paris in a series of bombings and shootings that claimed 130 lives and wounded another 494.

Stunned, Hayes pulled up the Google Street View of those locations — a cafe, a stadium, a concert hall.

"I was struck by how normal everything looked in these photos," he said.

So he began to paint, using 21st century technology to create a sort of modern take on plein-air painting, the practice of painting outdoors. He painted Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C.

The shootings keep happening, so the paintings keep coming — Pulse nightclub, the Gilroy Garlic Festival, an El Paso Walmart.

"It's so ubiquitous," Hayes said.

The series so far includes 50 or so paintings. In 2018, Hayes received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship to continue the series.

There's a frenetic nature to the work. Smudges, dripping paint and rag lines speckle the canvas.

He completed his painting of Parkland, Fla., a week after the Valentine's Day 2018 shooting that claimed 17 lives. Hayes spent four days stretching the 10-foot wide canvas and three days painting.

"It has the quality of urgency and rawness," Hayes said.

Hayes, who is originally from Washington, D.C., has been living and painting in the Northwest since 1985.

“Figure/Ground,” a book published for a 2013 exhibit of Hayes’ work at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, details the hours he’s spent plein-air painting at Sauvie Island and surrounding areas. He also has taught for years at colleges in the region, including Clark.

“It’s great to pass on the knowledge you have,” Hayes said. “If we’re going to move forward as a civilization, we have to be willing to pass that knowledge on.”

And while Hayes’ paintings typically focus on natural landscapes or portraiture, this isn’t his first inherently political body of work.

In the early 2000s, he took a series of posters for missing children, scanned and printed them onto silk screens, and manipulated the ink to create a series of portraits. Funds from sales of those portraits benefited the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

“I was trying to use beauty to solve a problem of horrific ugliness,” he said.

Hayes embraces that conflict in “In the Hour Before,” as well. He welcomes the idea that people can be both drawn to his work as beautiful, yet repulsed by the story of what it means.

“We still have to make room for being alive and embracing beauty,” Hayes said. “You can be respectful of the lives lost and embrace our own lives.”

ArtsWatch Weekly: past imperfect, present tense

In the Northwest, images of horror and hope from the past and present. Plus a West Side story, a flamenco flourish, and a divine voice.

Bob Hicks

OCTOBER 17, 2019

Stephen Hayes, *Livingston, TX 2-11-19*, 2019, oil on canvas over panel, 60 x 60 inches, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN OREGON, things get deceptively more tense at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Northwest Portland, where the exhibition *In the Hour Before: This Land ...* continues through Nov. 2. Stephen Hayes, a master Northwest landscape artist, has assembled a series of paintings of American sites that have been been disrupted by traumatic gun violence. Hayes, Portland curator Linda Tesner, and Portland artist Tad Savinar will talk at the gallery about the exhibit and its undercurrents, at 11 a.m. this Saturday, Oct. 19.

Stephen Hayes: In The Hour Before

opb.org/television/programs/artbeat/segment/stephen-hayes-art-paintings-mass-shootings-in-the-hour-before

History | local | Arts | World | Oregon Art Beat Stephen Hayes: In The Hour Before by Eric Slade OPB Feb. 21, 2019 midnight

In November of 2015 Stephen Hayes was working in his studio when he heard the news on the radio: mass shootings (and a bomb attack) had killed 130 people in Paris.

Stephen had recently discovered Google Earth as a tool for creating his evocative landscape paintings. He could pick a spot on earth, virtually travel there, then create a painting from this long distance visit.

On this November morning Stephen went to Google Earth and visited the scenes of these mass shootings. “And I was really surprised at how uneventful those images were,” Stephen recalls. “Logically there would be no reason to expect otherwise, but the impact on me was profound.”

Decades of studio practice have given painter Stephen Hayes the mastery of his materials to reveal intimate, internal emotions.

Stephen began making paintings of the sites of the Paris attacks. “And as I’m making those paintings there were shootings that happened in this country – in San Bernardino, California for instance. And so I made a painting for San Bernardino.”

In the months that followed Stephen built on this work – ending up with over 50 paintings, and a project that continues today.

The collective title of the project is, “In The Hour Before.”

“The notion being that it’s always possible to find this quality before these events have happened. It’s always possible to recognize that that quality is going to exist again potentially, given time.” For Stephen the work is a chance to respond to the “grotesque reality of an escalating physical and social violence in America.”

Last year in April, Stephen was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for his work on “In The Hour Before.” He joins a short list of Oregon artists who’ve received the prestigious national award.

A painting from artist Stephen Hayes depicting Ferguson Mo. before the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown.

Stephen has been creating his emotionally evocative work for decades now. And across time, with his plein air paintings, portraits, prints and monotypes, he has always encouraged us to engage with the work as an object, where we can find a personal connection. And where we can find some beauty — a word Stephen is not afraid to use. He hopes that "the object itself, the painting, the print, the drawing, is on some level beautiful to look at." Even when we're looking at landscapes that were once the scenes of mass violence.

"I recognize that there's an odd marriage of beauty and tragedy in these paintings, and in this project, and I'm not a 100 percent sure why I'm trying to keep that marriage alive in the work. But I think it's critical."

21 THURSDAY

7:00 OPB PBS NewsHour (Also Fri 12am) | **OPB+ This Old House Hour** P

8:00 OPB Oregon Art Beat *The Story Within the Story.* Portland painter Stephen Hayes isn't trying to duplicate nature in his evocative landscapes. Instead, he uses them to reveal physical scenes and intimate emotions. P ▶ (Also Sun 6pm) | **OPB+ 1964: The Fight for a Right** Follow the struggle to win African Americans the right to vote in Mississippi. (Also Sat 12am)

Pictured: Painter Stephen Hayes in "The Story Within the Story" airing on February 21. Photo by Eric Slade/OPB.

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

STEPHEN HAYES

Fellow: Awarded 2018
Field of Study: Fine Arts
Competition: US & Canada
Website: http://www.stephenhayes.net

Throughout his career, Stephen Hayes has explored themes of the land, loss, sexuality, identity, beauty and violence. No matter the subject, his works exude an authenticity and depth of understanding that belie their seeming nonchalance of execution or familiarity of imagery.

