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MAY 2018 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Michael Merrill Interior Theatre: An Episode in the Life of an Itinerant
Eyeball Part One: The Studio in the Gallery Galerie Roger Bellemare Galerie
Christian Lambert

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Michael Merrill, Studio Box, 2018, Oil on wood , 170 x 110 x 97 cm. Photo: Guy L Heureux

By JAMES D. CAMPBELL, May, 2018

Picture in your mind's eye a garage measuring 45' × 25' × 10'. The painter's itinerant eyeball palpates the interior array: "In one corner there is a 1964 Ford Thunderbird being restored. The walls are brick and the floor is cement. The ceiling has been insulated and drywalled, but water has infiltrated the roof and some of the drywall has collapsed. There is a table with chocolate bar wrappers on it and an empty coke can. There is a red engine hoist, tools and some dirty rags." This is the first time that Merrill saw the studio in which his art would incubate over the next fifteen years. He would spend the first six months insulating, dry walling, painting, and installing skylights and a proper door.



Michael Merrill: "Studio" - Installation, Galeries Roger Bellemare et Christian Lambert, April 28th to May 26th 2018, Photo: Guy L Heureux

Now picture the studio today: pristine, rife with works in oil, watercolour, graphite, plaster, wood and so forth, some installed on wall shelving or plinths. Work tables full of paints and brushes and other implements. Capacious storage space. Consider

the descriptive anatomy of the studio as a laboratory in which the most exacting experiments are being carried out across a wide array of media.

Merrill's paean to studio life can be appreciated in two concurrent exhibitions in Montreal, where he lives and works. One is being held at his dealers Roger Bellemare and Christian Lambert. The other is in the studio. Draw a radius across one and it runs through and encompasses the other. They overlap and merge into one arresting alembic.

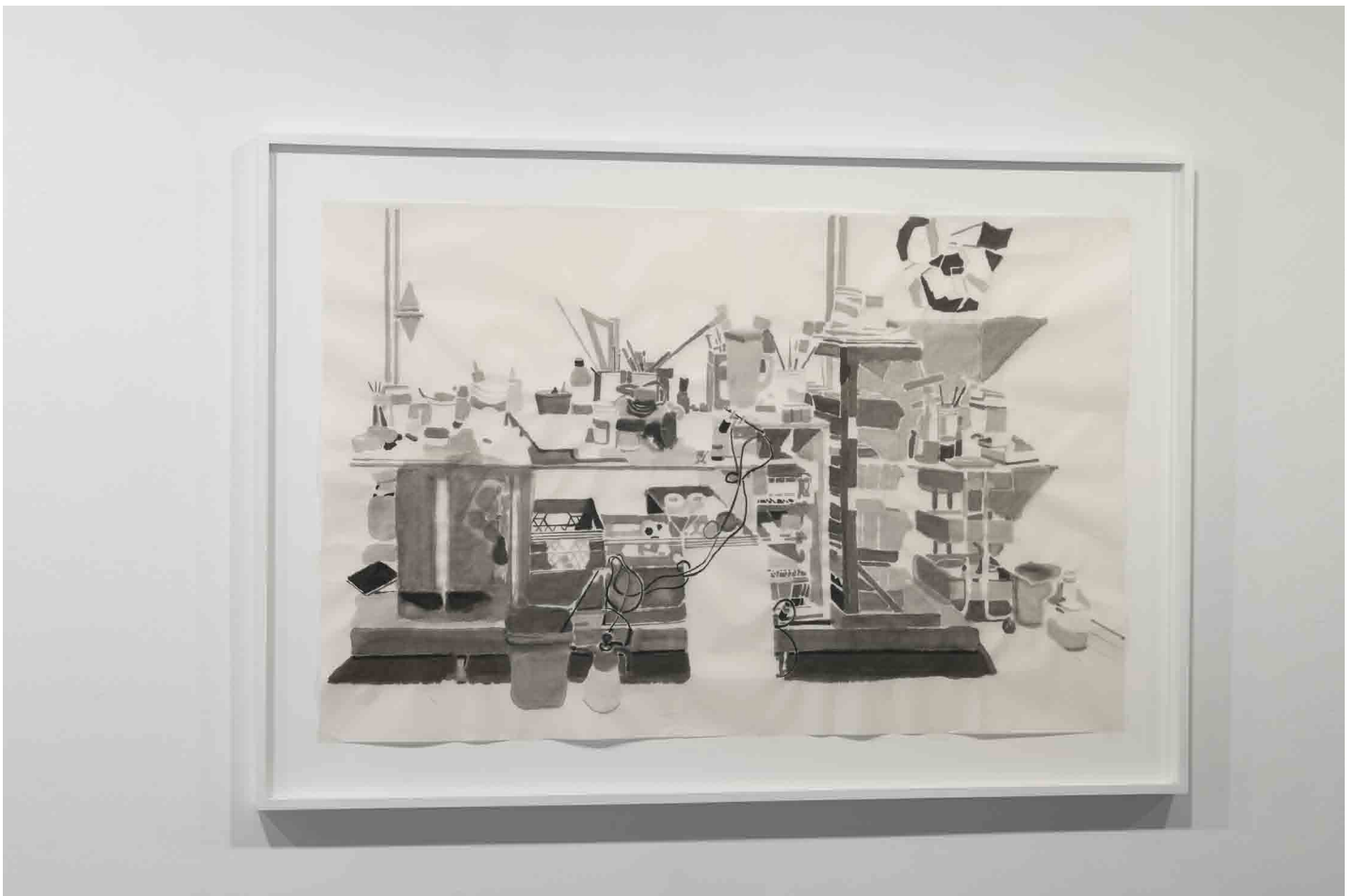
Merrill took a cue from Robert Smithson (who invoked Cézanne directly when describing the necessity of moving out of the studio and into the world to make his site-specific land art): "We now have to reintroduce a kind of physicality," he insisted in an interview, "the actual place rather than the tendency to decoration which is a studio thing."



