

PHILIPPE BLANCHARD

Inbetweening

Nick Novak Fellowship Exhibition

October 21 – November 19,
2016

Artist Talk and
Opening Reception
Friday, October 21
6:00-9:00pm



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ELI HOWEY

Waking Gates

Don Phillips Scholarship Exhibition

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UNSETTLING PRESUMPTIONS

BY PEARL VAN GEEST

Eli Howey and Philippe Blanchard play with the conventions and language of cinema and animation to scramble and prod the usual understandings of time, space and hierarchies of belonging, place and process. They undermine structures we take for granted through subtle and more obvious acts of rebellion carried out through various means: from an upending of the usual hierarchies in the process of the making of the work, to unsettling presumptions of idealized beauty, to depictions of gentle but deliberate deeds of defiance.

In Blanchard's work the frames of traditional, linear storyboards are stacked, merged, cut up and reassembled in ways that play with the usual business of animation to make inventive and unexpected combinations. *Inbetweening*, the title of his exhibition—and the philosophical orientation behind his explorations during the Open Studio residency—is a cheeky take on a process he knows well, having spent five years working for a small animation company. *Inbetweening*, as is usually carried out in the world of animation, is the process whereby intermediate frames are generated between the key frames of an action, so that the motion from beginning to end runs smoothly through time. *Inbetweeners* take the key frames that are drawn by senior animators and work to fill the space in between them with frames that incrementally move the action forward. Blanchard draws attention to this transitional space and process, reversing the preference given to the key drawings, the beginning and the end—and by extension, sending up the hierarchical arrangement of labour.

Without the accustomed demarcations of temporal or spatial borders, Blanchard creates an open and perhaps even more animated transitional space, one that allows for a continual shifting and reforming of



the movements between the cut-out shapes, framed by Blanchard's scissors, in his wall collage and videos. This approach leaves as much up to the viewer to fill in the blanks as it does to the artist to render a story.

But it is a story full of bold marks and vibrant colours that revels in the open-ended process of Blanchard's take on inbetweening. It's a kind of hyper and exuberant inbetweening. The action happens in the making as well as the presentation, and in the painterly and expressive marks that Blanchard uses to further animate the prints and installation. It is playful, experiential and improvisational.

Time in animation is linear—the sequence of frames move from one to another over a period of time. In the stand-alone print *Variable Mask*, Blanchard challenges this chronological motion—making, what he calls “vertical time,”¹ by printing layers, each with forms and openings surrounding a face-like shape, on top of each other. The usually distinct frames are in no particular order; the shapes and openings line up in an unpremeditated design on the paper's surface, leaving what becomes the negative and positive (or supportive and active) space up to chance.

In its haphazard, unpremeditated, non-prescribed and animated qualities, Blanchard's work recalls Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters, who made room-sized improvisations, or Jean Arp who, in some of his “chance collages,” would drop paper shapes onto a large sheet of paper and glue them where they fell. Even the Dadaists had their rules, rejecting Schwitters for his affiliation with expressionism, which was, to them, too hopelessly romantic. While the Dadaists were reacting to the shattering of the promise of rationalism and progress wrought by World War I, the anti-commercialization of

art that was part of the movement has contemporary resonance. Preeminent conceptual artist Gerald Ferguson also gave precedence to chance in his frottage paintings of coils of garden hoses, street drain covers, clothes lines and other everyday things. Ferguson used serial printmaking techniques to deliberately and resolutely downplay the “hand of the artist.” If Blanchard is the inheritor of these ideas, he mixes them with a dose of expressionistic brushwork, putting intimacy, the body and physical action into the mix, avoiding and undercutting any prescribed process or hierarchy that might come overtly or covertly from any source.

