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Contemporary Gallery
January 11 to March 8, 2014

The Big Foldy Painting of Death

IAN FORBES

(Vancouver, BC) - Painting



Art Talk:

Saturday, January 11th at 11am



Big Foldy Painting of Death

IAN FORBES

Artist Statement

I was born in Ontario, raised in Alberta and now live and work in Vancouver, British Columbia. I have an MFA in painting from the University of Alberta (1997). I describe myself as a multidisciplinary artist - mostly in painting, drawing, printmaking and mixed media.

I have two artistic impulses. First is the desire to make things: to create images and objects through my own actions and manifest my ideas in physical forms. The second is to combine these elements together to create collections, to curate: to create aggregated meanings, to tell stories. In the past this led me to create installations: narrative situations created through the repeated combination, juxtaposition and accumulation of images and objects in a gallery space.

Since 2008 I have been obsessed with creating handmade, accordion fold books (*The Foldy Books of Death*). I found that the continuous format of the accordion fold book naturally created the kind of personal, journalistic, stream of consciousness, visual narratives that satisfies my impulse to create and curate.

The narratives and characters that have emerged from this process, what I call "Foldyism" have been surprising, amusing, embarrassing and provocative. It is a bit like a diary/sketchbook, except that it can be unfolded into a 24' long drawing. The continuous format resists the notion of an image being a singular object. *The Foldy Book* is more like a motion picture than a single photograph. Transposing this approach to painting has proven to be even more interesting. *The Big Foldy Painting of Death* (continuous format: a roll of canvas) allowed me to create an immersive, narrative, panoramic experience that engages the viewer beyond the simple apprehension of "A Painting".



Jeremy Todd in his monograph on the Big Foldy Painting of Death described it as: " Monty Python's Flying Circus, colour field painting, graffiti, history painting, recreational drug use, polemical engagements with critical theory and post-structuralism, comic books, the Romantic Sublime, the Gothic Grotesque, post-punk bands and countless other phenomena co-exist and interact in a manner that transcends illustrations of a parody/pastiche dichotomy."

For myself, the project of "Foldyism" is an opportunity to dynamically participate in a deeply personal conversation about the nature of contemporary culture and our role as living creatures inhabiting this planet. The subject matter of my work is internalization and abjection: a collision of integration and fragmentation. Themes that emerge include: the horror of industrial processes and dehumanization; concern for the impending apocalypses (ecological, nuclear, religious...); betrayals of the body through age, ingestion and excretion; ecstatic rebirth and the ever optimistic hope of each new day; my personal failures; and so on. It is an ongoing, organic process well suited to my desire to work responsively to imagery as it emerges.

In February 2013 I did a commission for Iredale Architecture Group that has encouraged me to make part of my process a performance. Over the next year I'm going to investigate notions of sustainability, urban renewal and the history of my occupation of Vancouver (as if I, personally, am a colonizing force capable of affecting the entire metropolitan region) within the framework of the continuous format, in both painting and drawing and through public drawing performances and collaborations. In June 2013 I will be inviting members of the public to participate in the creation of a large scale (100' x 6') drawing as part of the annual Draw Down Festival at the Roundhouse Community Centre. This collaborative piece will form the backbone of a new Big Foldy Painting and develop organically from there. It is my intention to create a work that maintains the gestalt feeling of "Foldyism" but is capable of becoming modular and better suit varied exhibition spaces.



Interview with Ian Forbes


December 8, 2013

Anh Le: *I am here today in Vancouver interviewing Ian Forbes about his "Foldy Painting of Death" born from the "Foldy Books of Death" Ian, can you talk a little bit about what precipitated this project?*

