



# SUBVERSIVE RADIANCE

**the Art of  
Michael Merrill**

by James D Campbell



1. Michael Merrill, *Apartment 1*, 2016,  
oil on canvas, 111.76 x 152.4 cm.  
Photograph: Guy L'Heureux.

2. *Apartment 3*, 2016, oil on canvas,  
111.76 x 152.4 cm. Photograph:  
Guy L'Heureux.

The facade of the anonymous apartment complex in the Ville-Émard neighborhood of Montreal is neither immediately seductive nor aesthetically compelling. Socially assisted housing with a vaguely Modernist cast, it certainly lacks the grandeur of the legendary Port Royal Apartments on Sherbrooke Street West, or to cite a still grander example, the block-long Astral Apartments in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

What was it in the tree-shadowed street that so seduced the painter Michael Merrill? Did the secret life of the building invite a deep voyeurism? Was its proximity to home a persistent lure? Or did it shine? As the building changed according to the varying angles of sunlight throughout the day and into the evening, was a spectral beauty manifest that only a painter could see?

For now, the answer must remain speculative. But one thing is certain: whether in isometric, biomorphic or anamorphic guise, the work of Michael Merrill has always been maverick and subversive. Longstanding followers of his work know that the level of formal invention is inordinately high and the standards of execution exacting. Whether transforming the landmarks of Land Art into paintings, mining the caves at Lascaux for subject matter, mapping the interior spaces of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, or recently painting the apartment



facade opposite where he lives, Merrill is an artist in perennial pursuit of what things look like when the blinkers come off, when Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball" roams free and there is no impediment left between the thing seen and the eye seeing.

Arguably, his recent Apartment complex paintings count among his most sophisticated and daring works to date. *Apartment 1*, *Apartment 2*, *Apartment 3*, all oil on canvas, 2016, related inks on paper, 2016, and sculptures (architectural models) betray an attempt to conjure a world of the inner city as involute in its mien and obsessively realized as possible. The necessity to paint or draw them at a certain point became, for him, simply unavoidable.

The surfaces of these paintings make reference not only to the central ideas of Merrill's practice but its governing teleology, its evolutionary direction and thrust. Each window and door, so beautifully and exactly rendered, suggests openings and passages in and through his bodies of work.

In them, Merrill has morphed into a "documentary" painter of a whole new persuasion. For him, the physiognomy of landscape is pertinent to an ethic of making that renders the truth of things seen in pigment. He is a self-confessed devotee of César Aira's *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*. Not without cause. The Argentinian writer's marvelous novel circumnavigates the dovetailing territories of fiction, history, travel writing and philosophy to offer something less

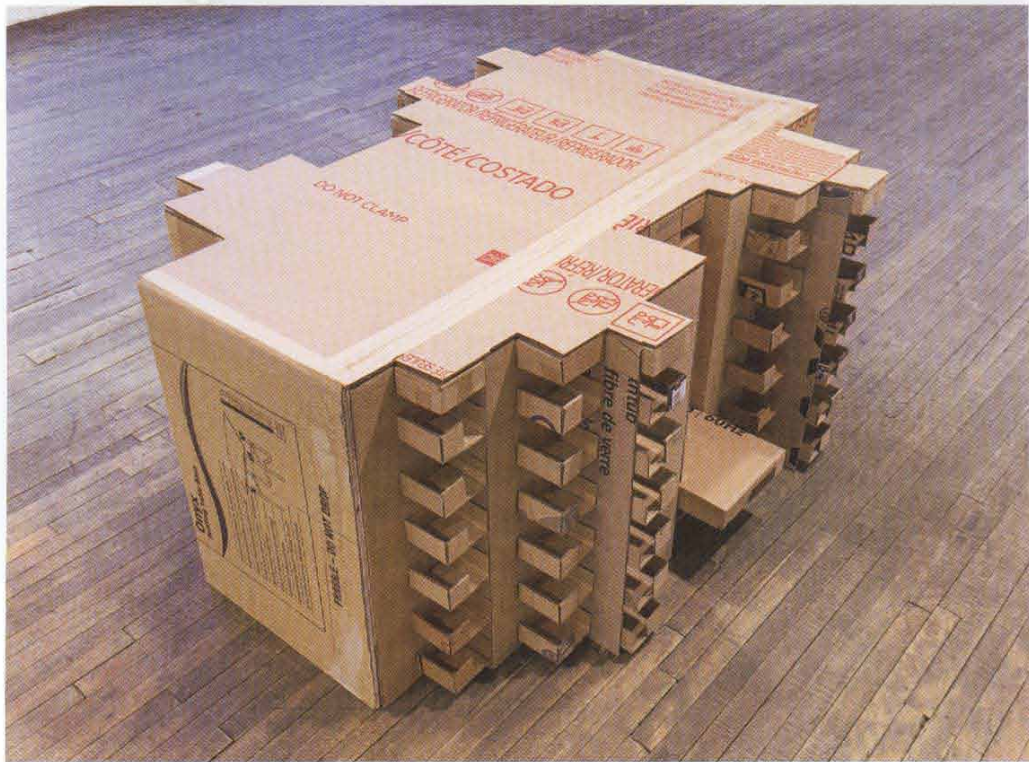
and more than a biography of the German painter Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802–1858). A genre painter, and the great grandson of Georg Philipp Rugendas (1666–1742), also a painter, he travelled across the face of Latin America at the behest of the eminent naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and painted with an eye towards achieving what Humboldt calls "physiognomic totality." Each painting effectively articulated not just part but the whole of Nature. His perseverance was radiant. Anyone who has followed Merrill's several journeys may find the parallels startling.

