

John Kissick: Painter, Thinker, Scribe

A feature from the Winter 2010–11 issue of *Canadian Art*
by Pete Smith



"Painter, thinker, scribe" by Pete Smith, Winter 2010, pp. 114-117

On a hot evening in June, the [Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery](#) is a full house of poshly dressed people—except for the artists in the crowd, who stand notably apart. Some wear shorts and sandals; others, jeans and a T-shirt. Many artists are in attendance; this is especially significant, as the show is taking place in a venue more than an hour outside of Toronto. Few city artists venture beyond an area-code border, let alone two. But tonight, a significant contingent has bussed or car-pooled in.

A woman wearing an expensive-looking draped smock affair delivers an opening board-of-directors address to get the ball rolling. The curator then steps up to provide a summary of the work on view, and to express her interest in the project. There is a brief pause while the artist moves forward. Tonight he's batting cleanup. [John Kissick](#) is a smooth public speaker, but he seems a little nervous. This is, after all, a survey of ten years of his work, and he is clearly overwhelmed by the show of support. It is a moment that artists dream of: a public acknowledgement of their contribution to art's perpetually itinerant dialogue. While actors fantasize about Oscars, artists fantasize about survey retrospectives. The tasteful applause at the end of Kissick's oration means that it is now okay to reload the wine glasses.

A few weeks later, I visit Kissick at his studio in Elora, Ontario. Located on the second floor of the Elora Centre for the Arts, the studio is surrounded by small, local businesses. As I walk in, I see that Kissick has several paintings on the go. The floor is littered with brushes and big jars of paint. Colourful splatters are layered deeply throughout. They are marks that tell their own story. How many paintings has this floor absorbed? How many failures scraped and heaped onto its surface? Colours precisely mixed, diluted, smeared

and ultimately cast aside are buried under constant shifts of new decisions and impulses, bearing witness to both triumph and collapse along the way.

The Kitchener exhibition is the first national travelling survey of Kissick's work—and it is high time. Despite the reputation that he has garnered in this country, the artist remains somewhat underappreciated. Although he has exhibited his work extensively in Canada since the early 1990s, it is only in the last ten years—since moving back to Toronto from the U.S., where he taught at Pennsylvania State University—that Kissick has emerged as a notable figure in Canadian art. He is a painter, and also a writer, an educator and an administrator. In all these capacities, he has helped to shape contemporary Canadian art. How does he reconcile the diversity of this expanded practice with the pre-existing conventions of cultural production, cultural commentary and artist education? Kissick's model harks back to older traditions of the artist as intellectual, but it also establishes a new mould for Canadian artists, particularly painters, in the early 21st century.

But first, some backstory on my own connection to Kissick. In the fall of 2004, I decided to go to graduate school. I had been showing my work in Toronto for three or four years, had garnered attention here and there, and had a relatively solid understanding of what I was about as an artist. As someone who identified himself as a Toronto painter and wanted to stay in the country, I felt there was really only one choice for graduate school: the [MFA Program at the University of Guelph](#), which boasted an impressive list of former faculty such as [Margaret Priest](#), [David Moos](#), [Tony Scherman](#) and [Ron Shuebrook](#). At the time of my application, [Fastwürms](#), [Robert Enright](#), [Monica Tap](#), [James Carl](#), [Susan Dobson](#), [Ben Reeves](#), [Suzy Lake](#), [Christian Giroux](#), [Jean Maddison](#), [Laurel Woodcock](#), [Sandra Rechico](#), [Arthur Renwick](#) and [Will Gorlitz](#) were on staff. John Kissick was the director of the program, a position that he still maintains. He was also my advisor, along with Tap and Gorlitz. I feel no conflict singing Kissick's praises; he was one of the principal reasons that I chose to attend Guelph. Getting to know such people is part of the whole idea of graduate school.



Photo: John Kissick, 2004. Photo: John Kissick, 2004.

John Kissick is a painter, writer, and educator. He is currently a professor at the University of Guelph. He has exhibited his work extensively in Canada and the United States. He is also a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and the Canadian Artists' Society.

John Kissick is a painter, writer, and educator. He is currently a professor at the University of Guelph. He has exhibited his work extensively in Canada and the United States. He is also a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and the Canadian Artists' Society.

John Kissick is a painter, writer, and educator. He is currently a professor at the University of Guelph. He has exhibited his work extensively in Canada and the United States. He is also a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and the Canadian Artists' Society.