Even the printmaking process itself is subtly undermined in small ways that nonetheless align themselves with the self-deprecation, humour and irreverence that runs through *Inbetweening*. Things are slightly off: the paper is not the quality usually associated with fine art prints; Blanchard deliberately mixes only small amounts of each colour so that the exact replication traditionally required for a proper print edition is likely to fail; and the finished prints are cut-up and reassembled. Blanchard isn’t, however, nonchalant about the level of skill, knowledge, craftsmanship, and commitment necessary to work in the medium. He smiles when he says it was a good thing a training stipend was included as part of the residency; being “a bit of a latecomer” to printmaking he had a lot to learn about the process. His large stacks of screenprints attest to the amount of labour and commitment required to create work that appears playful and spontaneous. The metaphor of “in-between” runs through the work in small and larger ways as Blanchard improvises with materials, process and presentation.

Eli Howey’s *Waking Gates* also alerts us to the value of the “in-between,” as a space in and of itself and of passageways between the spaces and places laid out in Howey’s multi-plate copper etchings, presented here in the form of large-scale comic book pages. The spaces in Howey’s pictures are metaphorical, metaphysical, psychic, psychological and spiritual as much as they are depictions of spaces and places that we recognize in the world. Even the recognizable ones, while familiar, are often spaces that are overlooked, marginal or considered off-limits. To Howey, however, they are sites of personal experience, contemplation and poetry—poetry from which the wordless and open narratives in the etchings arise.

The usually firm boundaries between worlds become tenuous in Howey’s visual stories, but ordinarily we don’t traverse them; our movements are curtailed not only by convention and assumptions, but also by busyness

and haste and the general volume drowning out other voices. Howey, though, “wants to experience the fast-paced city in a slow-paced way,” and we see the artist, in a frame of *Move Through Walls*, sitting next to a fence with a friend, where they “were not supposed to be.” The fence, instead of completely enclosing the off-limit space, simply ended, but you had to walk right up to it to know. “We get used to these things,” Howey says, “property, fences and locks are an externalization of capitalism”.²

Objects can mark these borders but they can also be invisible, psychological frontiers imposed upon us that shape what we do—and don’t do. Imposed upon us by the state and capitalism, but also maintained by our collective behaviour. We note when someone defies these boundaries and our suspicions are aroused. With equal parts wonder and defiance, Howey enters these forbidden spaces. While on a personal existential search for “my place in the world and things to be thankful for,” Howey’s trespasses also become metaphoric and symbolic political acts.

Loaded symbols add tension to the stories: objects with potential such as knives and lighters, whose activation, although suspended for the moment in the story, could have any number of consequences. There is a disquieting edge. In Philip Pullman’s classic, *The Subtle Knife*, cuts, openings and nicks allow the movement of beings to pass from one world to another with both promising and dire consequences. The knife in Pullman’s story is able to cut any material—physical or spiritual—and even the fabric between parallel universes.

In Howey’s prints, the words of plants are transmitted on this parallel frequency. While tuned in, they call to us. “Pssst,” the call comes from a branch. “Husssssshhhhh,” the needles on a pine bough intone together. “Leave us be.” They talk in our language and the concrete itself talks in theirs. Anything is possible in the stories depicted in Howey’s etchings. The limits to our perception, understanding and the spaces that we traverse, Howey seems to suggest, are in part self-imposed.

In other panels, Howey draws things such as air conditioners, pipes, sewer grates and blocked-in windows, things so commonplace and utilitarian that they usually disappear into the urban landscape. At first Howey just photographed these items over and over again during their exploration and documentation of the urban environment, not sure what held their fascination. What these things share in common, Howey realized, besides being aesthetically pleasing, is that they function as passageways, as mediators between spaces.



The in-between can be a transformative space. In *Hesitating Between Worlds*, Howey drew upon a trip to a friend's cottage, taken to fulfill a desire to swim and center themselves. Even there, Howey relates, they "felt the same feeling but bigger—that it is still colonized land. It is stolen and you are in it." While we can break down certain boundaries, Howey maintains, "no matter what you are doing you are still interacting with the same things." Howey seeks to "position myself in the right way in my mind." It's a very contemporary problem—finding one's place in the world, searching for a home however one might conceive of it—and trying to live in it with integrity and awareness. Loaded symbols are etched into this print as well, but this time, in the example of the plant drawn with precise detail in the top panels, one doesn't immediately associate it with danger or potential violence. In fact, the delicate beauty of this plant, the water hemlock, disguises a potent toxicity.

