

# MAGAZINE



National Gallery of Canada Musée des beaux-arts du Canada

## An Interview with Ian Wallace: Far from the Usual Portrait of Canada

By [Antonio Aragon](#) on December 22, 2015



Ian Wallace. Photo © Krisdy Shindler

“There is this idea of the magnificent space of the Canadian landscape that has been turned into a poetic metaphor,” said Vancouver-based artist Ian Wallace in an interview with NGC Magazine.

His point of reference is the Group of Seven – in particular, Lawren S. Harris' quintessential icebergs. They have been floating above the surface of the collective imagination as the sublime representation of Canada for generations. With his work, Wallace has tried to delve into this notion to uncover, present and re-present what lies beneath.

“As an artist you look at the history of Canadian art, and there’s almost no representation of the modern city,” he remarks. “I am interested in putting into the discussion what comprises the new landscape of Canada: one that recognizes the reality of both our urban and natural sceneries.”

Wallace, born in Shoreham, England, in 1943, is one of Canada’s most respected artists, having contributed to the development of this country’s contemporary art scene for over forty years. “There have been many different types of art projects produced since Harris,” he says. “People visiting Canada from another part of the world may look at my work and perhaps turn their attention away from the usual portrait of the mystic north, ‘The Great White North.’”



**Ian Wallace, Detail from *Abstract Paintings I–XII (The Financial District)* [2010], chromogenic print and acrylic on canvas, 244 x 183 cm each. Gift of the artist, Vancouver, 2014. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © NGC**

Wallace’s striking photo-lamination canvases entitled *Abstract Paintings I – XII (The Financial District)* [2010] exemplify a breaking away from the geography of the Canadian Shield. These twelve images, each over two metres in height, present photographs taken in the busy downtown core of Toronto’s financial district. The entire installation comprises monumental corporate architecture that the artist defines as the “new sublime” of the urban Canadian landscape.

Last year, he generously donated the whole collection to the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), where it will be on view until March 2016. Josée Drouin-Brisebois, NGC Curator of Contemporary Art, said she is amazed at how much power the installation has. “It’s also about the experience, the relationship with the buildings and the sky, and how people interact with these spaces. It is a beautiful study,” she notes.

“In terms of the scope and the significance of the gift,” says Drouin-Brisebois, “it is one of the biggest donations in contemporary art we have received from an artist.” *Abstract Paintings I – XII (The Financial District)* complements 30 works by Ian Wallace already in the national collection, which include photographs, paintings, drawings and a collage.



Ian Wallace, Detail from *Abstract Paintings I–XII (The Financial District)* [2010], chromogenic print and acrylic on canvas, 244 x 183 cm each. Gift of the artist, Vancouver, 2014. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © NGC

A teacher at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design from 1972 to 1998, Ian Wallace’s work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally. He received the Governor General’s Award in Visual Arts in 2004 and the Molson Prize in 2009. Wallace spoke to NGC Magazine about his practice, his attraction to the modern city and the representational aspect of his photography.

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**NGC Magazine: What is your muse?**

*Ian Wallace:* I am inspired by just the challenge of trying to make a meaningful work of art. It’s not easy to make something that is going to be permanent and meaningful to people a hundred years from now.

**NGCM: You were invited to participate in the Commissioning Program of The Power Plant in Toronto in 2010. This invitation led to the creation of *Abstract Paintings I – XII*. How did you choose your theme?**

*IW:* When an artist is asked to participate in an exhibition, he is entering into a very specific context. It was an opportunity for me to take up the challenge and do an interesting piece that would communicate to the audience. As a Vancouver artist, I wanted to speak to Toronto from the other side of the country.



Ian Wallace, Detail from *Abstract Paintings I–XII (The Financial District)* [2010], chromogenic print and acrylic on canvas, 244 x 183 cm each. Gift of the artist, Vancouver, 2014. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © NGC

**NGCM:** Why did you choose to work around the intersections of Wellington and Bay Streets in Toronto’s financial district?

*IW:* I was in Toronto trying to come up with a concept for the exhibition, and I found a tourist brochure. It had the financial district marked out with the streets that comprise it. I realized: that’s my theme! In 2008, there was convulsion in the markets and in the financial economy worldwide. So I thought this was an interesting opportunity to look at that theme through the architecture of the city’s financial district.

**NGCM:** These are streets that people in Toronto walk through on a regular basis. How is your gaze different?

*IW:* I think that different people bring many different perspectives: from the CEO looking out over the buildings from the top, to the delivery person and the doorman at the bottom, to the shopper, to the taxi driver. The city is not any one thing. It is many different things, different relationships.



Ian Wallace, detail from *Abstract Paintings I–XII (The Financial District)* [2010], chromogenic print and acrylic on canvas, 244 x 183 cm each. Gift of the artist, Vancouver, 2014. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © NGC

**NGCM:** Was there any particular moment that stood out for you while taking the initial photographs?

*IW:* One of my favourite scenes happened in one of these buildings. There was this businessman. He was not in the office, not behind the desk, not behind the computer, but alone trying to make an important decision over his cellphone in the empty lobby of a major building. That was very telling.

**NGCM:** Why did you donate this collection, and why to the National Gallery of Canada?

*IW:* For me, this is a public work. It is an artist's duty, or a public statement, to give it to the people in a context where it can be properly cared for. I didn't want it to be broken up. I wanted the whole piece to hang together as a panorama that would be seen by generations into the future. I am proud and thankful to the directors and curators of the National Gallery for accepting it and preparing it for installation. I am going to try to make it out to Ottawa to see it. It's definitely worth a look.