1. *Apartment 2*, 2016, oil on canvas, 111.76 x 152.4 cm. Photograph: Guy L'Heureux.

2. Installation view, 2016, Galerie Roger Bellemare, Montreal. Photograph: Guy L'Heureux.

3. *Model*, 2016, cardboard, tape, 140 x 102 x 66 cm. Photograph: Guy L'Heureux.





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Some account of the backstory is in order. The Apartment paintings emerge from the artist's ongoing, expansive series entitled "Paintings About Art" and the works that immediately preceded them. Works from the series have been shown to acclaim in Montreal, Toronto, Freiburg, Cologne and elsewhere in the last many years. In earlier pieces in the series, Merrill captured sundry works of art as they appeared in situ. He then chose as subjects not the artworks themselves, but their situational contexts and the architectural details of the edifices in which they were exhibited.

In the late 1980s until 1995, he had executed an extended series of oil paintings and works on paper based on light reflecting off the grey concrete floor in his studio. He said at the time that he wanted to paint his studio floor the same way that Monet painted his water lilies. Virtual abstractions, they possess a magisterial solemnity and calm as well as the simple, selfless stoicism that is his artistic signature. His studio, paint table, and apartment (replete with paintings hanging on the wall) would all come under his purview.

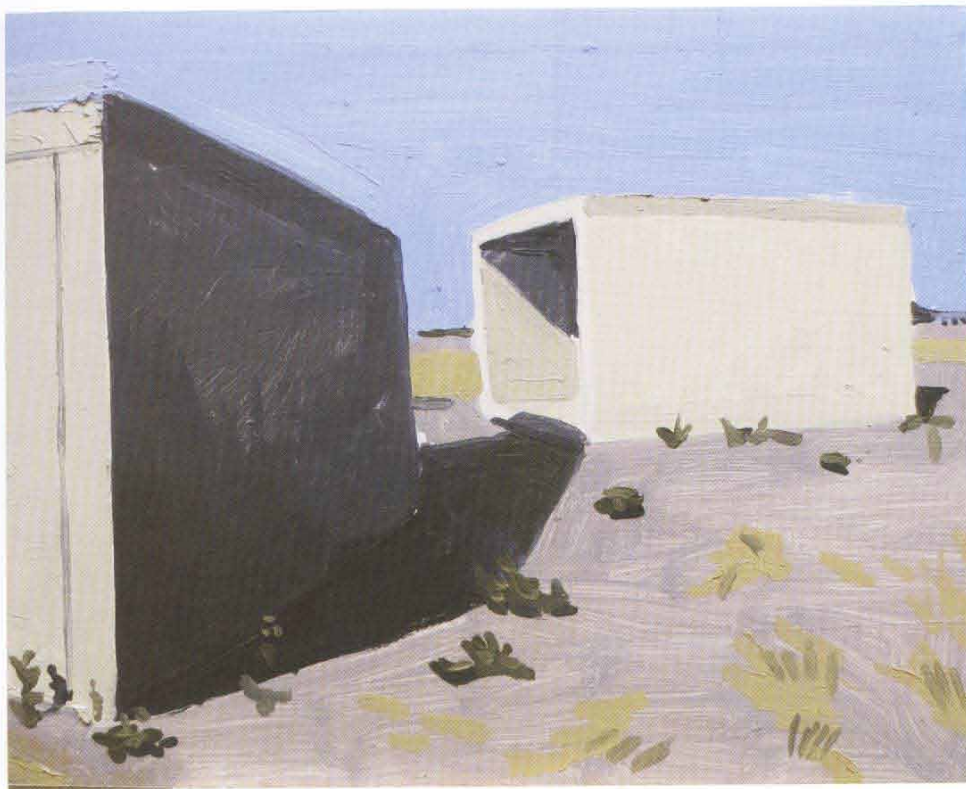
He wanted to understand the process of working with nothing interposed between himself and the subject. He wanted to paint directly from experience, unalloyed of freewheeling flights of fancy and experiments in the surreal. This inclined him toward subjects that were immediately available to him. The series he did in 1992–1993 of 26 paintings depicting his own apartment at 4419 St. Urbain Street was seminal. It was a forerunner of his recent

