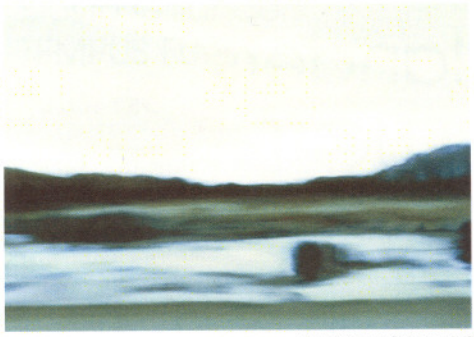
David Gillanders
TEMPUS FUGIT

No Condition is Permanent #2

Art Gallery of Northumberland
Cobourg, ON
October 3 – November 14, 2009



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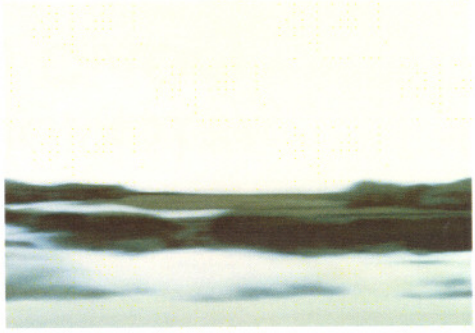

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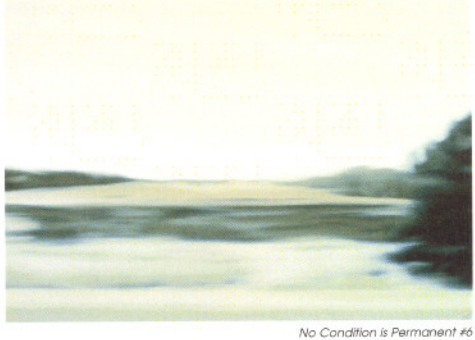

No Condition is Permanent #6

Closer to the Sun: David Gillanders' Paintings of Flight

David Gillanders' most recent body of work, Tempus Fugit, establishes his pratice as a painter more clearly than ever at the centre of preoccupations about the nature of visual experience in its historical dimension. Remarkably, this series is once again predicated on what seems like a highly purified subject which, taken to its extreme, is this time an almost impossibly winnowed pretext. For in twenty-five moments in time, twenty-five painted panels, David Gillanders presents us with an encounter between two flights. They were taken almost ninety years apart, in 1918 and 2007, by a young Canadian pilot whose son and grandsons, generations later, followed in his flight path. As one of these two grandsons, Gillanders could not give us a more personal account of the conditions of his own work of seeing. For as he tells us in his artist's statement, his series owes its inception to his grandfather's diary account of his airborne mission in the last year of World War I, in which he narrowly escaped enemy attack thanks to deft piloting of his injured aircraft back to base in the Vimy area of

northern France. Nine decades later, Gillanders, his brother and his father hired a small plane to retrace the trajectory of 1918. One mission is a palimpsest on the other, two calligraphic events in the sky. Much like the proverbial river, can we ever fly in the same sky twice? And yet the coordinates that make up this place in the world, are recognizably the same. Gillanders' black and white panels imagine his grandfather's flight; his colour panels describe its retracing; in between, small panels, absolutely black but for the rents of light that disrupt the fabric of void, suggest slippages in and out, across time. Goethe held that the colours of the world were created in this dynamic between pure light and pure darkness. The earlier prefigures and produces the later, as though tracing out the steps to be subsequently followed, leaving a journey in mid-air to which a son and two grandsons must return.

