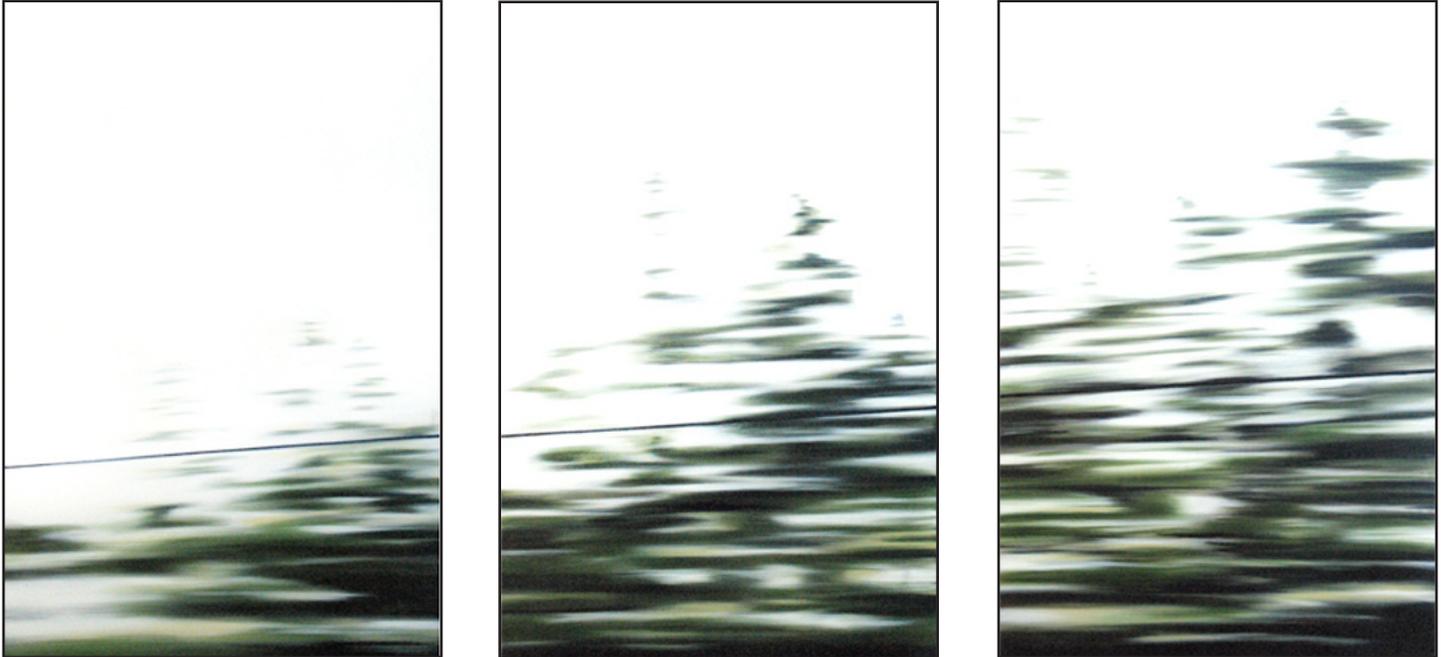


# Here today, gone tomorrow

## Patricia Morris's Trans-Canada Drive paintings



Patricia Morris  
Nova Scotia Drive 4  
Triptych, each panel 40 x 60 inches

In her Trans-Canada Drive series of paintings, Patricia Morris addresses a theme of iconic significance to Canadians, the experience of movement, specifically movement along our highways.

Canada has the second largest land mass and among the lowest population densities of any country in the world. The Trans-Canada highway is over 8000 km (just under 5000 miles) long. It ties us together as a people. For more than 50 years, about four generations, it has been the primary way Canadians travel the country, the primary vantage point from which we experience “our home and native land.”

Morris' paintings pay homage to the importance of highways while also fitting within the tradition of Canadian landscape painting. While the vast majority of us live in cities, we cannot help but be aware of the vastness of the landscape that surrounds us, how it can isolate even while it feeds us. Landscape paintings do not merely show us picturesque views but can also tell us something about our relationship with nature, describing the gulf that separates the “natural” from the “man-made.”

Morris's paintings tell us something critically important about our relationship to the land, and our experience of this particular moment in time. They speak of movement, transience, change, the way we experience things more and more through technology or “media” rather than actually being there.

Morris's landscapes are based on photographs she has taken from a speeding

car. She then translates the photographs, or portions of them into paintings, using horizontal brushwork and muted palette to capture what we might ourselves experience if we were in the vehicle staring at the roadside flashing by. The result is not so much a picture “of” something (trees, rocks, buildings) as an expression of the experience of motion and the passing moment.

Real landscapes are of course living, breathing things and Canadian artists have in various ways attempted to convey this. For example, in her later works Emily Carr



introduced what might be called “speed” or “action” lines: brush strokes surrounding the trees that were her favoured subject. This effort to paint the “atmosphere” of the forest activated her landscapes with a sense of wind and motion while the echo or halos created by the action lines conveyed a sense of spirituality.

