



AMY SHACKLETON
The Great Canadian LEEDscape

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Future Narratives

by **Todd Tremeer**, Exhibition Curator

BEFORE IT CAN EVER BE A REPOSE FOR THE
SENSES, LANDSCAPE IS THE WORK OF THE MIND.
ITS SCENERY IS BUILT UP AS MUCH FROM STRATA
OF MEMORY AS FROM LAYERS OF ROCK.¹

– Simon Schama

Canada is a large country. It costs more to fly within our borders than to many European countries or large American cities. Travel costs and our preference for warm weather vacations, may contribute to the reality that many of us have travelled more outside of Canada than within our own borders. Amy Shackleton's project, *The Great Canadian LEEDscape* thus seems a fitting touchstone for marking our "Canada 150" celebration year. In her words: "I spent time in every province and territory to photograph landscapes and hunt down buildings that were developed with nature in mind. I walked on sea ice in Nunavut. I braved -35°C in Manitoba. I hiked mountains in Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Yukon."²

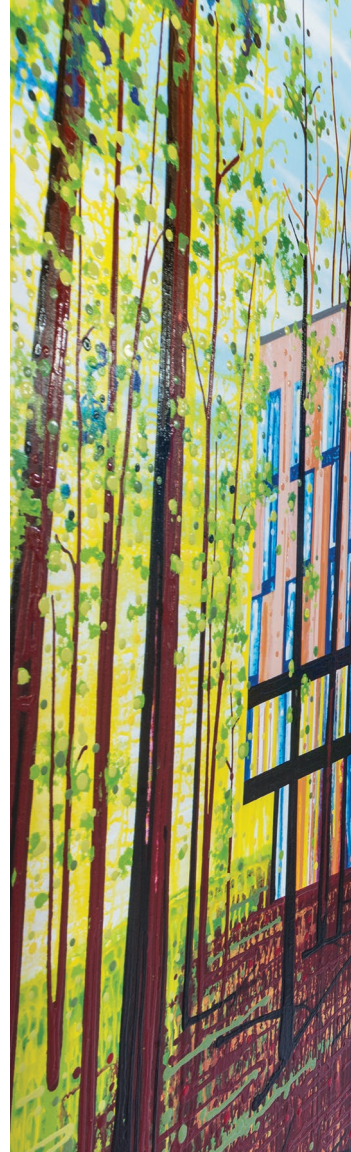
AMY SHACKLETON

The Great Canadian LEEDscape

Amy lived in Bowmanville before departing for Toronto to study fine arts at York University. There she graduated with an honours, Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2008 and has since received critical praise and gallery recognition for her paintings. The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington is proud to feature this early career artist with local roots in her debut solo exhibition in a public gallery.

Shackleton is a prolific and energetic painter working within the Canadian landscape tradition. She takes photographs on her travels, then back in the studio, crops and collages several photographs together to create new compositions. Also notable, is she paints cityscapes. For her *LEEDscape* Project, Shackleton visited and photographed LEED certified buildings (acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). This international certification is awarded to buildings that achieve high environmental and efficiency design standards.

Shackleton makes a kind of process painting, in the sense that much of the narrative surrounding each artwork involves describing her painting process. Her painting style is immediately identifiable. Paintings are large, boldly coloured, graphic in nature and notably, created without brushes. In her work, squeeze bottles and water spritzers have replaced conventional brushes. Paint is poured, dripped and splattered. Painting begins with thin watery layers; subsequent paint layers are thicker and more viscous. Paint flows down with gravity drawing straight lines across the canvas. To control the direction paint flows, the artist has created her own easel that rotates a canvas three hundred and sixty degrees. Sometimes, she positions her painting flat on the floor to pour, puddle and swirl the paint upon the canvas.





THE GREAT CANADIAN LEED-SCAPE
2017; Acrylic and enamel on canvas; each canvas 45×60 in.

Acrylic paint dries with a low luster and if thinned with water, absorbs light to create a matte surface. In contrast, enamel paint dries with a smooth, glossy surface and pronounced edge. The resultant effect is a beautiful modulated surface that alternates between capturing and reflecting light. Delicate shadows cast by the paint's subtle texture gives the work presence.

Canada has a strong association with landscape painting. Nearly a century ago the Group of Seven, Emily Carr and a few other artists broke with, what they deemed to be conventional English landscape painting. These progressive artists looked to northern European Expressionists and French Impressionists for guidance in matters of light, colour, paint application and subject matter. Many members of the group travelled across Canada with the goal of recording the nation's unique and varied landscapes. The Group of Seven famously painted on-site, most often with oil paint on small wood panels. Later in the studio, larger canvases were sometimes painted from their plein-air sketches. The group's formal existence was brief and their landscape painting approach was not well received by the public of the day. The group had its first show in 1920 and showed together for the last time in 1933. Ironically, the group's most iconic figure, Tom Thomson, was never formally part of the group having died in 1917.