The journey itself, as we experience it at either ends of Gillanders' imagining (re-imagining and imaging), is presented as a set of still interceptions of movement. We have a difficult task, because we see the painted images in the first instance as if they were all representations of a head-on seeing of the French landscape, villages, steeples, forests and fields, roads, here and there, beneath the plane. And indeed some are : the frame of the pilot's window, the speedmarks of a spinning propellor tell us so. At the same time, all of the panels convey their topographic data in formulations that resemble but ultimately turn out to have little to do with the conventions of topography. Colour strokes are organised by the artist so that they undulate, circle and adapt across referent forms, rather than keeping to the contours that western representation systems lead us to expect. We read the succession of natural and architectural elements through, or despite, the arbitrarily chosen visual anchors that manage to coalesce into information about given places seen from the sky. At once, Gillanders pushes us into thinking about the history of vision, and in particular the European history of vision as it develops between the Renaissance and the early twentieth century. Jonathan Crary (Techniques of the Observer, 1990; Suspensions of Perception, 1999) has addressed how our mental representation of space has shifted in accordance with emerging technologies such as the camera obscura and the stereoscope in their relationship to the evolving subjectivity of the visual self. Questions of the embodied, disciplined and attentive eye are set, among others, against the record of representations of landscape and other models of open space in the western tradition. While at the time of World War I many artists were indeed addressing directly the strategies needed to represent flight, speed, the modernity of aeroplanes and war, the experience of speed and flight was also closely linked to the history of mental and visual representations of landscape as land marked as territory, as series of politically articulated spaces connected to the exercise of property, power and identity. The astonishingly rapid development of aeronautics and flight technologies in the first twenty years of the twentieth century provided an equally rapid transformation of the military deployment of airborne reconnaissance in a strategy of preparation for land-based assaults. Ultimately, Gillanders' grandfather was engaged in the transitional phase of this mapping activity to one of air-centred attack and defense that has marked the rest of the century. Yet to a large extent, the 1918 moment is foremost about the defense and attack around observation itself, around seeing. In the heart of this process, photography was perfected in its capacity to map out territory. But the pilot worked from the fundamental capacities of human vision and recognition and the lightning-quick decisisons required in order to assess one's safe place in the sky and on land. If the artistic practice of landscape was tied, as has often been argued, to the romanticizing of nature in order to provide a foil to its possession and exploitation, the experience of landscape from the air might afford only a brief such seduction; when the embodied eye is aloft, ungrounded, landscape is the earth below. There's a threat of deadly impact, no less powerful and dangerous to the pilot than the ocean to the sailor. And equal to this threat was that of a territorially defined vision. The land seen from the early military aricraft is seen head-on, at times, but especially sideways, from an open cockpit, speeding and receding away below, or rushing far too quickly from the distance. Gillanders' work recreates for us the sense of peripheral vision, seen over a shoulder far too quickly for any information to remain coherent or to respect any of the established rules that visual culture has rehearsed for five hundred years; instead, each panel attests to the work of perception at

harnessing visual information at all costs, in a seemingly random order that produces by any means possible the semblance of recognition. Then the pilot, the airborne embodied eye, must make up his mind – infinitely quickly - about the safety of his position.

This extraordinary mental capacity to structure vision in order to gauge the spatial relationships of our body to the world turns out to have much to do with this notion of embodiment. Painting, in turn, is in question when the artist, as is the case with Gillanders, meets head-on and reconfigures the entrenched capacity of painting to carry out specific tasks within a specific tradition. As is the case with almost all artists working in figural representation, Gillanders investigates with the two-dimensional language of design, of paint and its application, on relatively flat surfaces in order to propose sets of visual references to elements of observed reality to in turn more or less persuasively suggest a depiction of that reality. But his attention to the place of the eye and the place of the eye's body significantly redefines the possible spaces occupied by his works. This very synchronistic conception of the eye may the basis for his historical understanding. For in Tempus Fugit, the works are one installation of paintings. The display of twenty-three of the twenty-five panels is left to the installation teams mounting each exhibition. The prepared intervention of chance and difference will always produce a sequence (probably not ever the same one twice) that echoes the mind's constantly reassembling, differently-ordering work with visual elements in order to produce information and narrative. This process itself calls into question the logic of history and the logic of its visual ordering in painted narratives and, finally, the inherited logic of narrativity. Chronological sequences of causes and effects can be told, can be remembered and attested to with evidence pieced together; a diary extract read generations hence can produce the return, the cyclical reinscription of the same trajectory through space. But the accidental and the achronistic play their part too. Gillanders' achievement is to produce a painting that works at the very bases of the western tradition of representation in order to reattach them to a fabric of ruptures and gaps in the visual field that the mind works with because of and in spite of historical contexts. The poetics of flight, of airborne human dreaming, are reattached to fear, the necessity for vision in the race to safety against death. The mythic structures of the self, of the family, of nation, hover between these twenty-five panels, between the artist and our engagement with his vision as we walk with him across nearly a century and reflect, perhaps like Icarus, what it is to be at least this much closer to the sun, and to be moving against the very limits of our controlled position in the world.