Ian Forbes: The painting or the books? Well, they're both the same. "The Big Foldy Painting of Death" really started a few years before I started painting it, I think in 2008. I was working up in Grande Prairie and I found these accordion style books, I didn't know they were called accordion style books, I just thought they were foldy, so I called them Foldy Books; and I write of Death on everything that I own. [My notebook] is called "Ian's Workbook of Death 2006-two thousand" – yeah. My iPod was "Ian's iPod of Death." So, it was a joke. And so, I bought this book, and the first thing I did was write "Ian's Foldy Book of Death" on it and I thought it was going to be a sketchbook; it was just going to be a side project. I got about 4 or 5 pages into it and realized it was all going to be one piece of paper, and this was very interesting. This was a way of creating visual narrative outside of film and video, in a sort of handmade visual space, which is something I've wanted to do ever since I can remember. I've been interested in comic books, and creating stories with images, and juxtaposing imagery together and generating imagery of my own. You go to art school and they tell you "oh, you can't do that." So I had worked a lot with installations and accretions of things, creating stories by juxtaposing imagery with objects and physical things; sculpture and a lot of found materials, found photographs and that sort of thing. I spent about oh, ten, fifteen years doing that, until 2008 when I started drawing again. It was like being back in high school again, just using pen and ink and drawing this crazy imagery. I did four volumes [of the "Foldy Book of Death"] really quickly, in about four months; 16 feet each of drawing, and then characters started emerging. A lot of imagery started cropping up. Things that I had normally done in meeting agendas and doodles suddenly had a place. I decided when I moved to Vancouver in 2008 that I wanted to work in studios full-time. I had all this imagery to work with and I started out doing that with painting. It took me a surprising amount of time to figure out that it was this continuing format of the accordion-fold book that was compelling the narrative forward. I tried doing comic book panels, individual paintings of specific imagery, and that was marginally satisfying. I pitched a show to Latitude 53 in Edmonton; they agreed to the show and then had cold feet. I went to Edmonton and talked to the curator there and I said 'Look, I'll make a painting that covers the whole wall! Yeah that's it!' (laughs) For some reason I thought I was going to do it on plywood, which is ridiculous!

AL: *And how did you come up with the title the "Foldy Painting of Death"?*

IF: I guess you could say it was a 'brand' although I hate that word. I had written "Foldy Book of Death" on the first one as a joke, and now I have to live with "Foldy Everything of Death". It's not inappropriate. It works with the content of the piece, I guess. It's not - I was gonna say it's not morbid, but it is morbid!



AL: *Let's talk about morbidity. What is it about the "of Death" surtitle that is all over the different materials, and in your creative process – where does it come from?*

IF: High school (laughs). It's the great mystery of life, death. To Victorians it was sex, to us it's death. Nobody thinks they're gonna get old, nobody thinks they're gonna die. Good lord, look at the 65 year old Hollywood actresses that are trying to look like they're 25. It's just creepy. But I'm not obsessed with death necessarily. It just sort of happened by accident.

AL: *Will the painting be different from its previous incarnations?*


IF: I can't say that I haven't created new parts of the painting but I'm not going to be starting new parts of the painting in Comox. It's folded up on the floor here and in a tube over there (points across workshop). It was very interesting showing it at Latitude 53. It was almost a closed circuit: the beginning and the end met in a corner. At Grunt Gallery when I showed it this summer, it didn't meet, it was open; I suddenly realized that because it's just a roll of canvas that I've painted on, that I can just stick another piece of canvas on it and just keep going, as long I have room to show it. It also has a flexible nature to it. It's not on a support. It's just a loose piece of canvas that can be screwed to the wall or hung from the ceiling or folded into any space.

AL: *Let's talk about some of the content. In some of your writings you talk about being interested in an 'ecstatic doom'. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

IF: The painting naturally falls into two parts, and that was just through the desperation of painting it. I had four months to paint it, one hundred and twenty seven some odd feet. So I had a schedule that I was supposed to be on. I got to about halfway through with about a month left to go, and I knew this was what was going to happen; I knew what the dimensions of the gallery were and I knew where the natural break-points were going to fall because there were a couple of doorways that I had to negotiate and figure out. I had planned to have a sort of representational, figurative half and a half that was more expressionistic, abstract ground. What happened was that I wound up unrolling about fifty feet of canvas in my backyard, actually a little bit more than that, and just dumping paint onto it and seeing what happened, and working back into it. So I was able to work more quickly for the last half of it. That suggested to me that there were natural juxtapositions of opposites within the work. Really, there is a lot of apocalyptic doom, but then also the opposite; there's creation and destruction happening at the same time and it's sometimes hard to tell what's what, and who's doing what.