"*In our society we distrust aesthetic experience—in particular the experience of beauty—and have come to associate it with the superficial and the vacuous. The paintings of Stephen Hayes remind us that in spite of contemporary skepticism, it is still possible to find beauty wedded to meaning*." - Terri Hopkins, Emerita Curator, The Art Gym at Marylhurst University (catalog excerpt)

In a career now in its fourth decade, Hayes has held over thirty-five solo exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad, and his works have been curated into nearly seventy group shows by a broad diversity of curatorial voices, among whom are: Kristy Edmunds, Cassandra Coblentz, Stuart Horodner, Linda Tesner, Bruce Guenther, Terri Hopkins, John Weber, Peter Frank, Willem de Looper and Mary Jane Jacob. Exhibitions of his paintings, prints and drawings have been reviewed in *Art Forum* by Stephanie Snyder, in *Art in America* by Sue Taylor, in *Artweek* by Lois Allan and by Paul Sutinen for *Oregon Arts Watch*. He is a featured artist in Lois Allan's comprehensive *Contemporary Printmaking in the Northwest* as well as Lauren P. Della Monica's *Painted Landscapes: Contemporary Views* and *New American Paintings* Number 121, curated by Nina Bozicnik.

Works by Stephen Hayes are housed in the collections of the New York Public Library, the Frans Masereel Centrum voor Grafiek in Kasterlee, Belgium, The Portland Art Museum, The Hallie Ford Museum, The Gates Foundation, Lewis and Clark College and more than one hundred private and public collections in the United States, Europe and Japan. Support for his work has come in the form of fellowships, grants and residencies from The Ford Family Foundation, The

Ucross Foundation, WESTAF and the NEA, The Oregon Arts Commission, Caldera, the Frans Masereel Center, The Vermont Studio Center, Clark College and Oregon State University.

Stephen Hayes is represented by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and by the David Richard Gallery in Santa Fe, NM and New York, NY. More information is available at his website.

Profile photograph by Kenneth Dixon

Stephen Hayes
San Bernardino, CA (4-11-17), 2017
oil on canvas
72 x 96"

A conversation with painter Stephen Hayes


orartswatch.org/a-conversation-with-painter-stephen-hayes

Paul Sutinen

Tad Savinar, writing in the catalog for Stephen Hayes's 2013 retrospective at the Hoffman Gallery at Lewis & Clark College, said, "I believe good artists are good scientists, constantly searching and testing in order to refine and express their pursuits." Over the past three decades Hayes has moved his painting from a controlled, uniform touch to wildly brushed, smudged, scraped and daubed compositions as free as improvisational jazz. His recent work focuses on seemingly mundane scenes, but locations of horrific tragedy.

A new group of Stephen Hayes paintings is at Elizabeth Leach Gallery from October 5-28.

So how long have you been a painter?

That's kind of a trick question. It's interesting you ask that question because I'm currently writing a fellowship proposal, and in there I wrote that when I graduated from grad school and went off on my journey to make work, I was not a painter, so I recognize that I was wasn't a painter coming out of school.

What did you think you were?

Somebody who got his MFA. I focused on drawing primarily. I did painting, but then I spent a couple years in Cyprus trudging the hills and painting *en plein air.* I learned a lot about what it was to make a painting. I traversed a whole bunch of sort of hackneyed ground, but also discovered what the material was, how much I felt connected to it, how much I didn't know about it. That was 1980 to '84. I was not really thinking of myself as a painter, but I was trying to learn something about painting.

So you didn't think you're becoming a painter while you were going through an MFA program.

Not at all. And that other loaded word of being an "artist." It wasn't until the last 10 to 15 years that I've had any ease with using that term—describing myself being an "artist." It's easier to describe myself as being a "painter" than being an artist because a "painter" felt like something physical that I was getting to, something I was connecting to. Being an artist has always felt like something much less understandable and a little bit mystical—a bit like I'm not the one that gets to say that. That has to be said about the work that I make.

Jasper Johns said something to the effect that the difference between "going to be an artist" and "being an artist" is a state of mind.

I can live with that.

Do you feel like there's a point where you decided you were a painter?

Definitely it wasn't an "aha" moment or anything like that for me, but I know that calling myself a painter happened first before calling myself an artist because it felt like much more achievable. I could say, "I'm figuring out moving this material around, what happens when I do this, what my response is, what my feeling is about the material, and how it assists me in working with imagery, or working with expression, or the more esoteric things." When I think of myself as a painter I can think about all the

things that I know how to do, like mix this with that to get this, predict the results of this medium in this temperature on this kind of day.

Stephen Hayes, “Ferguson, MO 8-9-14,” 2017 oil/canvas 30”x 30”

You know your instrument and you can play it.

I know the instrument and I can play it, so I feel like that’s the painter part of me—a little bit craftsman. The artist part is a whole different story. That’s knowing the space between the notes.

Paint itself has become very important in your paintings.

One of the things that I want my students to come away with is that they are painting even if they’re making images or pictures. So one of the first exercises I have them do is go to a real painting, see things in the flesh, and describe exactly what they see. If they start off with “there’s a guy on a horse,” then I know they’re in the realm totally of imagery. And then if they, on their own, get to that other place—“the paint’s really juicy and thick in parts and in other parts it’s really thin and the other parts are shiny or glossy or dull,” or “it’s a really big thing, it’s bigger than me”— any time they made a note of that, to me, that’s like “yes, OK.” Otherwise I have to do that work with them, teach them how to look at the painting.

I suppose there are people who listen to music because they like the words in the song and other people are listening to the music as well.

Absolutely.

When did you decide that you wanted to study art?

I was in college. I went to the University of Wisconsin for my bachelors degree. I went to study geology, but I left behind a high school girlfriend who went off to the Rhode Island School of Design, and I figured I'd better take some art classes if I was going to have anything to talk to her about as we got into our old age with all our kids around. And at the end of my freshman year I decided to switch over to art because I found out I just love it. That relationship, as most high school romances do, didn't have legs, but in spite of the fact that I got Cs in basic drawing, I connected with that.

Looking back at the teachers you had, were there particular important teachers?

Absolutely, yeah, there were some great teachers. Probably the most significant for me was a guy named Richard Long. I just found out recently that he passed away last year. He wasn't a painter. Drawing was his thing. The thing that I got from Richard more than anything was—it's a little bit Johnsian, let's go back to Jasper—the "take an object, do a thing to it, do another thing to it," kind of approach. He taught me that process and the ability to look at the things after you've done that, at each stage, and name what you see, name what's there and then what else might I do.

So it was an attitude about how to proceed in making the work, not a particular technical thing or aspiration to what kind of artist you might be. Something seemingly simple.

But absolutely critical to the ability to move forward. If you have no ability to challenge your thinking or to find context for what it is you're doing, you're going to run out fast.

Stephen Hayes, "Self Portrait", 2002

Robert Ryman said that the main focus of painting is to give pleasure. Does that ring true to you?

For my own work I'd have to go sideways a little bit on that. I always insist on coming away with something better. I have really broad definition of what a beauty can be. There's not a lot of limitations to it, so it can be a can of artist's merde [Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Shit,* 1961].

The can may be beautiful. I'm not sure about the contents.