In Howey's visual narratives nothing is quite what it seems—yet each thing, plant or tree is drawn with precision and specificity. Howey draws from life and trained themselves to draw each species of tree and plant by studying and drawing them repeatedly until able to draw them by memory—the eye becoming the mind's eye and their hand confident in the lines and shapes rendered.

Repeated over and over again, the act of drawing something becomes a memory stored in the flesh as much as it is a mental image. Drawing is an act of reverent intensity, a way to commit to paper the relationship of the parts of something to the whole of it, another space between, this time between the observer and the observed.

(continued overleaf)

It is a way to mark the edges and boundaries between surfaces and planes that shift along with our viewpoint and moment in time. It is an act as much related to touch as it is to vision—the eye traces the edges and at the same moment the hand marks these traces on the drawing surface and the form emerges from this interaction.

Howey depicts time by how much space is given to something, using a language familiar to the close-ups, establishing shots, medium shots and camera angles of film. In turn, they use framing “to pull apart space,” moving in and through emotional, industrial and natural space.

Howey takes us into these places, slipping through barriers into spaces assumed to be off limits. The Virtue of Stillness is paradoxically fluid, a parallel notion to the current of symbolic potential danger and uneasiness that moves beneath much of their chosen imagery. But there is beauty and wonder as well. The worlds Howey creates are complex and immersive. They draw attention to all that happens while we don’t watch, all that slips beneath, between and through the world as apprehended and delineated by our perception and capitalist structures. Their visual poetry and open narratives challenge and disrupt assumptions, perhaps awakening the viewer to a change in perspective.

¹ Blanchard, Philippe. Conversation with the author. 15 Aug. 2016. (All Blanchard quotes from this conversation).

² Howey, Eli. Conversation with the author. 6 Aug. 2016. (All Howey quotes from this conversation).

Artist Bios

PHILIPPE BLANCHARD

Philippe Blanchard, 2015-16 Nick Novak Fellow, is a Toronto-based artist and teacher at OCAD University. His recent work explores printmaking and animation as expanded art forms, using the reaction of coloured lighting and printed pigment to generate the illusion of movement through sound and light installations. His approach attempts to de-familiarize the viewing of moving images, inviting renewed curiosity at animation's fundamentally illusionistic and magical properties. Philippe Blanchard's installation work has been shown at the National Museum of Print (Mexico City), Festival Chromatic (Paris), Wayhome Festival (Oro-Medonte, ON), Idea Exchange (Cambridge, ON) and Galerie Glendon/York University (Toronto, ON). Philippe Blanchard would like to thank Meggan Winsley and Open Studio. He would also like to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council Exhibition Assistance program.

ELI HOWEY

Eli Howey, 2015-16 Don Phillips Scholar, is a printmaker, illustrator and designer currently based in Toronto. Their art practice uses the anomalies within traditional analogue printmaking techniques to create work in fine art, publication and textile-based projects. Eli Howey would like to acknowledge the support of CUE Art Projects.

Author Bio

PEARL VAN GEEST

Pearl Van Geest is an artist, writer and arts educator currently based in Guelph, Ontario. She has written for *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine* and exhibition essays for artists including Julie Sando and Gary Evans. She was recipient of the 2015 Canadian Art Foundation Art Writing Prize.

Cover images:

Philippe Blanchard, *Work in progress*, video still, HD, 2016. Created under the auspices of the Nick Novak Fellowship.

Eli Howey, *Move through walls*, 2016, etching, watercolour, 29"x 39". Created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship.

Interior images:

Philippe Blanchard, *Work in progress*, video still, HD, 2016. Created under the auspices of the Nick Novak Fellowship.

Eli Howey, *Blueflower*, 2016, etching and watercolour, 14.5"x 12.5". Created under the auspices of the Don Phillips Scholarship.

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