

# *It's my antidote to modern life*<sup>1</sup>

Bill Jeffries

*... I think the boys work too hard up there at Queen's. ... it's better to take your time. A young fellow ... has lots of time, no need to rush through life. Take your time and you'll live longer.*<sup>2</sup>

The painting in "Take Your Time" surveys a range of subjects, each depicting a state of calmness. They are drawn from the expanding painting scene in British Columbia and the situations depicted constitute a local eye in the global storm of conspicuous freneticism – within art, within the artworld and outside of it as well. The scenarios in each have their own story, their own relation to theory, but collectively they remind viewers that human activity bypassing technology today occurs at about the same speed that it did 150, or 1500 years ago. The show's origin is in the art, but it is also my reaction to meeting so many people claiming to be 'really frazzed', saying they had 'no time'. Pushing franticness aside, "Take Your Time" explores what artists might create when 'painting modern life', yet not depicting the frantic. They sometimes reference leisure activity, but not exclusively; and some 'leisure' not in the exhibition, such as racing, is anything but slow. The depiction of 'the slow', here and now, yet conjuring a range of 'pasts', is the unifying element in this otherwise stylistically diverse exhibition.

Genre theory has long provided the organizational structure for clarifying cultural subject areas, as well as providing the critical justification for repetition of both form and content in art and literature; within any genre there is no choice but to repeat material. The golden ages of both 17th-century Dutch, and late 19th-century French painting, elevated the depiction of leisure to the status of a separate genre.

There is no genre of 'taking your time' today; this exhibition sought to ask the question of whether there should be one, and if there were, what kinds of motifs might be represented, and repeated. Vancouver's reputation as a 'laid back place' should provide the basis for art produced here to be in the forefront of what might be termed a grammatology of slowing down. Such an art would invoke the ever-ineffable nature of time and the equally mysterious way that the past, in art and the rest of life, can push its way forward into the present moment, as it has pushed itself into each work in this show.

Artists have pictured leisure for centuries, initially confined to the amusements of an aristocratic class elevated above the idea of labour, therefore not having to work, and later spreading to the Dutch bourgeoisie, and then, with Manet and the Impressionists, to the masses, by which time the contrast with the then-emerging modernities was not only sharper, but more meaningful. A luncheon on the grass matters more when contrasted with mass production, 'steam and speed', and the ways that leisure could represent, and be, a form of wealth. That contrast is sharper now than ever before: hence this exhibition. In Vancouver art leisure does have a history; it was embraced

1 Julian Germain's thought from his book *For every minute you are angry, you lose sixty seconds of happiness*, the elderly subject of which was Germain's 'antidote to modern life'.

2 From Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Miss Judith Heame* (1953), Penguin Books, 1959, 12.

by Charles H. Scott in his beach paintings, and then went 'back to the land' at Babyland in Roberts Creek in 1968 where Mick Henry set up what became *Slug Pottery*, enshrining the spirit of the slowest moving land mollusc, which also became Gerry Gilbert's signature animal. Another local call to slowing down came in the early 1980s when Dan Graham reprised his 1969 work *Lax/Relax* in Vancouver, virtually begging the audience to slow down with him.

Speed has been an ongoing subject in art, if not a separate genre, so why shouldn't speed's opposite have a more prominent place in the discourse of art history? If the corollary of speed is mechanization, their inter-dependence is at the core of Paul Virilio's studies in dromology, his science of speed. Dromology never caught on as a descriptor, so the discourse around the acceleration-related phenomena that are the root cause of everything from over-population and climate change, to excess resource use and the pollution it causes will continue to take place outside of the context of dromological discourse – each issue/problem is treated in isolation even though we know about the connectivity of global systems. Art's resistance to 'dromospheric hegemony' is enmeshed of many works critiquing progress, not all of it depicting slowness.<sup>3</sup> The time has perhaps come for more exhibitions (and more theory) looking at ways that 'taking one's time' can address, or help avert, the coming predicted environmental catastrophes. Leisure is, of course, not always benign: if we assume that idiots in gigantic power-boats or jet-skis are in fact enjoying 'their leisure', the inconsistencies are apparent.<sup>4</sup> We question accelerated culture now, but so did those present at the onslaught: in 1910 a member of the British House of Lords, "for whom the modern world was a most unpleasant rumour", wondered if we were facing the abyss. Others however, in the same pre-war years, were adapting: Churchill wrote his wife "Everything tends toward catastrophe. I am interested, geared up and happy."<sup>5</sup> Churchill's comment perhaps answers the question of how we, today, cope and adapt to constant change and acceleration.