For Morris, by contrast, motion is conveyed through gradations of colour that create a blurring effect. Unlike Carr’s action lines, Morris’s soft focus effect quiets or stills the image. What is conveyed is not movement “in” the forest—rustling leaves, swaying branches—but the motion “away” from it, in the passing by.

Carr’s landscapes would have appeared radically dynamic to audiences of the 30s and 40s. Morris’s blurs, by contrast, create a much more literal experience of motion, directing our gaze away from the brushwork, away from the subject, away from the painting.

Canadian landscape art, to be true to the experience of the vast majority of Canadians, has to deal with the man-made environment, as tortured as its relationship to the natural environment may be. We live with this contradiction, valuing raw nature while also having little recourse but to develop and occupy it.

In *Sunday Drive 2*, Morris wrestles with the contradiction between nature and the man-made by introducing architectural elements: a bungalow, neatly trimmed grounds and out buildings. These are treated with the same blurring technique, the same palpable restraint as the other paintings in the series: a muted, subtle palette and generous amounts of white space. The diptych is pervaded with the sense of movement, but also, as in Carr, an ethereal, otherworldly, spiritual atmosphere. Jack Chambers is another Canadian artist who has dealt with landscape in a way

Patricia Morris  
BC Drive 2  
Diptych, each panel 20 x 28 inches



Emily Carr  
Edge of the Forest, 1935  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery

that considers our man-made place in it. His monumental *401 Towards London No. 1* is based on a photograph he took from the top of a hill on a frequently commute between London, Ontario and Toronto. The exceptional viewpoint – too high to be an overpass yet clearly centred over the highway – and the slightly tilted horizon line (as if the photo was taken from a light plane) gives the painting a vertiginous sense of space. The painting is also imbued with a sense of movement and, as with Carr’s “atmospheric” brushwork, a sense of spirituality. Chambers manages to blend immovable man-made constructs—the highway with its sweeping on and off ramps—



Patricia Morris  
Nova Scotia Sunday Drive 2  
Diptych, each panel 20 x 28 inches

into a simultaneous whole with verdant fields and forest and an enormous, classically Canadian blue sky.

Both Chambers and Morris use photography as a tool in their processes but towards different ends. Chambers uses the camera’s ability to freeze a moment in time to

help him render the idea of the artistic flash of insight, the revelatory vision of perfect clarity. Morris uses the camera’s mechanical limitation (the slow shutter speed that results in a blurry photograph) to help her simulate the experience of things flashing by, giving us a picture of experience rather than vision.

Techniques that endeavour to capture aspects of perception, how we see, are not new to art. Artists since the Renaissance have softened edges to make pictures appear more realistic. In Modern times, the Impressionist’s pointillist technique blended the edges between objects in an effort to better capture how things actually appear to us.

During the first decades of the 1900s artists began to deal with time in relation to perception. The

Cubists combined different views of objects into one image. The Futurists invented a host of techniques—simultaneous views, overlapping figures, “speed” lines, etc—to capture the hustle and bustle of modern life. And Marcel Duchamp created *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a painting which showed a sequence of figures overlapping



Jack Chambers  
401 Towards London No. 1 1968-69  
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada

like in time-lapse photographs. Duchamp would of course have known about the time-lapse photography of Edvard Muybridge, but up to that point no one had brought the two techniques, painting and photography, so literally, or mechanically, together.

In the Contemporary period, post-1945 to today, the German artist Gerhard Richter is exemplary of the continuing conversation between photography and painting. In the early 60s, Richter began to copy blurred photographs in paint. Richter was less



Patricia Morris  
Nova Scotia Drive 2  
40 x 30 inches

interested in using the camera as a tool than in looking at photographs as objects just like other things in the world. Richter's paintings are pictures of photographs. They comment on the strained relationship between photography and painting (If photography can copy what we see so perfectly, what is left for painting to do?) while also cleverly reproducing the same emotive, atmospheric effects that photographs are so good at capturing.

Morris's painted reproductions of blurry photographs parallel Richter's in some important ways. Their subject matter is indistinct. There is precious little to look at or interpret. The original photos could have been taken almost anywhere, there are no landmarks or notable features. There is nothing picturesque, attractive or pretty about them. This de-emphasis of the content of the painting directs our attention to the fact that a painting is more than the image in it; it is also a thing, an object among all the others we surround ourselves with.

Morris' paintings are barely landscapes; vaguely tree-like shapes and random overhead wires provide a few cues that prevent the images from veering off into complete abstraction. Yet, like Richter's paintings of photographs, they resonate with emotion, evoking a melancholy reflection on how we experience the world, how ethereal it is and how transitory and uncertain our place in it is.



Gerhard Richter  
Apple Trees (Sketch), 1984

— Robert Labossiere, 2010  
[www.ReadingArt.ca](http://www.ReadingArt.ca).