work, the temporal interval being a long period of gestation, on-site learning and progressive formal refinement.

This is what led him to the still-ongoing series "Paintings about Art" that began formally in 1995. Merrill was working as an art installer, transporter and technician at the time and familiarity bred reverence whether art was seen on the wall, on the floor in its rough state before presentation or held in his hands. He began making paintings depicting various aspects of the art world. "Paintings about Art" considers an artwork in the same way as another painter would a vase of flowers or a still life. They depicted art in various locations from artists' studios, to storage facilities, art galleries, personal collections, museum exhibitions and so on. He cherished the tactual dimensionality of art.

In 2011, Merrill mounted a remarkable exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts that used the institution itself as the subject. The exhibition is still spoken of with astonishment and awe by his peers. Paintings of specific areas in the museum (transitory spaces such as hallways and staircases) were hung in other places in the museum, creating a seesaw dialogue with the architecture and calling attention to spaces not normally the subject of such scrutiny. He wanted the paintings to create a visual echo of the actual buildings in order to close, as it were, the circle of experience and creation.

He then took his "Paintings About Art" on an extended road trip South. He travelled alone in the US to see and document various watersheds



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in the history of Land Art. He saw the possibilities of transforming them into his own paintings. He maintains that in Land Art the art and its context are inseparable. Inspired by the Group of Seven, he executed oil sketches, watercolours, drawings at each site. He was able to use the rental car as shelter to paint and draw from a rich range of work: Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* all felt the thoroughness of his gaze. Merrill says that Gus Van Sant's film *Gerry*, 2002, which follows the dire adventures of two hikers who get lost in the desert, was never far from his mind while on his long excursion.

Perhaps the work that had the most impact on him was Heizer's *Double Negative*, 1970, in the Moapa Valley on Virgin River Mesa near Overton, Nevada. This long trench in the earth was made by the displacement of a quarter of a million tons of rock and is a paradigm of negative space that can only be appreciated in physical experience. Merrill absorbed it in solitude without any filters and was struck by the fact that like the best non-objective painting, it refers to nothing outside itself.

He likened the cut in the landscape "to some kind of interior theatre." It certainly became the perfect arena for the exercise of Emerson's aforementioned philosophical metaphor (later championed by photographer Walker Evans) of the "transparent eyeball." The eye is understood

