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CITIES, FROM ABOVE



A TRAVELLING EXHIBITION OF RECENT WORK BY JOHN HARTMAN REVEALS POIGNANT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CITY, APPARENT IN THE ABSTRACTED QUALITIES OF HIS OIL PAINTINGS.

ABOVE VANCOUVER FROM ABOVE BURRARD INLET (2006) REPRESENTS ONE OF HARTMAN'S EVOCATIVE DEPICTIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY METROPOLIS.

TEXT JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
IMAGE JOHN HARTMAN

In his recent paintings of cities, now on view at the University of Toronto Art Centre, Ontario painter John Hartman assumes a viewpoint a few hundred feet above the urban grid, just below the thin layer of smog and damp that hangs over the metropolis. It is a privileged position, one from which it is possible to scrutinize the city as both luxuriating sprawl and the awkward sum of intimate details that never fit together just so. We know Hartman's position and moment: it happens when you are dropping down from the sky toward a large urban airport, and suddenly, you can see everything, all at once. The flat edge of earth slipping beyond the horizon, the unrelenting stasis of suburbia, cars moving, fans revolving in mechanical penthouses, a bed glimpsed through a hotel window—things near and things far, arrayed across an immense tableau that contains infinity and yet also the most minute detail—all things that we never see as long as we are earthbound.

Hartman's oils in this series, like that moment of aerial descent, open up views of everything and more than everything. Our eyes, gazing down from a

great height, can only register the dusty greys and browns of the urban fabric, but Hartman's urgent, supple brushwork brings near the city in its radiant diversity and complexity, rendering it electric, incandescent and—to borrow curator Stuart Reid's word—ecstatic.

Organized and sent on a national and international tour by Scotiabank Group to celebrate its 175th anniversary, this group of 21 highly expressive works in oil on linen is about the ecstasy of urbanism as the artist discovered it in large and small cities across Canada, in Manhattan and in London. In the panoramic *Halifax* (2006), for example, expressways and streets surge across the cityscape like pulsing veins, bringing blood into the urban tissue. The city itself, painted in vivid blues and reds, is densely packed on its peninsula, like a huge magnet radiating ripples of force beyond itself, toward the far horizon.

Here, then, is the city as it would appear to us, if we could see it as it is. **CA**

John Bentley Mays is an architecture critic and writes regularly for The Globe and Mail.