The concept there, the notion of it, can be quite beautiful—on a different level than, say, a Titian *Slaying of Marsyas.*

So there could be something that's visually beautiful, and something where the idea is beautiful.

I'm fascinated by the work of Sol LeWitt and his work looks nothing like mine—and I have no intention of making works that look anything like his. But I'm always aware in his work that he's following some sense of logic to an unknown end. It's pleasurable. It makes me laugh, even though it's very dry in a way, makes me smile. I find it really beautiful. And in a weird way, the paintings that I make contain that quality, too. I didn't expect this. I'm not controlling everything so much that I can predict the outcome, and that's what I want.

Early on, maybe when you hadn't yet become a painter, was there a particular kind of painting that you aspired to?

Authentic is what I really aspired to, of the moment for me. It's personal. Aspired to work that speaks, that has some kind of voice, that feels necessary. I don't sign many things. I don't feel that I need to because when I look at the work I recognize them instantly—even if I don't remember making it—that's mine, that's my hand.

There seems to have be a time when the paint itself becomes more loosely attached to the image, brushstrokes almost for their own sake, but I always feel that they help to define space in some way. Do you have a thought about how that occurred? Or just one day decided to throw in this brushstroke?

There's a little bit of that. There's a resistance to finesse. I struggle to hold my hand back sometimes. I've certainly killed a lot of paintings by overworking them.

It's part of the game.

Part of the game is to do that and learn from that…It becomes clear that once you've begun it's no longer you making it, it's the two of you working together—the painter and the painting are working together. It sounds really weird when you talk about it like that, but it becomes really evident, at least in my case. I'm not in total control of this thing becoming. I'm a facilitator.

If I think back to the earliest works of yours that I saw, which must've been from the '80s, landscape paintings, there was a certain kind of consistency in paint application. Now there's a smudge here, a smoosh there, a drip. There must've been an attitude about consistency early on, but at some point you must have decided that what's important is something else.

I think early on the drawings that I made when I was in grad school were very controlled, realistic portrait drawings, life-size figures, heads. When you look at the drawings you can see all the hashmarks and scratchings and you could see the making, but you quickly went to seeing the image and that was pretty impressive to me then, but it is less interesting to me now.

Satisfaction in accomplishing a task.

So, painting in the beginning, even though I was switching materials and subject matter and approach, because a lot of those paintings I was making were *plein air* paintings, actually made outside, I was trying to control a little bit. I think that look is a result of seeking control, manipulating the thing to an intended end. At this point the intended end is pretty open. It's much more divergent than convergent in my approach to painting. I might have an idea of the subject matter and the image that I'm kind of focusing my attention on, but what the making is going to be—I learn it along the way. It's using brushes, using scrapers, using rollers, using rags, and all that stuff, all a result of all the years I spent making something.

Do you visit the Portland Art Museum often? What works do you make sure to see?

I'm a member and I go two or three times a year. There's always a few paintings that I insist on seeing. There's a Pissarro painting of the house with the red roof —it's one of my favorites and it hasn't died for me. There's an Albert Pinkham Ryder painting. I saw it last week. There's a painting of an aqueduct —I don't know who the painter is. Really phenomenal. The mood just kills me. There's a Kuniyoshi portrait that I insist on seeing every time I'm there. There's not a lot of seminal pieces that draw me in, that I always go to see. There's a Fairfield Porter painting, too. Pissarro is the one for me, though—if I was going to steal a painting out of the museum.

Do you still do portraits?

I do. In fact I have a commission that I haven't started yet. I'm going to get started on it this week. I don't do them in the same way that I did, just out of interest. Now I do them when it's time to do a portrait for somebody, or if I got a commission and those commissions are generally from people I know.

Talk about the difference between between doing a portrait and doing these other paintings. With the portrait there's probably a feeling that you should have some kind of likeness.

There is from the people who are being painted, definitely. I guess the biggest difference to me is not in how they're made—they're made in the same way. But there is always that there is that kind of restriction to bring it back to that image, that you say, "that's the person." The people who are being painted, of course, feel that, but I really feel that as well. I want that. I want that person to show up. But I want that painting also to be a killer object. I want you to look at it as a painting every bit as much as I want you to look at it as a picture of that person.

The same way we look at Rembrandt.

The whole reason that I started painting portraits in the first place was a single painting in the National Gallery of London by Anthony van Dyck, a portrait of a guy named Cornelis van der Geest. When I spent nine months in London in 1995, I spent, I don't know, a hundred hours just trying to figure out that painting. I wasn't making work then. I didn't have a studio or anything. I did drawings. I just tried to fathom "how is this painting made?"— so magic you know—and it was easy to see the nature of the stroke, what the color was, how the paint was applied, practically impossible to replicate, for me, but it was the thing that sparked me wanting to make portraits when I came back to the US. I just started having people over and painted everybody.

It's interesting to me that you say you looked at this van Dyck painting and tried to figure it out.

It always impresses me that you could have those thoughts about a certain painting by van Dyck, a

quality that a certain kind of viewer will respond to, and have the exact same approach looking at a painting by Robert Ryman. I can feel exactly the same way about it, but it's chalk and cheese. So you're looking to Robert Ryman and you're looking at a van Dyck and why are they at all on a parallel with each other? But, they definitely are for me.

How do you begin a painting?

Making stuff like the canvas on the stretcher—making the support.

The ones on the wall here are all the same size.

They're all the same size for a reason. The proportion was intended to be very referential to the 35mm slide proportion, a subtle sort of reference to seeing the world through photographs.

It's a familiar proportion.

And to my way of thinking, because the source material comes from Google Earth, I wanted it to refer to this notion of mediated seeing as opposed to direct experiential seeing.

Are you still working with sites of tragedy?

I am.

How did that start?

This particular project started when I was in a residency at Ucross in 2015. I didn't really have a project that I was working on or have a body of work that I was in the middle of. I had the idea that it would be interesting to go around and see things through Google Earth. I had this thought of, what if I go to southern France where van Gogh painted, go to Arles? He's a hero of mine. I love his work. So I went into Arles, dropped the little yellow guy arbitrarily in Arles and ended up in his little back alley and it looked really pedestrian and uneventful and not romantic, kind of trashy, like cinderblock constructed homes, and so I thought, "this is kind of cool." This is an updated version of him traipsing along the road looking for the motif. So I made a painting of that, and I thought I could go to all the places van Gogh went. When I was back here in the studio, I was working on building the stretchers for doing that work in that proportion because I wanted to maintain the notion of seeing the world mediated that way.