However brief the Group of Seven's formation was, their vision of Canada, continues to influence today how we imagine our northland and wilderness spaces. To this end, most artists who paint landscape in Canada have received the off-handed remark, "just like (or unlike) the Group of Seven." In this regard, Amy Shackleton is probably no different. She, like them, paints rocks, trees and water. Also her titles convey specific geographic places.

Shackleton's panoramic project, *The Great Canadian LEEDscape*, arguably continues the Group of Seven's legacy through her nation-wide travels and efforts to capture the geographic diversity of Canada.

That said, a more nuanced and considered evaluation of Shackleton's paintings relative to the Group of Seven, relates to the theme of progress. The Group of Seven has come to symbolize our wilderness north, yet this is something of a misinterpretation of history. In fact, the Group of Seven followed in the wake of industrialization. Their travel sketches document a landscape already transformed by mining, logging and other industries. Many of the group's most iconic paintings capture a landscape already stripped of their trees. The barren hillsides, sumac stands, birch groves, lumber chutes and logging dams would have been viewed a century ago as progress.¹

We tend to glorify Canada's wide open spaces, although the vast majority of us live in large urban centres. In his essay about the Group of Seven, art curator Andrew Hunter ties our mythologizing of Canada's wilderness with First World War nationalism and the shifting reality that by the 1920s, Canada's population had become predominately urban. He writes:

Popular Canadian concepts of the 'north country' and wilderness have been largely generated from an urban perspective, a perspective that is based more on ideas than a direct experience of the landscape. These ideas have acted as an ideal, a projection of what we like to think this country is, a kind of façade that masks the true landscape, along with our problematic place within it.³



A century after Tom Thomson's death, Amy Shackleton has re-imagined what landscape painting can be. Her paintings depict city structures enveloped by trees. One hundred years on, her paintings grow out of Photoshop collages rather than the plein-air sketches associated with the Group of Seven. Yet her painterly mark, albeit more electric in colour, in acrylics not oils and made without brushes, looks back through art history and finds its ancestry in the direct painting urgency of Impressionism and European Expressionists.

In 1916 Thomson painted numerous oil sketches of the northern lights, each time struggling to capture the dancing aurora lights of the night sky. In Shackleton's *Bright Idea: New York + Costa Rica*, nature's wonders seem replaced by electric bursts of rainbow colour and fireworks. There are no dark skies in Shackleton's exhibition. Population pushes skyscrapers, bridges and scaffolding up, over and through the landscape. Acrylic and enamel paints are modern industrial products. Shackleton favours intense cobalt and phthalo blues, permanent greens, turquoise, magentas and cadmium hues. The ochres, siennas and umber earth tones traditionally used by landscape painters are gone.

Progress shows itself visually as a shift in emphasis. Today urban planners, environmentalists and real estate developers promote bringing nature into the cities. We often hear, "preserve the green space—don't pave it over." Shackleton describes, with optimism, her treed cityscapes as "urban nature." In contrast, picturing progress looked dramatically different a century earlier. In 1912, the ship *Titanic* carried a false fourth smokestack as an expression of its power, size and leading edge design. Similarly, industry was promoted through pictures of factories spewing pollution.

Progress was once expressed by conquering nature, today an increasing number of us seek to preserve it.

Shackleton's titles reveal each painting to be an amalgam of two or more disparate sites—usually one or more cities, juxtaposed against a desert, forest or mountain view. Despite their compound naming, each painting feels plausible enough. Seemingly, the iconic skyscraper motif with its grid of rectangular windows, is conceivable anywhere. In *Through the Roof: New York + California* apartments and scaffolding swing around a mountain landscape while yellow-orange scaffolding reaches up to glow against a blue sky. In *Go with the Flow: California + Croatia*, a freeway overpass cuts through the trees and buildings sprout from the mountainside.

Shackleton's double canvas *Change of Plans: New York + Alberta + Iceland* is interesting when considered against Tom Thomson's paintings of Tea Lake Dam in Algonquin Park. Going back further in history are the many painters who sought to capture the awe of Niagara Falls. Shackleton, like her precursors, contrasts the rush of water against human elements. Thomson shows water and logs corralled by the dam, men working and the water's current moving lines of floating logs. As per convention, most nineteenth century artists foregrounded Niagara Falls with enthusiastic fur traders, well dressed tourists, Natives, a campsite—sometimes—all of these. Through the actions of small figures, these artists intended us to imagine the scale and awe of nature. In contrast, Shackleton foregrounds her rushing water with bright orange scaffolding; scale is suggested through buildings in the background. Shackleton's painting generates its own energy, cobalt blue water pops against the bright orange structure.