Michael Merrill, Studio, 2018, Oil on plaster, Dia 30 cm. Photo: Guy L Heureux

In 2012, Merrill ventured forth from his studio and visited Spiral Jetty, Sun Tunnels, Double Negative, The Lightning Field and Marfa, Texas on an epic road trip. He put each of these to paint while on site. The experience had a profound effect not only upon his optic but its instrumentality. The frame has been removed, and the painter has recourse to a form of staccato shorthand that evacuates polish, installing wilful rawness in its wake. For Merrill, each mark is “a step into thin air” – a high wire act second to none. What is unstated now becomes as important as what is. Now he translates the unstated into a litany of eloquent absences – stealthy subtractions that invigorate the work with hauntingly liminal suggestions of seen and unseen, presence and absence, there and no-longer-there.

Merrill paints the studio as a subject in the same spirit. In these shows, Merrill pushes his paint relentlessly forwards and will now hazard the evacuation of referents, making the viewer complicit in “finishing” the work. This radical strategy -- which we might call a methodology of “unfinishing” -- highlights this artist’s high level of formal invention over the course of decades.



Michael Merrill, Paint Table with Sculpture, 2017, Ink on paper, 94 x 146 cm. Photo: Guy L Heurreux

The studio is a perennial, inexhaustible subject for artists: Matisse, Braque, Bruce Nauman, Paul McCarthy, Louise Bourgeois, Philip Guston, Courbet, Brancusi, just to name a few of the artists that Merrill has looked to in this regard. It is, for him, an incubator, painterly matrix or “centre of creation.” The exhibition draws an indelible line from the studio to the gallery; hence, the necessary bifurcation of venue.

Highlights of the studio in the gallery exhibition include *Studio* (2018 Oil on plaster, dia 30 cm.), a huge painted plaster sphere which, like the great globe itself, articulates the studio as mega-continent in 360-degree surround view. It is a stunning work. Similarly, *Studio Box* (2018, Oil on wood, 170 x 110 x 97 cm.) a sculpture in which the studio is painted inside the walls of a crate, opened up on the floor plane like a Necker cube spontaneously reversing in depth, is simply mesmerizing. These sculptural works are complemented by paintings like *Studio (With Canvas)*, (2017, oil on panel 20 x 25.5 cm.), *Studio (With Square)* (2017, oil on linen, 122 x 122 cm.), *Studio (With Press)*, (2018, watercolour and ink on paper, 55 x 76 cm.) and a number of others.



Exhibition: Michael Merrill: "Studio" - Installation, Galeries Roger Bellemare et Christian Lambert, April 28th to May 26th 2018. Photo: Guy L Heureux

Merrill's activity here reminds me of Philip Guston's *The Studio* (1969) but not in the sense of some comical incarnation of an Imperial Wizard but rather of a latter-day Prospero. All the great artists have taken the studio as their subject, and their refuge, *sanctus sanctorum*, painterly cesspool and lab. Guston's late 20th century version seems particularly pertinent, as it shines an unsparing light on the painter (surrogate or perp) amongst a hectic accumulation of his essential props. But this is no idealizing vision. Nor is it the epitome of squalor. It reminds us more of a 21st century version of the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* of Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598), the embodiment of Ralph Waldo Emerson's transparent eyeball, and Prospero's undying words:

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits, and

Are melted into air, into thin air:

*And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve... ”*

In a very real sense, Merrill *owns* his subjects. Or at least co-opts them. If there seems something supernatural in their facture, it is no craven matter of séances in the dark, talking with the dead, or vertiginous sleight of hand. We are talking about sheer will power, endless morphologies of line, and the voluptuous integrity of Emerson's 'transparent eyeball'. Merrill becomes a silent proprietor, a partner with the viewer in the making of meaning, even as he affirms his outsider status as wily observer, able ventriloquist -- and devout voyeur. **WM**



JAMES D. CAMPBELL

James D. Campbell is a curator and writer on art based in Montreal. The author of over 150 books and catalogues on art, he contributes essays and reviews to Frieze, Border Crossings and other publications.

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