That's when the attacks happened in Paris. I was in the studio when I heard about that so I went on Google Earth to see those places and they look really normal. There weren't updated photos, just a little café on a street corner in Paris. So, I decided to make paintings of those places. It just really struck me how unspectacular they looked, unromantic. I compose by moving a little guy around and seeing from different angles whatever their car captures. So I use my sensibility and composition within the limits of what was available in the thousands of photos they take, so I in a sense I composed them, but I didn't take the pictures. I wasn't there. Then as I was making those paintings I was thinking about how quickly you think about Columbine, then there was San Bernardino, there was Newtown, Connecticut. This is happening, bam bam bam, left and right. It happened not long ago, it happened 15 years ago, it's going to happen again. [This interview occurred before the shooting in Las Vegas.]

You go on Google Earth. These could be anywhere. Then you make them into paintings and they have lives as paintings several steps from what happened. So what is your thought process about the meaning of the work? Where is that original impetus that's translated through all the steps to the final Steve Hayes painting?

Well, it's not as direct as that question suggests, that I'm going to do this, so it means that.

I would hope that the answer is more convoluted.

There has been no abatement of that insistence on beauty for me in these paintings. So as rough and kind of un-finessed as they might be, some of them might be, I find that quite beautiful and the painting that's a quality that really engages me…The strategy for this work is that I want to pull you in. I'm not trying to tell you what the content is. I want you first of all to be moved by this thing, this painting. Then, once you've been moved, to have your legs taken out from under you by having to face the reality of what it is you're actually seeing. Is what's moving you that knowledge or that object? So it's a perverse strategy, but I think it's an effective one. It's different from making an illustration.

How do you feel about being an old-fashioned painter in the area era of video and computer-generated art?

I'm glad that I have colleagues that are interested in all the stuff that I'm interested in. I think the paint still has quite a lot to say. I've invested a lot of time learning how to move it around. I like the time painting takes. I like the fact of the painting takes time to make. I put it all together. I'm using Google Earth. Over the years I've used Hi8 tapes [analog camcorder tapes] and photos and sandwiched slides together—used technology as an aid to painting.

The classic abstract square expressionist question: How do you know when a painting is finished?

Exactly.

Have you ever had a painting that you had for awhile, thought was finished, and then you saw something to change?

Absolutely. Years ago I worked at the Phillips Collection. Marjorie Phillips had this story that that she had to physically stop Bonnard from coming into the gallery and painting on his painting. To answer that question honestly, it's not a "damn I'm done." It's more like I really have been working on this painting for a while, I've sort of lost interest in it, or it's not engaging me right now—sort of like by default it's done—because you could always keep going.

Do you have a regular studio routine?

Yes and no. During the regular school year my teaching schedule is so intense that Friday is my studio day and then one day on the weekend. In the summertime I'm basically here most days, five days a week at least for a few hours. It's not like I wait for inspiration and I go to work. I come in here and sit around if I need to. Work begets work. Sometimes just being, being around.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHTS

Highlighting the works of painters Stephen Hayes and Brittany Weistling, glass artist Dan Friday and elemental designer Kathy Burk

WRITTEN BY Michele Corriel

Orlando, FL 6-12-16
Oil on Canvas | 72 x 96 inches | 2017

Like the calm in the eye of a hurricane, Stephen Hayes' body of work, *In the Hour Before*, portrays a place before tragedy embeds itself. Using images from Google Earth, Hayes, a longtime plein air oil painter, turns his attention on cities where upheaval has ripped away ordinary lives.

The artist responds to the "political moment," contemplating social issues, such as gun violence and political unrest with people of color. "In other words, our social reality right now," Hayes says. "I'm focusing on issues in the country. I travel to places that have seen violence, like Newtown, Connecticut, or Las Vegas."

When he says "travel," he refers to more of a metaphysical movement. Sitting before his computer, he pulls up Google Earth and takes a screenshot of a random street in a city where there's been a shooting or a riot. It's the alchemy of chance and purpose that allows Hayes to see a place beforehand. With his informed sense of composition, color and the eternal search for light, he paints the city as a seemingly serene place: just another pedestrian sidewalk, but with the knowledge of the torn and ragged fabric left behind by guns and unrest. The result comes across as streaked with emotion, foreshadowed with wreckage, silently rattled.

He approaches his work as a landscape painting. "I know [this place] has been visited by unspeakable acts," Hayes says.

"But when I see these places, they can still be seen for their mundaneness. I'm trying to keep up with events as they happen, but I've gone back in time to Columbine, for example, and back two years to Paris."

This body of work started with the Paris paintings. Hayes was at a Ucross Foundation artist residency when he developed the process of working with Google Earth. It became an interesting way to merge technology with the low-tech art form of plein air painting, to travel while sitting still and to consider the ramifications of place in a different light.

"When I came home in November, I shifted from an innocent use of the technology to more politically charged imagery," Hayes says. "Over the years, my work hasn't been project based, I just did my work. But the last two years I've been dedicated to this project. I'm not interested in telling people what to think, but I do think it affords an opportunity to slow down and look at who we are in relation to events and how we might want to act in relation to the violence."

Working with a tool like Google Earth allows Hayes an intimate perspective — dependent upon the time of day, the weather and the type or placement of the camera. The ambiguousness of time and the nature of the technology adds to the power of the pieces, providing a blankness that belies the new nature of a place, post-violence.

"What I notice is that my knowledge of what happened there overlays what I'm seeing and affects how I see and what I'm seeing," he says, "because these pieces are not violent at all. In fact, they're contemplative. The images can be distorted. It can go from rainy to sunny in an instant. So I'm just looking at the images, but I'm constantly aware that I'm in a previously unimportant place. A place that has become extremely important because of the people that are there and what happened to them, which makes it important to all of us."

Hayes is represented by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and the David Richard Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Baton Rouge, LA 7-5-16
Oil on Canvas | 30 x 30 inches | 2017

San Bernardino, CA 4-11-17
Oil on Canvas | 72 x 96 inches | 2017

Stephen Hayes

PORTLAND,
at Elizabeth Leach

by Sue Taylor

Stephen Hayes: *Tucson (1-8-11)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 23¼ by 35¼ inches; at Elizabeth Leach.

Eighteen landscape paintings (all 2016) made up the exhibition Stephen Hayes called “In the Hour Before,” most depicting unremarkable terrain. *Roseburg (10-1-15)* resembles a Daubigny only just begun, with light camouflage colors—brown, tan, and Army green—limning a dull country expanse along a featureless road. In *Tucson (1-8-11)*, several tall spindly palms line an empty street receding diagonally toward the horizon. An outsize stand of shrubbery in the foreground dissolves into a cluster of olive-green brushstrokes loosely applied, while, close by, a melting, indeterminate blue shape bleeds onto a sandy parkway. Squat, nondescript structures and a few more trees huddle at the edge of what might be a vacant parking lot; an anomalous blue-gray paint patch hovers over them, attached to no subject at all. A thinly brushed, earthy-pink sky rains down from above. Liquid and fragile, the scene almost evanesces into pure painterly effects.