DESERT SPRINGS (UTAH + LAS VEGAS)
2014; Acrylic and enamel on canvas; 60×90 in.

BRIGHT IDEA (NEW YORK + COSTA RICA)
2015; Acrylic and enamel on canvas; 30×45 in.

SURFACE TENSION (TORONTO + MUIR WOODS)
2014; Acrylic and enamel on canvas; 45×60 in.





Enamel paint lends the work shine, texture and presence. The double canvas panorama format gives the work movement.

Notably absent in all Shackleton's paintings are people, traffic and other living presences. Absence leaves space for projection; space, scale and time is ambiguous, its incongruencies go unnoticed. In *Change of Plans: New York + Alberta + Iceland* one recalls the 2013 Calgary flood, China's Three Gorges Dam project, or perhaps other events featuring crashing water. However specific Shackleton's titles, there remains enough ambiguity in each work to leave to audiences the task of decoding.

"Hewers of wood, drawers of water," is a clichéd phrase often cited in the ongoing debate about Canada's industrial and manufacturing future. Yet tradition continues to provide us our most recognizable symbols. Mounties in scarlet uniforms, traditional crafts, natural resources and industries, festivals, tourist attractions and Neo-Gothic Parliamentary buildings have all served to represent us. Shackleton's *LEEDscape* proposes an alternative vision. Her representation of Canada looks to the future. It is optimistic—even patriotic, in its promotion of the environment and progress.

The Great Canadian LEEDscape comprises of thirteen separate canvases (one for each province and territory). As with other works, canvases are large and painted with bold colours. Also, she has moved each building from its actual site and then transplanted it into a bucolic woodland or seaside landscape. There is a sense these buildings could reside anywhere. Perhaps even the proposition that someday they will.





THE GREAT CANADIAN LEED-SCAPE
2017; Acrylic and enamel on canvas;
13 canvases each 45 × 60 in., total length 53 ft.

From digital sketch to panoramic landscape, Shackleton's paintings glow with promise. Historian Simon Schama's words open this essay. In his influential book about landscape and culture, he demonstrates landscape is realized after it has been marked, explored and rationalized. Landscape in his words "is the work of the mind."⁴ The act of painting landscape gives a site presence. Painting landscape highlights what is valued and omits or glosses-over details that undermine the artist's vision. In Shackleton's case, "glossing-over" means the virtuoso paint pour or splash of colour. Like an architectural concept sketch, absence and ambiguity invites the viewer to project themselves into the scene and imagine the future. It is this very constructiveness of landscape painting that might be pondered further. Ultimately landscape painting calls us to think about our place in the world and imagine what is possible.

Endnotes

- 1 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Vintage Canada, 1996) 7.
- 2 Amy Shackleton, *Artist Statement: The Great Canadian LEEDscape*, 2017.
- 3 Andrew Hunter, "All That We Can't Leave Behind" in *The Group of Seven Project 1920–2005* (Ontario Association of Art Galleries, Toronto, 2010) 53.
- 4 Schama 7.

Artist Bio & Acknowledgements

Amy Shackleton grew up in Bowmanville. She graduated from York University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours degree in 2008. Amy has exhibited extensively across Canada and the United States. Her paintings adorn over one hundred private and corporate collections, including the Colart Collection, Facebook Canada and the University of Cincinnati. The VAC is the second host of her travelling exhibition, which will continue on to Maison du Développement Durable (Montreal) and THEMUSEUM (Kitchener). Amy currently paints in her studio in Oshawa. She is represented by Elaine Fleck Gallery in Toronto.

I would like to thank James Campbell for inviting me to present my work at the VAC—a gallery I have looked up to since I was a child. Thanks Todd Tremeer for your beautiful essay and carrying a “baker’s dozen” canvases to and from the third floor gallery. Thanks Sherri Helwig and Dionne Powlenzuk at the VAC for making this show possible and Jean-Michel Komarnicki for his expert photography. Also Elaine Fleck Gallery for organizing the traveling exhibition and Station Gallery for recommending me for an Ontario Arts Council grant. Last but not least, a special thanks to my family, friends and patrons who attended the exhibition and have supported me over the years—if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be where I am today!



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