## S L O W   P A I N T

*Take your time and do it right; Leave yourself some room to fall;  
Sometimes you've got to give it up; If you want to have it all.*<sup>6</sup>

One unresolved, unstated thesis of this exhibition is that there might be a difficult to articulate difference between the depiction of time in painting, and what viewers perceive with photographs, film, the novel, and day-to-day human experience. I can not imagine organizing a show of photographs on the same basis as this one and I wonder if the distinction may relate to Pierre Boulez's notions of 'smooth time' and 'grooved – or striated – time'.<sup>7</sup> Grooved time has a beat, as do films, novels and photographs. Painted time is smooth and lacks a pre- or post-history. In the absence of that beat, that striation, one is left with slow time, with the *longue durée*.

3 Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 1986 (1977), Semiotext(e), New York City.

4 "Take Your Time" fell between the two incarnations of the show "Speed Limits", coming to the Canadian Centre for Architecture in September 2010 after showing at the Wolfsonian in Miami Beach. The book of that show is an important and thorough companion to the complexities, and to this exhibition's questioning of speed.

5 These quotes are from the 2009 BBC2 series 'The Making of Modern Britain', as reported by Nancy Banks-Smith in the *Guardian Weekly*, November 11, 2009, 37. The 'anthology' section in "Speed Limits" (previous note) has many examples of modernity's reception.

6 From: *Take Your Time And Do It Right*, lyrics by Chris Whiteley, available on the CD *Dear* sung by Jenny Whiteley.

7 See Gilles Deleuze, "Occupy Without Counting: Boulez, Proust and Time" in *Two Regimes of Madness*, MIT Press, 2006, 292.

**Rebecca Brewer's** allusive paintings thrive on their mystery, as well as what she sees as their ethos; the ethos and mystery are both enveloped in her fluid mode of figuration. Her figures are integrated with their landscape, perhaps scavenging on beaches, or doing nothing; ideas about their activities have to come from her viewers. The semi-diaphanous players, in their other-worldly, ambiguous settings, which sometimes appear to be intertidal and not unlike the mood (and palette) in much of Carol Wainio's painting, seem like wanderers, as if they are on a hunting and gathering mission in which each is on his or her own, with no one communicating with anyone else. Like Millet's gleaners or those in Agnes Varda's film *The Gleaners and I*, her people seem intent of finding 'what's left'. Varda's message was not just about the prevention of waste and its relation to sustainability, she also makes it clear that life is much more interesting for those engaged in hunting and gathering, and that is, in part, what makes Varda's, and Brewer's, people interesting to us – they seem to be more engaged with life than those who have given up the hunt.

**Ron den Daas** is an artist inspired by social and environmental issues. His painting 'LIFEGUARD' depicts a well-known piece of Vancouver's 'environment', 3rd beach in Stanley Park. Den Daas says it's in a "highly described style", one that is photo-realist in the foreground and then fading to semi-expressionist and slightly out of focus as one's eye proceeds to the background. He uses the language of 'realistic' painting to question the emphasis Western society places on its own perception of reality. The clearly defined gaze of the viewer reflects the central positioning of the 'lifeguard' who sits in an elevated position of control, while Vancouverites enjoy a sunny day at the beach, 'taking their time'. Many environmentally-oriented artists paint realistically, but few combine den Daas's oblique commentary with his 'pulling focus' realism. On the surface, his painting shows us a typical summer day in Vancouver, with leisure at the core of what McLean's Magazine once headlined as "the Vancouver Way"; beyond that he is asking questions about power relations, governmental oversight (who does the guard really 'guard'?) and the way that his concerns can be interwoven in what has been described as his 'interest in exploring the effects classical influences have had on contemporary culture'.