Such deft blending of representation and sheer abstraction underpins Hayes’s eminence as a supreme kind of painters’ painter in the Pacific Northwest. In this exhibition, however, an unnerving disjunction arose that seemed uncharacteristic of his work: the serenity of the individual landscapes belied the traumatic theme of the series. In addition to Roseburg and Tucson, Hayes’s sites include Littleton, Newtown, Charleston, and Colorado Springs, while the dates memorialized in his subtitles conjure the headlines one would rather forget. In a gallery statement, Hayes explained that his pictures derive from Google Earth, which he employed to view locations of

mass shootings, first those in Paris, where he had traveled shortly before the terrorist attacks last November, and then those in Jerusalem and town by tragic town in the United States. If the project became for the artist a means of honoring victims and bereaved survivors, the series confronted viewers with the brutal fact of violence fatally erupting in the midst of ordinary daily life.

As paintings, Hayes's works are unsensational, and also beautiful in their execution; as memento mori they are effective and deeply disturbing. They at once deliver and perversely disrupt aesthetic pleasure, as when, relishing milky-white scumbling amid the blue ether in a hazy suburban scene, I was jolted out of my absorption by a glance at the wall label: *San Bernardino*. Similar experiences must have vexed viewers who, on the night of the exhibition's opening, debated the appropriateness of Hayes's apparently provocative move. Some complained of too many pictures, an objection that seemed directed at curatorial judgment but was likely a displaced response to the bewildering surfeit of murderous events recently in the news. We still sometimes cling to the fantasy of art as an autonomous realm where only detachment and delectation reign. Insistence on that consoling fantasy grows ever stronger in the face of such random, irrational destruction as that which Hayes seeks to undo by turning back the clock to a moment of normalcy "in the hour before."

PAINTED LANDSCAPES

Contemporary Views

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STEPHEN HAYES

(B. 1955)

Stephen Hayes paints abstract, reductive renditions of the natural landscape that are as much about the painting process and the physical object that is a painting as they are about the views presented. Using a formal, compositional painting structure in combination with loose, painterly techniques that reference the natural world in simplified form, Hayes creates balanced yet dynamic landscape paintings. Enticing color combinations reveal Hayes' avid interest in the effect of light and atmosphere in the landscape and in creating mood in painting.

Like freshly fallen snow covering a landscape, Hayes frosts his canvas with white paint, over-painting layers of brown, yellow, and green pigment that form land and trees in the backdrop of *An Ending Begun* (Fig. 43). There is only a slight tonal difference between the white sky and the land, with its darker underpainting creating an all-over atmospheric effect in the painting. The work is focused, however, by the placement of the horizon line in the center of the canvas, a classical organizing principle and one that controls the composition through its geometry. The sky and land form equal-sized bands across the canvas, the weight of each section balanced by the other.

Controlled as they are by formal elements such as the placement of the horizon line in the vertical center of the canvas, Hayes also allows his paintings to devolve into chaos, giving freedom and natural spontaneity to the paintings. Often, as in *Fruit Falls Into Our Mouths* (Fig. 44), Hayes allows the bare canvas to show through the paint, revealing the hand of the artist and pointing to the artistic choices involved in creating these compositions; it is as much a choice to stop painting and leave a void as it is to fill a canvas completely. The foreground exposes the unfinished canvas, with drips of paint running down the surface of the canvas, reminding the viewer of the artist's reverence for his material and its tactile qualities as a physical object. Such blank areas of canvas and paint dribbles also suggests that Hayes' paintings are as much about the landscape scene depicted as they are about the painting process itself. The formal structure of the works—the segments of the landscape divided into spatial registers on the surface of the painting—provides solidity and grounding for Hayes' abstract painting style, combining structure with freedom.

Mood and atmosphere are essential components in Hayes' landscape paintings. Impressionistic in their loose application of paint, often in fanciful colors, Hayes' landscapes suggest qualities of light. *An Open Secret* (Fig. 45) presents a dark, brooding landscape in half light, the depths of the water in the foreground a blend of dark red, black, and blue shades combined to form a shadowy mass. The view into the scene is partially obscured by a subdued green mass comprised of scratchy, loose brushwork, perhaps referencing a shrub. In *The Arousing* (Fig. 46), by contrast, light reflects off the surface of the water as yellow, green, blue, and nearly flesh-toned pigment create a joyous, uplifting atmosphere evidencing a midday light in the exuberance of the colors.

Hayes lives and works in Portland, Oregon. He is a painting instructor at Oregon State University. He has had solo exhibitions at the Art Gym at Marylhurst University, Oregon State University and Portland State University as well as the University of Maine. His work is in the collections of: the Portland Art Museum; the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University, Salem, Oregon; the State of Washington; and the State of Oregon. He has also shown his work at the Portland Northwest College of Art, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, the Portland Art Museum, and in four Oregon Biennials. Hayes is represented by Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

Fig. 43: Stephen Hayes. *An Ending Begun*, 2006. Oil on panel: 30 x 30 inches. Private collection. Photograph by Dan Kvitka.
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Fig. 44: Stephen Hayes. *Fruit Falls Into Our Mouths*, 2008. Oil on canvas: 23 x 35 inches. Photograph by Dan Kvitka.
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Fig. 45: Stephen Hayes. *An Open Secret*, 2004. Oil on canvas on panel: 60 x 60 inches. Private collection. Photograph by Dan Kvitka. *Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.*

Fig. 46: Stephen Hayes. *The Arousing*, 2007. Oil on canvas on panel: 60 x 60 inches. Collection of Legacy Health, Portland, Oregon. Photograph by Dan Kvitka. *Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.*

OREGON ARTSWATCH
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Stephen Hayes: Keeping painting new

Painter Stephen Hayes show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery points in a very particular direction

May 11, 2016 // CULTURE, VISUAL ART // Paul Sutinen

Just over 40 years ago Artforum magazine published a "special painting issue." Painting was in trouble, losing status as a vehicle for the "avant-garde" as it had been from the time of Impressionism (a hundred years earlier), through Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Color Field Painting. In the magazine was "Painters Reply…," an article in which more than a dozen artists gave responses to a short questionnaire. The intro to the questionnaire began, "ARTFORUM wishes to ask you, as a painter, what you consider to be the prospects of painting in this decade. It appears that painting has ceased to be the dominant artistic medium at the moment."

Today there is no "dominant artistic medium at the moment," and the concept of "avant-garde" is not an issue. As Buffie Johnson said in her reply to Artforum: "Having been proclaimed 'dead' more than once, the persistence of painting is remarkable."