John Kissick is a painter, writer, and educator. He is currently a professor at the University of Guelph. He has exhibited his work extensively in Canada and the United States. He is also a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and the Canadian Artists' Society.

In addition to its faculty, Guelph boasted a list of accomplished alumni. The headliner was painter [David Urban](#), who had emerged in mid-1990s Toronto to early acclaim. Urban's success pretty much gave youngish (white) men permission to make big, abstract paintings again. Trumpeting a return to sincerity (in a manner similar to the period's literary culture), Urban's work and uber-intelligent rhetoric opened a fissure in the discourse of anti-modernism, which had a stranglehold on the language surrounding serious painting at the time. The art establishment (and Power Ball crowd) in this town was clearly smitten. They had a new king, and they crowned him with record speed. Toronto painters, however, were decidedly less sure. Urban's generational peers were split; indeed, his rhetoric as a painter invites such division. Urban's work solicits a selective return to modernist values, and while he has not been alone in this proposition—either here or abroad—he was among the first to take the plunge.

This is the backdrop for Kissick's early work. The acclaim his abstractions garnered placed them in league with Urban's neo-modernism (Gary Michael Dault called Kissick "an unbuttoned expressionist"). From 2003 onward, however, Kissick's work begins to present a challenge to the modernist legacy. It gets pulpy and more physical. Bright comic-book colours and shapes collide with muddy, abstract-expressionist forms and gestures. The works are far from unwavering structural and graphic certainties; collage-like, they display doubt about the foundation of painting, asking timely and important questions. In 2003, Kissick's paintings start to brim with a longing for an unmediated painting experience, tempered by an awareness of where abstract tropes have ended up—as IKEA fabrics and as paintings on the walls of Super 8 motel rooms. Through their mashed, paraphrased motifs, his paintings suggest that wanting to believe is not the same as believing; once you know that Santa Claus doesn't exist, can you ever wait for him to come down the chimney? With their vibrant and joyful exuberance, Kissick's paintings show that skepticism is a mindset apart from cynicism.

Between the time I began graduate school and the time I finished, the Guelph MFA program took on an enhanced profile in the Toronto art scene. The term "Guelph Mafia" became common, and Guelphies were suddenly everywhere. [Kristan Horton](#), [Martin Golland](#), [Katie Bethune-Leamen](#), [Derek Sullivan](#), [Melanie Authier](#), [Maura Doyle](#), [Zin Taylor](#), [Adam David Brown](#), [Sarah Cale](#), [John Eisler](#) and [Sara Graham](#) all emerged as artists of note. It would be wrong to give Kissick all the credit for their work, but as the quasi-Godfather of this mob (although Tony Scherman does a better Marlon Brando), Kissick is part of the story. During his tenure at the [School of Fine Art and Music](#), Guelph has accrued not only an impressive collection of graduates but also an impressive faculty. As director, Kissick leads his faculty by example. He paints. He writes. He teaches. He administers. He is the busiest person I've ever met, and yet he still finds time to drive two hours on a cold February morning to open his studio to a former student. He then drives an hour-and-a-half to be the critique examiner for another former student's first fourth-year sessional appointment. In that critique, by the way, he was just how I remember him: smart, funny, tough and generous. He bought lunch afterward.

There is a long tradition of painters teaching. Simone Peterzano was a pupil of Titian. Peterzano taught Caravaggio. Ingres studied with David. Pierre-Narcisse Guérin taught

both Géricault and Delacroix. Klee and Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus. Albers studied at Bauhaus, then taught Rauschenberg and Twombly at Black Mountain College, and Eva Hesse at Yale. Hans Hoffmann taught Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers and Lee Krasner. Lee Krasner taught Jackson Pollock in their living room. In the final decades of the 20th century, after the influx of speculative capital and the birth of “art market” culture, painting found itself more separated from teaching than ever before. Traditionally, these component parts work in tandem. In Canada, where art is attached to fewer capital interests than in other countries, many artists teach. It is an environment where artists are expected to think, and where serious painting has always been an intellectual activity. John Kissick is a painter who teaches. This is what defines him.

Back at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery in June, only a few people linger as the evening draws to a close. I sit on a bench running calculations about filled wine glasses, elapsed time and the drive home, while Kissick talks to a young artist nearby. He spots me and ushers the artist over for an introduction: Jeff to Pete, Pete to Jeff, alum to grad student, grad student to alum. Kissick supervises the exchange. Jeff’s world is looking up.