Whatever the fate of the 'book as artifact' may be, it will remain the case that the time required to read something is time that might be used for other activities; we have a choice, to read, or do something else. **Colleen Heslin's** two paintings, 'Franny and Zooey' and 'The Way of the Pilgrim' are titled after the books her subjects are reading. They are reciprocal because in 'Franny and Zooey' the author has Franny reading 'The Way of the Pilgrim' – it is the book that she slowly tells Lane she is reading just before she faints. Heslin's paintings capture a stillness and calm that is not unlike that in a Vermeer. She portrays young women having "a room of their own" reading a cult-status book that can claim to have influenced many when they were at an impressionable point in their lives. In the context of a university gallery exhibition these paintings say to viewers, among other things, 'read books'. The reception and impact of Salinger's book is interwoven into Heslin's meditations on the liberation of the self via her picturing young people who are rejecting the received wisdom offered by those around them – and, following on from the Salinger story, developing their own critical abilities.

**Damian Moppett's** painting *1815/1962 Self Portrait*, derived from his film/video *1815/1962 Self Portrait* made in 2003, in which he plays a mid-19th-century Canadian trapper. He is resting, examining his toe. It is a Beckett-like moment, waiting, as if slowly sculpting himself into one of

the 3-D forms that were at the core of his practice from 1995 to 2001. *1815/1962* links the past with the 'present' of his parents' and Anthony Caro's generation by referencing a Caro from 1962 in the film, as if a Caro, not shown in this painting, were a normal element in 19th-century Canada, or that an animal trap presaged a Caro. This particular moment is part of a story-line from the film/video, but as a 'still' from that work it freezes what might have been trivial into a monumental gesture, recreating a 'drop-out' moment that itself summarized the coming, hippie-ish state of the world in 1962. The mood of Moppett's paintings made after the *1815/1962* film/video is not just that of some unrealizable, mythic past, but of a slowing, a desirable state of relaxation and an escape from urban freneticism.

**Heather Passmore's** two paintings in the exhibition use salvaged mattress cover cloth as their 'canvas'. Her subjects are 'out of time' and are the exception to my idea that everyone in the show is 'enjoying' their calm. She creates a play between the two-dimensional patterning in scavenged mattress covers and three-dimensional scenes that I initially assumed were passed-out drunkards, hovering slightly above a gravity that didn't quite hold them down. Her subjects are in fact painted and drawn after pre-1950 crime scene photographs, mainly in New York – if they feel like cross between Weegee's New York photographs and the settings in Edmund Wilson's *Upstate* there is a reason for that. Passmore's critique of class structures has resulted in a form of *arte povera* based on the discarded mattresses found in Vancouver's lanes – her stretchers are also made from salvaged wood. Her paintings derive from scenes of poverty that likely fed the violence documented in the amateur photos, in which the corporate, mass-produced paisley-ish mattress patterns read as a mono-dimensionality through which otherwise lost personal histories, sometimes with a mattress in the murder room, are viewed. The tagging on 'Mattress Painting #1' was on the fabric when she liberated it from its status as 'garbage'.

