

James Lindsay: An Unknown Artist, and Unknown Revolutionary

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JAMES LINDSAY

AN UNKNOWN ARTIST, AND UNKNOWN REVOLUTIONARY

By Brian Grison

JAMES LINDSAY HAS MAINTAINED AN ALMOST RECLUSIVE BUT RIGOROUSLY POLITICAL ROLE IN VICTORIA'S ART COMMUNITY SINCE

HE ARRIVED HERE FROM A SMALL, LEFT-LEANING, WORKING-CLASS, INDUSTRIAL CITY ON THE SKIDS IN SCOTLAND IN THE EARLY 1970s.

THIS INAUSPICIOUS BACKGROUND APPARENTLY PREDISPOSED HIM TO POLITICAL ART, WHILE HIS EDUCATION INCLINED HIM TOWARD

THE GRITTY EXPRESSIONISM OF GRAHAM SUTHERLAND AND FRANCIS BACON.

In-keeping with this background, and reflecting his concern for the increasing militarization of the North American landscape, in 2006 and 2007 Lindsay completed eleven paintings of aerial views of the mapped world. The first exhibition of *Political Landscapes* takes place at Victoria's newest commercial gallery, Polychrome Fine Arts, this September. This is the artist's only solo exhibition in about twenty-five years.

The subject of these paintings encompasses the sphere of the Earth as a vast mapped landscape viewed from about 6 kilometers straight up, about the height at which military surveillance planes invisibly and silently pass overhead. The horizon, high on the picture-plane is almost hidden by the smog of the lower stratosphere, above which the hypothetical viewer apparently hovers.

Rather than painting the conventional view of a bucolic or gem-like Earth, Lindsay depicts the built planet as if it is a map demarking geo-political machinations, military tactics or terra-forming design on the scale of the planet itself. The paintings could also easily be maps of natural or man-made disasters, or seemingly endless dead zones. These depictions of an increasingly un-natural Earth as a series of artificial demarcations is suggested metaphorically by the geometrical flatness of the horizon, which, in a more "impressionistic" or 'realistic' painting, would be noticeably arced.



Political Landscape No. 3 (Military Action Painting)
2006, Oil on canvas, 66 x 42 inches

Political Landscape No.1 establishes Lindsay's theme, and includes most of the graphic elements of the series. We observe the land below divided into political zones as well as large areas that could suggest agribusiness, pollution, war zones, no-mans land, industrial parks, segregated cities, blast scars, terra-formation for real-estate development or any other of the many other anti-natural things that we humans are increasingly imposing on the planet.

In *Political Landscape No. 3 (Military Action Painting)*, the murky reddish blue on the left either rampages or oozes across a

green area into the yellow green zone on the right. This is a punning reference to the techniques and style of historic Action Painting. The painting also puns that common contemporary phrase, "military action", an Orwellian euphemism for one country invading another. This painting could represent the German blitzkrieg across Europe, or Iraq's attempt to appropriate Kuwait, or the American attempt to do whatever to Iraq. It could just as well represent the eventual buy-out of British Columbia by Californians anxious for water for their beautiful green lawns in the desert.

Because of James Lindsay's paintings, it is now impossible to ignore the fact that all those lovely pastel coloured shapes, dotted lines and symbols across schoolroom globes represent actual political, cultural, ethnic and economic conquests. Lindsay's art challenges those of us who would prefer to not think about the meaning of borders, which seem so ordinary and natural anyway, and which we all take for granted, as we fly across the world as tourists protected by our guides from the challenges of real situations on the ground. His paintings are not for the complacent viewer or artist, those who prefer that landscapes promote a conservative, nostalgic rose-tinted view of the world.

These paintings impart one of the most important lessons of serious contemporary political art. They demand that we who live on Earth pay attention to the politics that are destroying the beauty of this world. □