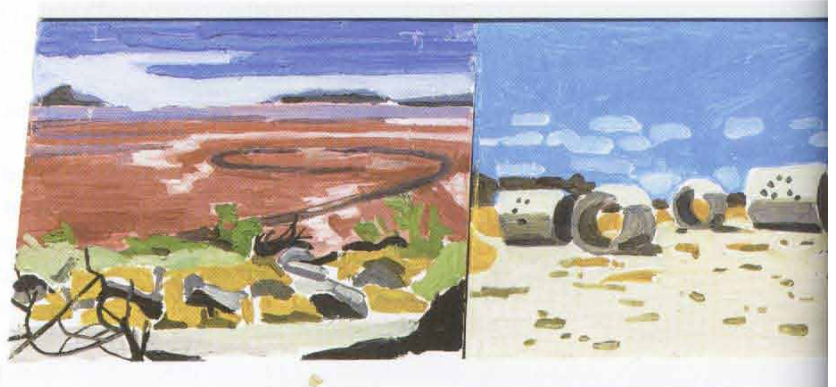
as a proverbial sponge that sops up all that nature has to offer, and then some. In a sense, the eye is a totalizing instrument of seizure and submission but not sterile taxonomy. In his essay *Nature* (1836), Emerson explains that the significance behind the transparent eyeball is similar to a scientific standpoint with respect to the Bible. Wholeness with nature is a state devoutly to be sought. Awareness enjoys hyper-focus, strange geometries rule and the vicissitudes of the built world fall away. Given the ever-present prospect of jeopardy, Merrill became attentive to Nature in ways he had not previously thought possible.

His experiences in the South prepared him for a subsequent stake-out of the caves at Lascaux to see the Paleolithic paintings first-hand. The writer and

1. *Judd*, 2012, oil on panel, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Photograph: Michael Merrill.

2. *Studio (Double Negative)*, 2012, flash on panel, 48.4 x 63.4 cm. Photograph: Michael Merrill.

3. *Spiral Jetty, Sun Tunnels, Double Negative, Lightning Field*, 2012, oil on panel, 20.32 x 25.4 cm each. Photograph: Michael Merrill.



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ethnographer Wade Davis put him in touch with the American poet Clayton Eshleman who had lived in France and written extensively about the caves and the Paleolithic imagination and even conducted tours there. Eshleman worked out for Merrill the ideal itinerary: Font-de-Gaume, Les Combarelles, Rouffignac, Cougnac, Pech Merle, Niaux and the new national prehistory museum in Les Eyzies.

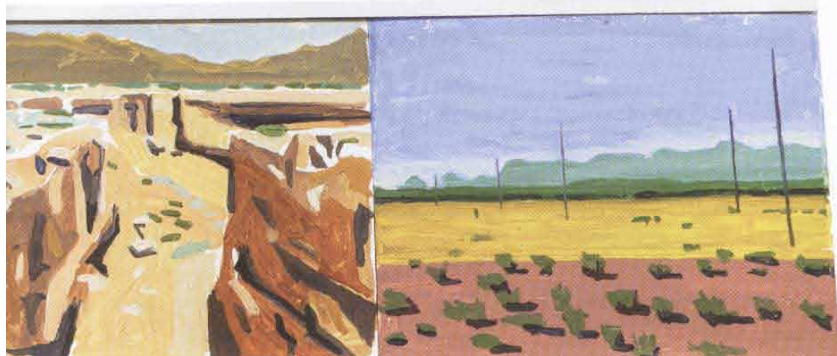
The topography of the cave walls was an active instigator of the images painted on them. Merrill says: "As you go through the caves with the light and shadows, it is almost as if the images are being spontaneously conjured. It becomes hard to tell what is an actual painting and what is a kind of *pareidolia*, much like dreaming while awake. Walking through the caves there is a continuous forming and

dissolving of images. Picasso comes to mind—think of *Guernica* unfurling on the walls in real time—as well as certain passages of experimental film."

The experience of the cave art differed markedly from that of the Land Art sites. Whereas finding and surveying the Land Art sites was an endeavour that ensured isolation, the caves are completely mediated and Merrill found that being with a tour group had its limitations. Solitude was simply not possible. Still, he experienced a rapture there that thoroughly irradiated his art.

César Aira affirmed Merrill's belief that travel and painting are intertwined like fibers in a rope. In tandem, they can be transformative. The trips through the southwest and the caves in Europe made landscape a necessary subject of Merrill's work. The need to be in the midst of it became a raging hunger. The earlier works in the "Paintings About Art" series were largely contained and framed by architecture, giving the work distinct definition and closed boundaries. The work of Donald Judd, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and the cave painters is much more implicated and informed by the surrounding landscape. This is a context where the boundaries are fluid and open.

Merrill has always asked himself as he has moved restlessly from series to series, work to work: "What was learned?" César Aira held that an artist continually learns valuable lessons from the practice of his art. Those lessons are related to the discoveries made possible by the so-called eureka



effect endemic to Merrill's corpus, the results of which are seeded throughout his work. He lifts the lid off the liminal and explores transformations inside liminal space that can be spatially and temporally complex, dislocatory, rapturous and even profound.