Stephen Hayes, "Paris, Bataclan (11.15.15)", oil on canvas, 2016, 23 x 35"

If you want a great example of remarkable, persistent painting, see Stephen Hayes's exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, which continues through May 28.

Hayes is showing a group of medium-sized (about two-by-three feet), very loosely painted landscapes. For the basic images he worked from Google maps street views. From the text on the wall we know that

these images are all from sites of recent violent tragedies such as Littleton, Ferguson and Paris, but you wouldn't know that from the paintings alone, because there's nothing in them that speaks to that issue. Maybe that's the point for the artist in beginning the works, a way of sorting out what's going on in the world. In the end the art process takes over and the social meaning is left in the consciousness of the artist. Now that they are paintings exactly what they depict isn't all that important. The scenes themselves are not picturesque, just mundane, like amateur snapshots. What Hayes has done is to take the mundane scene (perhaps as any scene of violence is before or after the incident itself) as a structure for what now speaks of painterly painting.

In his film Painters Painting, 1973, (https://youtu.be/Vhj0ajdWjiI) Emile de Antonio asks Willem de Kooning, "What does painterly mean?" De Kooning replies, "That you can see it's done with a brush." Hayes brushes, and he also scrapes and wipes his paint forthrightly—and you can see it. The viewer's enjoyment (conscious or not) of these paintings is due to the jabs, gestures, swipes and touches of the artist's hand as he applies paint.

Stephen Hayes, "Ferguson (8.9.14)", oil on canvas, 2016, 23 x 35"

In Ferguson (8.19.14), 2016, Hayes shows us a classic urban scene, our viewpoint in the middle of an empty street with the perspective lines of sidewalk receding directly into the center distance. On the right are three small trees, their foliage a jumble of quickly brushed greens—and that brushy-ness animates them, giving personality. Directly above the trees is a puffy light blue "cloud." Its rounded form contrasts to the jagged gestures of the trees below, but it is not fussed over, just daubed onto the canvas, staying fresh. To the far left is a car in a parking lot. We see it is a car through the tiny swipes of just a very few small brush marks. We sense it is a parking lot because a "car" is there. Trees, cloud, car, but the key to the picture is a brushy inverted v-shape in the road in the foreground. It is an overt "brushmark," almost living on its own, but sticking to the description of the street just enough—a Post-it Note level of stickiness.

That must be part of the excitement in these paintings: they just barely hold together. The trees, the cloud, the car, the gesture are all painted differently. It is not the method of paint application that stitches the whole into a fabric. It isn't a fabric. It's a house of cards.

Stephen Hayes, “Kalamazoo (2.20.16)”, oil on canvas, 2016, 23 x 35”

All of these paintings are “impressions.” Nothing is clear. They are like glimpses through a car window. In Kalamazoo (2.20.16), 2016, there’s a big bluish sky with a few cloudy gestures, and along the bottom third of the canvas a few long horizontal paint gestures blur a landscape—feeling like you’ve just looked up to notice the scene as you whizzed by. There are a few vertical brushy green bushy shapes, suggestions. Again, just a couple of well-chosen notes make the painting gel. On the far right is a tall, highway-sized sign post (just an empty red rectangle atop a thin red line) serving to compositionally hold your eye as it wants to zip along the horizontal out of the picture, and also suggesting, “hey, this is a road trip scene,” which snaps us into a little piece of memory. At the left edge, a drippy daub of yellow in the “sky” serves a compositional, but no representational, purpose. What, for me, are the best paintings in the show have a balance between the abstract gesture and the representational mark.

Stephen Hayes, “Charleston (6.17.15)”, oil on canvas,2016, 23 x 35”

In another interview in the Artforum issue, Budd Hopkins says, “What I mean when I talk about ‘skill’ is what is meant when you talk about skillful painting, that the actual physical handling of the paint has interest in itself.” That’s much of the pleasure of looking at Hayes’s work. In some paintings there is a strong architectural image such as Paris, Bataclan (11.15.15), a theater, or Charleston (6.17.15), a church. These images (all of the paintings are based on the sites of recent public tragedies, but you wouldn’t know that from the paintings alone) draw the viewer’s attention so strongly that the skillful painterly aspects are overwhelmed.

Stephen Hayes, “La Loche, Saskatchewan (1. 22. 16)”, oil on canvas, 2016, 23 x 35”

Color is also important in these paintings. La Loche, Saskatchewan (1.22.16), 2016, depicts a few bland agricultural buildings along a central horizon line. Must be winter because the foreground is mainly white like snow. However, defining that snowy field are a few red brushmarks. Why red? Well, of course to set off the broad expanse of bright yellow sky! As in many of my favorite artworks I have the feeling of “how does he get away with that?” I think that here it is because one of the things this painting is about is making that big area of bright yellow make sense. While the yellow is attention-grabbing, there is a lot of color action among the greens, tans, and reddish-browns in the narrow line of buildings. A strange gray brushy shape leaps into the sky at the left as well, one of those odd things that Hayes seems to enjoy throwing in, just to balance out a composition. Again: “How does he get away with that?” I don’t know, maybe it just has that feeling of seeing something indistinct from a drizzly window.

When I first became aware of Hayes’s work, maybe 25 or 30 years ago, he was making fairly normal landscapes, serviceable stuff, but not something to grab you and demand attention. But, after a few decades (maybe that’s what it takes), he’s among the handful of the best painters around. His work makes me think about painting. Frank Stella said, “There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting.” Hayes shows us that “finding out what painting is” can mean finding out what painting is for the individual painter, not generically. And determining “how to make his painting” is to make it “new.”

ARTFORUM

Stephen Hayes

ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY
417 N.W. 9th Avenue
November 15–January 15

Stephen Hayes, *Dreaming Rooms*, 2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 90".

Stephen Hayes's most recent landscape paintings of rural Oregon possess a psychedelic quality that is firmly rooted in painterly traditions but also reflects the garishness of contemporary life in the era of the off-brand discount store and the ink-jet printer. Like masterful colorists of the nineteenth century—Monet and van Gogh come to mind in particular—Hayes represents the reassuring hues of everyday life in discordant terms, shocking and, at times, disturbing the senses.

The pastoral scenes found in Hayes's current exhibition, "In Valley," are peppered with electric juxtapositions of color, meandering brushstrokes, and streaming lines of glaze that speak to Pierre Bonnard's maxim "A painting that is well composed is half finished." Nowhere is this truer than in the work *To Think of Time*, 2012. Here, a lone building sits in a field represented by a thick snaking of green brushstrokes that appear to float atop a vortex of bright cadmium underpainting that threatens to swallow it like quicksand.