The other work in the show that explores picture-plane flattening effects is that of **Ben Reeves**. Reeves' portraits of leisure-conscious smokers are sourced from photos posted on the Web, so their smoke is not just second-hand in public health terms, it is steps removed from first-hand experience. His magma-like clouds of particulates are harmless paint blobs, even if the 'smoke' obliterates the subject, and his/her personal identity as well – they are smoker first, philosopher, say, second. Reeves exaggerates smoke as a phenomenon, if not its effects; his smoke clouds are like outsized cancerous blobs externalized. Of the four portraits in the show, two are holding cigarettes, one a pipe and one is blowing smoke rings, and in all four the blobs of gray paint simultaneously undermine the perception of depth in the painting while also creating another signifier of depth. The 'smoke' both flattens and deepens, a Necker Cube quality emerging that virtually forces viewers to question how pictures actually work. Like carcinoma in the lung, Reeves' 'smoke' has splattered itself, seemingly uncontrolled, like a cancer undergoing metastasis, spreading, escaping the picture frame and multiplying both itself and the levels at which one can perceive the picture.

Much of **Gary Pearson's** painting derives from scenes that he sees in his travels. His painting in the exhibition, 'Come Back Later', is like an updated Degas' *Absinthe Drinker*, a film still, or a quotidian moment from 21st century life; its actual source is a scene from a newspaper photograph that Pearson saw during his stay in Sydney, Australia, in 2005. The title, painted across the top of the picture, speaks to many possible narratives: to the viewer, as if to say, 'don't give me just the average of five seconds, but come back, look again', as well as saying to

a waiter or someone trying to pick one of the women up, that they might try again another time. "Coming back later" is what all the basic themes in the history of art do – they never go away, but perform their own version of the myth of the eternal return. Pearson has said that he paints life's drift; the dryness of his Ruscha-like texts, with updated late-19th century 'Parisian' subject matter, replicate the nature of repetition within a genre – we 'come back later' in perpetuity when working within a given area of art making, here the café.

**Neil Wedman's** *Cowboy Dances* paintings are closely linked, in their form and monochrome methodology, to much of his other recent work, especially the flying saucer paintings and prints. The elements in these works are barely differentiated from each other pictorially – the subtlety becoming a test for the viewer, some of whom, for instance, never saw the picket fence in the work *Payne's Grey Nocturne* in the exhibition. Wedman revisits the monochrome field that has been exploited by other Vancouver artists, notably Ian Wallace, but with image content that is carefully modulated like something out of a Whistler or a Pinkham Ryder painting. The slowed-down pace of these works is of a piece with Wedman's practice over the past twenty years, with the stillness of séances and empty film sets being just two of his earlier subjects. These works ask 'how little information can one use and still convey something of the scenario in the painting'? As Wedman has said, he uses "solid colour fields where, under the slow, contemplative gaze of the viewer, nostalgic figures of cowboys ... would emerge." His 'fog' beautifully references our inability to escape from cultural amnesia, through which we see the past dimly, if at all.

Neither relaxation nor 'taking time out' are a 'solution' to global environmental problems *per se*; they are, rather, a sign, a suggestion that it is possible to exist within the global collectivity, doing less damage than we do when we consume needlessly, and run around like the proverbial chicken. Each of these artists examines the body language of human form as part of the phenomenology of our occupying both public and private space in the current image-clogged, digitized, sociological moment. They show us things that neither photographs nor YouTube can: time that is both frozen and fluid, space that is part of the time that the picture constructs, and moody, invented micro-worlds. The paintings are 'now', but what takes place in them is in an indeterminate 'now', one that doesn't come with a given year attached; they resist labels, being neither modernist nor postmodernist art, while mining the pictorial language of the tension between the two isms. The admonishment to 'take your time' says "time is not money, use your time as you like, and be less efficient when it comes to doing the world's bidding – the world will not notice." If the thesis of this exhibition was to examine the overlaps between and among an otherwise disparate group of works by seeing them through the frame of 'slowing down' and leisure, the title also seized a chance to say, 'don't rush, take your time', maybe we can make difference, maybe we can muffle the sound of the beat of modernity's drum, maybe it's time for 'slowology', perhaps as a parallel to the 'slow food' and 'slow city' movements.