This is the so-called *kairos* moment (*καιρός* is an ancient Greek word meaning the opportune or supreme moment); a temporal movement that is not sequential, linear or auto-bio-chronological but rather a phenomenal time lapse in which everything is held in abeyance and still possible. It is the breach wall in seeing between representation and the unrepresentable, the object world and the hegemony of the hungry eye. In this liminal stage, Michael Merrill stands on the threshold between his previous way of structuring identity, time, necessity and circumstance, and a radically new holistic way, which the rituals of being and seeing established as the only way forward.

He is most interested in the moment between perception and recognition—that time just before we can put a name to what we see. He would say that he is only an interpreter, albeit one guided by Georges Perec's suggestion that it is necessary to attend to the minute details of the "infra-ordinary." What he tries in paint is to provide a worthy algorithm for that liminal moment like a Giacometti drawing as though possessed by some internal GPS. As a painter this interpretation is intimately tied to capacious knowledge of the physical attributes and limitations of the medium that is being used.

Merrill says of the apartment building directly across the street from where he lives: "I cannot in good conscience call it beautiful. However, I am fascinated by how dramatically it is affected by different conditions of light. The bluntness of the architecture against the sky, softened by foliage or stark against snow or illuminated in the night, is captivating." Over the course of the last several years, Merrill has spent hundreds of hours photographing and sketching it. He had the template for it printed onto canvas to provide a precise under-study and grid. The structure remains the same from painting to painting, but the light and colour of each is completely different. More than this, the numinous seeps out of these paintings like a fine mist that envelops the viewer, guiding us forward toward the coming surface rather than obscuring our view.

Merrill, who counts Cézanne, Milne, Milton Avery, Morandi and Edmund Alleyn among his mentors, may be one of the most subversive minds in contemporary Canadian painting. His insertion strategy mirrors the tentacular and multi-tiered nature of his body of work as a whole, and it's worth

noting that his relentless experimentation with perceptual cues, paint and its support and a wider context has served him well. This is a tribute to a chameleon-like sensibility and a remarkable ability to import crucial discoveries and manoeuvres from earlier series into what he is doing now. His polymorphism, curiosity and detective spadework are always in play.

In his paintings, the change is entirely perceptual. Effectively, he hijacks works of art, presumably in an act of paying homage, renders them his own and contextualizes them. It is the practice of contextualization rather than simulation that equates with the 'thrown voice' as he has practised it in the caves at Lascaux, at *Double Negative* in the desert, in the MMFA, on his studio floor, in front of the apartment complex and elsewhere.

It is important to remember that in Merrill's work, verisimilitude or Naturalism is not some holy grail he is seeking. His fidelity to things seen is a worthy and enduring pursuit in itself. The work never aspires to photorealism, however binding his fidelity. Ventriloquism, if Merrill's metaphoric instrument, is not the blunt cudgel of a traveller through darkness or the crude gag in slapstick but a subversive tool which might unearth the truth about art objects and their myriad contexts, and render that a worthy artwork in its own right.

Indeed, Merrill's work is arguably a case of *extasis in extremis*. I mean by this neither his early experiments with mescaline (at age 16) nor the more ubiquitous MDMA. I mean a far purer form of ecstasy—the pursuit of the predicates of the visible and its capture. He is so sophisticated at manipulating his own authorial voice that it seems to issue from the art he references rather than from his own hand.

In drawings and paintings, the artist is able to throw his voice surreptitiously and with seamless grace. He has done so for almost five decades. Merrill uses a paintbox as a surrogate for a refractive anamorphic polyprism, a way of making coherent what seemed facile or inchoate, restoring splendor and auratic gravity to his subjects, however commodified or fractured they were or are. He convinces us that the far is really the near and the near, the far; that the artwork depicted is really his to interpret and that the spaces in which it is situated are also subject to his own supportable claims of occupancy.

This thinking comes very close to the sort of ritual that makes ownership possible, transcends representation as an act of mimicry, if not constituting alterity, and achieves truth. Michael Merrill, like Aira's unstoppable protagonist, has learned that his medium could become life itself. ■