AL: *In your artist statement, you talk about the far edges of your ability and relate this work to the indulgent nature of painting, and talk about the nature of visual art in Canada today. I find it really interesting. Can you comment about where you are at in this place in time, in the downtown east side, and here you are doing this 'indulgent' practice of painting? Why did you say that?*

IF: Art school. It's all about art school, going to art school. I went to a very formal school. It was abstract steel sculpture, abstract




painting, very formal, sort of stuck in the fifties. I never fit in that school, I just sort of went there. There was always kind of a love-hate relationship with painting and the capital-P 'Painting': What does Painting mean? What does it mean to be a good painter? What's a good painting? 'You have to be a great painter!' Who cares? Why would I do this in painting and not some other medium? For me, the question is very simple, it's where my natural facility lies, in drawing, and I love painting. I love the material qualities of paint, what it can do... I think quickly with painting, as opposed to working on a video, where you're sort of working on three minutes of film and it takes four months to prepare, to do, to shoot, to get people, you know. That's not very quick, whereas I can do a lot more in four months with painting. It was just a question to me of getting the content and the process in place where they met in terms of my career. It was just fortuitous that this continuous format happened to me, where suddenly this thing that I thought was just going to be a side project turned into the driving force of all of my work. So it's a complicated relationship, but I think I've come to terms with it now. For a long time, I thought 'why am I trying to make these beautiful things?' It just seemed very self-indulgent sometimes, but there's a necessity to it to get something out there. It's a way of getting content out for me. It's a tool.

AL: Now that you're painting in this fashion, are you feeling less as though you are painting beautiful things? I remember that somewhere in the writing there is a sentence either you or Jeremy wrote that says [the work] is 'impervious to commercial applications of any kind.' In the context of the art world, making your art, making the standard framed-canvas thing that consumers are accustomed to acquiring, where do you feel that your work lies?

IF: I feel really great about where my work lies, but I'm not making a living from it. Which would be nice. The process for me is really important, though having worked on it for a few years now, the process has percolated up into a whole lot of other areas, where I'm actually able to turn on the "Foldy," I guess you could say, like in that painting behind you there (points off camera to a 4'x6' canvas with a similar aesthetic to the FPD, depicting many art styles comprising a unique and vaguely Monty Pythonesque cityscape). This is the sort of painting that I wanted to do when I was in a BFA and MFA program and either didn't have the confidence or the facility to actually pull it off. That's not finished yet and who knows whether I actually still have the facility to do it or not, but just sitting down and letting the imagery flow out is a result of practicing with the "Foldy Books" and the "Big Foldy Painting", doing things like that.

AL: Can you tell us a little bit about what informs your work? For people who have never seen your work before and are just coming to it, what would you tell them? What do you look at, read, watch, study...

IF: To the more art history oriented people I would say that I'm really interested in the Northern Renaissance, I love going to Belgium and Holland. The Royal Museum in Brussels is brilliant! They have lots of Brueghels and a whole ton of symbolist work, and the symbolists are just insanely good and very strange. They're proto-surrealists, I mean they're more surrealist than surrealists



sometimes. The surrealists, of course, I am very interested in reading about them and that sort of thing. I pick stuff up everywhere, I am very kind of Catholic in my tastes, I'll look at everything at least once. I worked in Edmonton at the Edmonton Art Gallery, they have a very large collection of prairie abstractionists, I used to have no time for it at all but in working with people who liked it, or respected those people, I had to come to terms with it, and can appreciate all sorts of different things now. For other types of people I'd say I grew up reading comic books like everybody else, playing Dungeons & Dragons, playing video games. A lot of people say Robert Crumb and I say 'yeah I like Robert Crumb,' but he was a little too weird for me when I was younger. I read the Freak Brothers, Mad Magazine, Heavy Metal Magazine, stuff like that. When I went to art school I thought I was going to be a photographer.

AL: Jeremy Todd (Vancouver based Curator) wrote a very interesting sentence about your work that I want to talk about.

IF: Yeah that was a very interesting process with Jeremy. We met three or four times and had really extended conversations. It was a lot of fun.