Throughout all of the paintings, nature is represented in a constant state of flux, while the buildings and roads that inhabit each environment possess a serene clarity and refinement. It's challenging to discern the implications of this contrast. Do Hayes's vivid reimaginings of the rural contain an important message for our time? Or are they, at the end of the day, an exercise in the formal pleasures of painting, swelling with visionary insight still in search of its message? In the hands of such a skilled painter, the ambiguity stings.

— Stephanie Snyder

STEPHEN HAYES * born 1955

Shore, 2007
Oil on panel, diptych: 30 x 60 in. (76,2 x 152,4 cm) over all. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon

Riding the edge of representational landscape painting and abstraction, the works of Stephen Hayes embody a looseness and confidence that make them feel both historical and contemporary. The viewer is guided across quiet vistas, past solitary trees, and towards the perfect sky. Yet, it is always his masterful control of oil paint that calls the landscape to life: color is richly layered and the paintings' surfaces are vigorously worked. Returning repeatedly to the same location, Hayes paints small works on site, reflecting and immediate, and a direct response to the landscape. He then takes them back to the studio where he creates larger works with the studio assuming the role of landscape. Ironically, it's through prolonged observation that he captures our transient relationship to nature's beauty.

Born in Washington D.C., in 1955, Stephen Hayes received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1977 and his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1980, both from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has had several solo exhibitions at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery; The Art Gym at Marylhurst University, Oregon State University, Corvallis; and Portland State University, all in Oregon; as well as at Papajon's Gallery in Kyoto, Japan; and The University of Maine, Orono. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane, Washington, as well as at the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, and four Oregon Biennials. In 2004 he received an Oregon Arts Commission Award.

www.elizabethleach.com

Stephen Hayes: Peripheral Vision

BY TERRI M. HOPKINS

In our society we distrust aesthetic experience—in particular the experience of beauty—and have come to associate it with the superficial and the vacuous. The paintings of Stephen Hayes remind us that in spite of contemporary skepticism, it is still possible to find beauty wedded to meaning. In Oregon, where Hayes has painted for the past fifteen years, it is not unusual to be blindsided repeatedly by the beauty of the natural world. The significance these experiences hold is tied in part to the knowledge that the mysterious still stubbornly resides in the familiar, is encountered when least expected, and disappears before it can be fully grasped.

Hayes has investigated the relationship between the experience of landscape and the creation of paintings for twenty years, continuously negotiating the territory between observation and invention. He is interested in the heightened awareness that comes through aesthetic experience and in the artifices we employ in seeking that experience in the world, or creating that experience through art.

This cultivation of an awareness of what is sometimes referred to as the fleeting world is something we associate most often with Asian painting and printmaking. In contemporary Western culture, continuous, if not relentless, change is expressed most frequently through film and video. Although Hayes has painted en plein air for years, his most recent paintings tap video as source material. They draw on our familiarity with the language of video, or more particularly of the video still, to convey the complexity of the contemporary relationship to landscape. In both the plein air work of the past and the current studio paintings, Hayes seeks to slow time down. The paintings stop time just long enough to record a single charged moment. To understand the path that led him to the current work, it is helpful to take a look back.

From Cyprus to Sauvie Island

Hayes began making landscape paintings while living in Cyprus from 1981 to 1984. There, the type of charged landscape he sought was a short walk from his door. When he moved to Oregon in 1985 he could still step outside to paint, but what he found were the narrow rainy streets of his northeast Portland neighborhood. He started driving west of the city to smaller rural communities such as Hillsboro, Banks and Helvetia, but he resented spending time driving that could have been spent painting. He decided to stay home. He painted his neighborhood street, the view out his kitchen window, and the confines of his small house—living room, sofa and chairs, a cup on the table, the stairs to the basement, the plumbing and the utility sink.

After painting everything that was close at hand, he finally conceded the need to look elsewhere and began driving once again to to the outskirts of the city. This time Hayes found Sauvie Island. Just ten miles north of Portland, the island is a stretch of land that lies between and briefly delays the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers. The low, flat terrain is a mix of wetlands and cultivated fields separated one from the other by rows or groves of poplar, alder, oak and maple. Hayes has returned repeatedly to the island to paint. He has set up his easel in fields and stayed all day. Some of the paintings were done on the island; some were begun there and completed in the studio.

Landscape changes rapidly and continuously. The wind shifts. Clouds converge. The sun moves closer to the horizon. Color deepens and slowly drains from the sky. Few people, other than painters, bridge-tenders and fire lookouts experience landscape in this way, from a single vantage point for many hours at a time. Most of us get our experience of nature from a moving car. This modern experience of the landscape as witnessed from a fast-moving vehicle is a genre of experience that compounds landscape's already elusive nature.

In 1997, in preparation for the paintings in his "Terra Incognita" exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, in Portland, Oregon, Hayes began to shoot slides out the window of his car, often not looking at what he was photographing. It was a way to see what is missed, what is on the periphery of our vision and our consciousness. The slides

Cyprus Landscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 18"x 18"

were an attempt to capture a landscape we are aware of without seeing, or know without looking. Back in the studio he experimented with holding two overlapping slides up to the light. These hand-held double exposures created composite landscapes that did not exist in nature but paralleled our cumulative knowledge of the land over time. These composite, or recombinant, images became the starting points for both the paintings and the monotypes in the *Terra Incognita* series.

Although many of Hayes' paintings are triggered by rural landscapes located on the fringes of the metropolitan area, they are not about the disappearance—or threatened disappearance —of that landscape. Hayes explains that for him they are about the nature of immediate experience, of direct experience. They are in a way an attempt to "re-experience" an instant in time. In plein air painting, the artist goes out, stands still and observes. His eyes are directed ninety percent of the time at the trees, sky and fields around him and ten percent at the painting in front of him. The plein air paintings change in response to the changes in the landscape, but at some point each coalesces and is complete.

In preparation for most of the paintings created in 2000, Hayes continued gathering images from a moving car, but this time he shot video. The paintings underscore the transience of that experience. Many include roads, or began with the road as an integral part of the composition. Roads split the painting diagonally, seem to end suddenly, or act as counterpoints to trees in various configuration. We sense the changes in point of view that come as a car follows a turn in the road, or the shifts in color as a rain shower wets dead black asphalt, causing it to reflect the gray of the sky.

When Hayes records the landscape on video, then returns home to slow that video down frame by frame, and shoot stills with a Polaroid camera, it is a way to focus on one small frame or fragment. A level of control can be maintained in relationship to film that cannot be asserted over the live experience of nature in real time. Film may record the fleeting world, but, unlike its subject, it can be stopped, rewound and replayed. The studio paintings begin with the film still and evolve, not in response to a changing source—photos do not change—but in response to their own internal development and to the memory of the constant changes that take place on-site.

