

Elizabeth McIntosh, Show Up, Oakville Galleries, Gairloch Gardens & Centennial Square, Oakville

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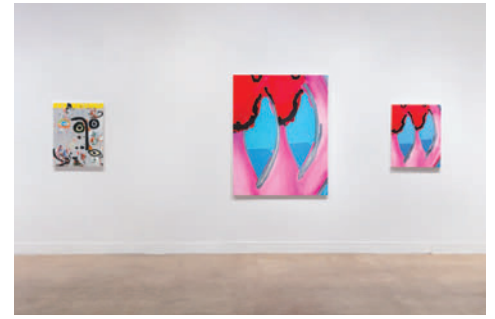
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Elizabeth McIntosh

Show Up, exhibition views, Oakville Galleries, 2020.

Photo : Laura Findlay

Elizabeth McIntosh

Show Up

My first encounter with Vancouver-based artist Elizabeth McIntosh was in 2016 when I was working at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto. McIntosh was coming to install an exhibition and I was to take her for coffee so that I could draft a press release from our encounter. As it turned out, we didn't talk about art at all, instead discussing life, travel, and family. At one point she mentioned that parents of young children in Vancouver had been instructed to pack an emergency kit every day for school, which included extra food, water and clothing, medication, personal information, and a letter in case parent and child became separated for good. The last devastating earthquake hit the 1,000 km fault line running from Vancouver Island to Northern California in 1700, and seismologists believe it is inevitable that another, equally devastating quake will strike soon. I recall an ever-present feeling of impending doom from my own time spent living in Vancouver, and it resurfaces as I take in McIntosh's ambitious solo exhibition *Show Up* at Oakville Galleries eight months into a global pandemic.

Disaster is not a common reference in writing on McIntosh's work. The focus tends to be on her bold brush strokes and free use of colour, the way that her style references historical moments in painting and speaks a language of creative abandon to form confident compositions time and again. *Show Up* does not disappoint in its prolific display of bold new works. From geometric abstraction to abstract figuration, landscape, and portraiture, the show feels almost like a survey of every technique that oils can offer. The sheer number of works (27 in total) is mirrored by an almost flip-pant approach to titles with ultra-simple observations like *Legs*, *Parts*, *Watch*, *Two Views*, and *Knobby Tree*. Despite witnessing a clear mastery of medium, I am left feeling flat and wanting more. The social anxieties that loom over our current moment are nowhere to be found in these works, or

in the text that accompanies them. Though I am hesitant to make demands on art, I can't help but question the relevance of an incredibly joyful volume of new work made mostly in 2020 without even the slightest acknowledgement of a broader context.

I find this head-in-the-sand approach accentuated by the 1920s estate cottage architecture of Gairloch Gardens, where the largest of McIntosh's canvases are hung. With an omnipresent lakeside garden view, the interior includes grapevine moulding, ornately panelled radiators, and an original fireplace. I was relieved to discover that instead of ignoring this far-from-neutral space, McIntosh had the wooden support columns that dominate the central room painted a deep, matte black. She did the same for the more modern columns at Centennial Square. These gestures ground me. Their imposing angular physicality provides an antidote for so much disconnected beauty, allowing me to entertain the thought that behind these high-spirited experiments with colour and form there lies a wrestling with what is and what might yet come to be.

Alex Bowron

Oakville Galleries, Gairloch Gardens
and Centennial Square, Oakville
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