Dominic Hardy

David Gillanders
TEMPUS FUGIT

Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, ON
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No Condition is Permanent
Oil on canvas
Seven works at 14 x 20" each
2007

A Natural Condition #1
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2007

A Natural Condition #2
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2007

A Natural Condition #5
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2007

A Natural Condition #6
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2007

Smokescreen #1
Oil on canvas
28 x 40"
2007

The Dawn Reconnaissance #1
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2009

Smokescreen #3
Oil on canvas
28 x 40"
2007

Tempus Fugit
Oil on canvas
Approximately 96 x 240"
(25 works of varying sizes)
2009

The Dawn Reconnaissance #3
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2009

The Dawn Reconnaissance #4
Oil on paper
8 ½ x 12"
2009

Saint Eloi's Fields
Oil on canvas
42 x 60"
2009

David Gillanders
TEMPUS FUGIT
Artist's Statement

The narrative group of twenty-five paintings, Tempus Fugit, is rooted in family history. My grandfather, John Gordon Gillanders, was born in Highgate, Ontario in 1895. He enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps in 1917 and flew with the18th Squadron R.F.C. in France in 1918, receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross for valorous conduct in August of that year. I am told that my grandfather didn't talk much about his experiences in the war, and he died in 1946 when his son, my father, was still a young boy. During his time as a pilot with the R.F.C. my grandfather kept both a Pilot's Log of each of his missions and a personal journal. His journal entry of March 30th, 1918 describes the flight upon which the Tempus Fugit group of paintings is based:

Sat. 30 March 1918
"Went this morning with Archibald on a dawn recon. From La Bassée to Arras with Camel escort. Had to go at 3000' on account of clouds and our radiator was shot at Courcelles. We were archied, machine gunned and "onioned" like stink and managed to cross the trenches at 700' landing across Vimy Ridge near St. Eloi. Breakfast with Can Art unit, back to Wing at Bruay & to 18 Sqd. Our machine shot up by Archie and Engine burnt right out."

In the fall of 2007 my father, brother and I made a trip to northern France to visit many of the places mentioned in my grandfather's journals. It was during this trip that we hired a pilot and a small plane at Lens to retrace the exact route flown by my grandfather on March 30th, 1918: from La Bassée to Courcelles where the trouble began, then west over Vimy Ridge to Mont Saint-Eloi. I shot video and photographs from the air during this flight and those images have formed the starting points for this group of paintings.

Twenty-five canvases of varying sizes offer images of salient moments from the beginning, middle and end of this flight. They present an open narrative. Is it 1918 or 2008?

A confusing complexity arises from both the random arrangement of the works and their varied vocabulary of painted treatments. Misreadings are inevitable. Indeed, for the work to be truthful, they are essential. Who knows, in the end, what really happened on a given morning ninety years ago?

Interspersed here and there among the narrative group are paintings representing a darkened room, just a little light entering through the shifting folds of a curtain on the left. These paintings suggest sleep (is it a dream?), but also loss and, as must have been immediately palpable to my grandfather at the time, the constant possibility of death.

David Gillanders
TEMPUS FUGIT
Artist Bio

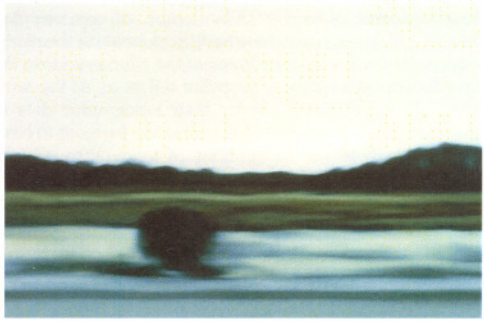
David Gillanders was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1968 and studied at the University of Western Ontario, London, and McGill University, Montreal. He lives and works in Montreal.

In recent years his drawings and paintings have been exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the McClure Gallery, the Maison de la culture du Plateau-Mont-Royal, the Maison de la culture Marie-Uguay, and the Galerie Port-Maurice, Montreal, as well as at the Stewart Hall Gallery, Pointe Claire, and the John B. Aird Gallery, Toronto.

In 2008, his work was exhibited at the Chicago Art Source Gallery, Chicago, and for the second year in a row, at the Toronto International Art Fair and at Papier, the contemporary works on paper fair in Montreal. His work will be shown at the Toronto International Art Fair again in October of 2009.

In fall 2009, three new bodies of work will be shown in solo exhibitions at Galerie Trois Points, Montreal, the Méridien Gallery, Montreal, and at the Art Gallery of Northumberland, in Cobourg, Ontario.

Works by David Gillanders are held in the Collection Prêt d'oeuvres d'art du Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the Méridien Versailles collection, Montreal, and in many private collections.



No Condition is Permanent #1

Acknowledgements

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