The color in these new works, like a number of earlier monotypes with landscape imagery, is heightened and artificial. The artifice is intentional. Responding to slides or film stills, the artist does not feel the need to adhere to a natural palette. In fact, Hayes plays with the color on the television screen before shooting the Polaroid stills. The viewer easily makes the connection to the acidic color of tweaked video or debased Polaroids, and that association reinforces the sense of the painting as an improvisation. It is an improvisation not just on an image from the world, but an improvisation on an image several times removed from that world.

Hayes' paintings continue a tradition of seeking out and then responding to beauty in the natural world by creating a corresponding artwork. His is a heritage that includes both American nineteenth-century landscape painting and contemporary cinema. Hayes seeks to frame, not unspoiled or less spoiled rural places, but places where it is still likely to encounter a kind of beauty not frequently found on a city street. It is true that the rural landscapes on the fringes of our cities may eventually disappear completely, but it is also true that they change constantly and are continually disappearing and reappearing in new guises. Although the genre of landscape painting—and Hayes' landscape paintings in particular—mine a familiar and traditional vein of art, these paintings challenge our security in what we know, trust or take for granted. As the landscape refuses to remain static, it defies simple codification.

Observation and Improvisation

The big studio paintings also draw on lessons learned in the course of working with monotypes over the past twelve years—lessons learned about invention and improvisation. Monotypes are made without much preplanning. Ink dries quickly and requires and encourages one to move rapidly and spontaneously. Instead of working from observation, in his monotypes Hayes draws on his knowledge of the human body and the way posture and gesture convey states of mind, and his knowledge of landscape and the way color, light and composition do the same. When working in monotype, he may start with a single color, put it on a printing plate, move it around, print it, add more pigment to the plate, print on top of the first print, and perhaps repeat this process up to a dozen times.

The large oil paintings are also about the changes that take place

Untitled, from the Days of Love portfolio, 1993, monotype

as the painting is made. Like the monotypes, the studio paintings rely predominantly on the artist's accumulated knowledge of his subject. They are the product of improvisation on a photographic source, not observation of place. As I visited Hayes' studio several times during a four-month period in 2000, I saw the paintings change significantly. Roads were eliminated, trees relocated or subtracted, color profoundly altered.

The process of making and remaking the large studio paintings takes much longer than either the *plein air* paintings or the monotypes. First, they are made with oil paint, and oil dries slowly. The *plein air* paintings are also oil paintings, but they are small. Their size allows them to be completed more quickly and also allows the artist to react quickly to changes in the environment. With a single swipe of an eight-inch palette knife, for example, he can alter the entire painting. In the large paintings, change happens through repeated painting, scraping, sanding and repainting. The work goes on over a period of months, rather than days as in the *plein air* paintings, or hours in the case of the monotypes.

At the same time, the bones of many of the paintings remain unchanged. Some impetus that attracted the artist to the original place or the frame of film of that place, persists. In several works, a tree is silhouetted on the horizon, its barren branches set lightly against the sky, or its solid bulk dominating the middle of the canvas like a baritone at center stage. These back-lit forms remain unknown or dimly known. We are left in doubt as to the specifics of color or leaf; are left to infer type, much as we gather clues to the the identity of a person from her posture or gait as she approaches at dusk.

There is some irony in the fact that something that originates in a split-second of film requires months to find final form. However, much as film is a series of sequential frames, the big paintings are a series of sequential paintings. Each painted "frame" both alters and obliterates its predecessor. The other frames, each but a single moment in a visual narrative, have a private audience of one. At the conclusion of that narrative, the only painting left visible to the public is the last.

Hayes has not abandoned the type of observational painting that he pursued in his *plein air* work. He now applies that approach to his portraiture. In portrait painting, like *plein air* painting, most of the time spent looking is spent looking at the subject. Hayes' work on a portrait often takes place over several sittings. He rarely works from photographs, because he believes that over the course of these long, slow and intimate sessions, the face a person might put on for a photograph cannot be sustained. Over time, it will be supplanted by an expression that more fully projects the individual. By painting and observing the subject for hours at a time, Hayes hopes to arrive at an image that more accurately portrays that individual.

Every painting is an artifice, whether the product of observation or invention. Natural history and biography are constructs, as are novels and short stories. Whether through fiction or nonfiction, human beings attempt to make sense of things. Stephen Hayes uses both approaches in his effort to articulate a beauty that reveals itself fleetingly and is seldom comprehensible.

These large studio paintings are oases in a world that is speeding by, a world more and more difficult to grasp. Thus the video—the artificial document of the artificial speed at which we encounter the world—is stopped, photographed, translated, enlarged, improvised. Hayes believes we live a world in which we need such artifices—artifices of stories and dramas and operas and paintings—to be able to perceive and internalize beauty or love or sorrow. We always have. Perhaps, as life is lived at increasingly breakneck speed, we need these artifices that slow us down even more.

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Sam Slater, 2000, oil on linen, 12"x 12"

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The Ford Family Foundation announced the three winners of its Hallie Ford Fellowships for 2011: Stephen Hayes, Bruce Conkle and Sang-ah Choi.

The three artists fulfill the foundation's wish to highlight accomplished but perhaps under-exposed artists. For example, Hayes, a painter, has exhibited steadily for many years at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery. His landscapes and portraits have garnered respect from critics and artists but wider renown and recognition has eluded him.

Conkle, a sculptor and installation artist, has exhibited with regularity at many of the city's non-commercial spaces. His challenging work, often interpreted as critiques of Northwest environmental concerns, hasn't easily fit within the local gallery system. Exposure for Conkle has thus been limited, too, but far more intensely compared to Hayes, whose paintings nonetheless conform to a conventional sense of taste that has made him an admired artist for commission.

Choi, a Korean-born artist, is the least known of the three, mainly because she has spent the least amount of time in Oregon. Her paintings mine both Pop art and its concerns with the implications of

commercial iconography and the heritage of traditional Korean art. Choi currently has an exhibit of recent work at Chambers@916, located in the Pearl District.

Each artist will receive $25,000. The funds are unrestricted and can be used in any reasonable manner by the artists.

This is the second year of the anticipated Hallie Ford Fellowships created by the Foundation, which is based in Roseburg and usually focuses on social service issues in rural communities. The $25,000 are the single biggest fellowships awarded to an individual artist in Oregon.

This year, 154 applications were received by the Ford Foundation. The five judges pared down applications to about 60 artists before making their final choices. The judges came from both local and out-of-state institutions: Terri Hopkins, director of the Art Gym at Marylhurst University; Rock Hushka, curator at the Tacoma Art Museum; Suzanne Ramljak, editor at Metalsmith magazine; Tad Savinar, an Oregon artist and designer; and Stephanie Smith, curator at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art in Illinois.

By D.K. Row, The Oregonian