AL: Yes, I had him as an instructor in art school. Here's the sentence: 'The word "structure" also conflates continuously interactive relational determinations of meaning, rejecting the framed and singular instantaneous vision and intent commonly associated with the image of Western art with an over-determined pull that pre-emptively excises curatorial input, collaborative processes and mediation.'

IF: He said it much better than I could. I understand it, though, so I can unpack it.

AL: What is he saying here and what is your response to that?

IF: We did talk a lot about the fact that it was a continuous piece of canvas, and that the original intent was to basically encircle the viewer, so that you are in the middle of this painting and that you couldn't see it all at once. Normally you walk into a gallery and you see a painting and think, 'I understand it'. You turn around and you walk out. This painting, you have to actually turn your head to see the whole thing, and turn around behind you, and in certain instances you actually have to walk through it. At the Grunt Gallery it was more like a maze that you actually had to negotiate through and it basically occupied the entire gallery. So there's really no way to curate that, you know? What are you going to do with it? Which I kind of like in my own way. I mean, every artist wants to be their own curator because you want to put stuff that you like with your work and sort of be in control. That wasn't the original intent of doing the piece. The intent was to do a narrative that was extended, that you had to spend time with. Things that I work with usually wind up in my house so I usually wind up looking at them for a long time. If it doesn't hold my attention for a long time, then why bother?

AL: So in this format and the way it was installed in the Grunt Gallery, being all-encompassing, did that work for you as an artist seeing it that way? I imagine as you were working on it that you were probably working in the way that we read, from left to right. Would

it make more sense to hang this piece, if you could find the space, as one panoramic linear horizontal, a single tapestry?

IF: That'd be cool. There's one spot where the little – I call them the 'poopy head fish' – where they have eaten through the canvas, and they manifest in other parts of the gallery, because it looks like they've escaped out of the canvas. And that's where the door was, there was a sort of break at that spot. Other than that, it is one continuous piece, so I would love to see it like that, like those panorama paintings where you walk up the middle and you're just sort of in the middle of it looking around, but most galleries have doorways. You have to get in and out of them.

AL: *In its first formation it was made specifically for the installation in Latitude 53 Gallery, and as it's moved around it's going to change, so-*

IF: Yes. Which I'm finding really fascinating! It's totally unexpected. Things happen, it's very interesting.

AL: *Are you interested at all in your audience response?*

IF: Sure! Of course I am. My part is only half of it. It's the viewer who brings the other half to it.

AL: *Do you have any hope for what a viewer might take away from it?*

IF: Well everybody wants to be liked! But that's kind of superficial. What I hope for is some sort of a conversation, some engagement. I put a lot into it, and I really felt like I'd just got started when I had to stop. I put little things in it for people to find, little things in it for me to find. I don't necessarily remember everything that I put in there. It's a very dense piece with lots of layers, and that's



the cool thing about the accordion fold format of a book. It's not just page-to-page where everything is individual, it's actually one entire whole where very complex narratives can unfold. It's truly discursive, I mean, there's so many layers to it, such a wide field of 'text' I guess you could say?

AL: *Are you binding your own books?*

IF: Yeah, these first ones were mass produced but then I couldn't find these anymore, so I started – they're so easy to make, I've discovered! I can use better paper, so it's easier to draw on.

AL: *What are you teaching at Emily Carr?*

IF: I just got finished doing the "Painting Techniques Boot Camp". It's all Continuing Studies. I did the "Introduction to Mixed Media Painting", which was fun. I'm also teaching "An Introduction to Drawing & Painting" at the Roundhouse.

AL: *I read your teaching profile and I really like the second sentence, about endless possibilities.*

IF: Right, that's what I love about art, there's always something to do. You never reach the end of it. That's the interesting thing with painting, for a long time it seemed like painting had an endgame. Like it was over, it was finished, which is ridiculous! But when you narrow the terms of painting down so much to the flat surface and the flat mark and the flat colour, which is completely arbitrary really, when you essentialize painting that way it does feel very closed off, and that's not what I am interested in. I appreciate those facts about painting but I've turned around and looked the other way. I've gone in a different direction. Those concerns are not my concerns.

