

Thursday, September 21, 2023

A look behind the scenes at the making of “From Far” – Manulife’s 2023 art commission.

Speaker Participants

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Presentation

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Steve, welcome. I'm so glad you could join us today. It's so fantastic to have you here.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Oh, my Gosh! It's amazing to be here. I get to see the pieces installed and you know, get to see details the works back behind me, which is awesome.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

And I hear that you brought some really amazing photographs with you today.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah. And I've got a clicker.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

And you've got a clicker, so you have all the power. So, yeah, I know that Roxanna mentioned your mid-career survey at Steely McMichael, and there have been so many other really fantastic exhibitions that Steve has done, and he's really one of Canada's top tier contemporary artists right now. So, I'll invite you to actually show us some of those photos of some of your accomplishment so far.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah, it's actually some of the questions I got when I was standing in front the pieces were about how did you start making these things? Why are they so big? And so one of the things that I've always thought about with landscape art, especially thinking historically, we used to have this idea where landscape paintings were a window into space, so you'd have them over your couch, you'd be the viewer in your living room looking out into this window, into a thing. And for me, I'm really more interested in taking the viewer out of that living room and putting them into the landscape. And so scale is something that's really been a factor within my work. And one of the major things, one of the starting points to this idea of like having immersive work is this pond show. And I had a whole series of these that ended up being in Stratford Museum as well. But what I did is, in the studio, you would keep making bigger and bigger, bigger paintings until you hit the edges of all your walls and you're like, how do I make it bigger? Well, the most logical way for me was to do the floor. So, all of a sudden it flooded all the floors with this water and I was able to get this like sense of a reflection pool inside of the space, and you became completely immersed within the work. It was like being on a dock, looking out onto the shoreline and seeing the reflections and the lights. And it just so convincing about being part of that space. And I continued to kind of work with that on these photographic series I did for the McMichael where I took paintings and had a local photographer help me out to take photos of all the paintings are out in nature, and it started as a project where I was looking at giving a sense of scale to the paintings because so often, you're shown artwork by a phone or a device or like over the internet or something like that, and there is like a lack of scale, inherent in that, it's always just the size of the rectangle that you're looking at, right? So, I thought it'd be fun to like add human elements and add recognizable size features like beaches or trees or any of those kinds of things into the work and give it that sense of scale. So, these are all photographs that went to the McMichael, and they went along with the painting's kind of sitting side by side. And when you look at the Manulife Commission Outside, what happened is I was able to see the space beforehand and really get a sense of that scale and get a sense of how I could immerse a viewer inside of that. So, that's one of the reasons I'm showing some of these. This is a commission that I did for CIBC. They invited me. CBC Square is a new tower that's built just behind Union Station. And so, I was able to do the entire lobby of that space, over 4000 square feet of backlit glass. You can see kind of the middle slide, is the main floor with six different backlit glass pieces. And you can see behind me, is actually me with a construction hat on there. And the pieces are 36 feet tall. So, that the idea of having an image 30 feet over your head was just like the most amazing immersion you could possibly get in. So, I'm always thinking about these ideas of like putting the viewer right into the pieces. And after this one, I was able

to kind of play around with these light boxes. You can see kind of on the left there some of how the light boxes are constructed. And those pieces ended up going at Tom Thomson Gallery in Owen Sound just afterwards. These are a few more. This is actually the back of my studio which looks out onto Gloria Street, which is kind of fun. And then, yeah, here's a couple from the studio.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Amazing. These are such awesome photos. I'm so excited to share this with everyone because not often do we get to actually see an artist's studio and how they work in the studio, but I will get to that.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

We usually, hide!

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Usually hide! We'll get to that in a moment. I wanted to talk a little bit about your connection to Canadian landscape and how you feel you fit into the history of Canadian landscape in this country. I mean, it's so inherent to the subject matter that you choose. And if any of you were on the tour, I kind of made a connection between you and the Group of Seven. So how do you feel you fit in?

Steve Driscoll
Artist

I did like being next to the Lismer. That was nice.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Glad, you approved.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah. Like I say, I think that like the landscape has changed and how we look at landscape and the idea of like a window versus like an immersive space. So, but I'm also, I was really a material painter to start with, so I spent about ten years doing almost exclusively abstract paintings and it was kind of a challenge to start working as a landscape painter to control the material to that level. And so for me, it was like getting that challenge in. I

just spent so much time out in nature that it just kind of filtered into my process in a lot of ways. The light that you see, distant forests, it's just hard to escape it as a Canadian and going out into the nature around us, it's kind of unavoidable. So, these slides also show variations in the studio. So, me kind of working.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Yeah, definitely. And I'm so excited you brought these because you can actually see in the background some of the maquettes that Steve Driscoll created for us as well. But before we get to that one, I do want to talk about material because, correct me if I'm wrong, but is this a blowtorch on one of your paintings?

Steve Driscoll
Artist

It's funny, I've over the years I used to start by letting people tell me what they think I make the work out of, and the stories are amazing. Actually lot of people believe I paint with a blowtorch because there's really cool images of me painting with a blowtorch, so to speak. But the reality is I use it to get bubbles out of the paint. So, when I'm painting, there's always air that gets mixed in with the urethane. And I use a blowtorch at the end to kind of take all the bubbles, heats up the air inside the paint and then pops. So, if I don't, you'll see all these little fish eyes and things like that. So, I don't really paint with a blowtorch, but I definitely use it for an aid, for sure. It's a great image!

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

It is a great image. It's fantastic, very unique. I don't think I've ever seen something like that in the studio before. But you did mention that you use urethane and it's oil pigments and urethane, correct?

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah. That's right!

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

So that's a very unique material. Can you tell us a little bit about how you?

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. So, when I went to school here in Toronto (Ocad) and when I was in school, I maybe the second year I was doing this really large panel that was out of a water-soluble ink. So, eight feet by eight feet. And I lived about a block away from school. And so, one of the things I've found in my entire career as an artist is that if you're going to move artwork and you're doing it yourself, guaranteed to rain every time or some sort of windstorm or blizzard. So, if you're going to carry this thing that's water soluble down the street, it's just going to dissolve because it's definitely in the rain. And so, the year previous, I worked at Canadian Tire in the paint department, obviously, and I was introduced to this material that was urethane and you just like you can put it on anything that seals everything. And I was like, well, this is the perfect time for that. So yeah, so I was like, okay, and try this urethane stuff on it. And I put it on as like in art school you go for like four or five years, you spend a lot of time at the bar, but you could kind of distill all the information you learn in art school into about 15 minutes in like two-minute increments, let's say. And so, this was one of those 2 minutes where I was like, Oh, I could get it. I can learn something about this new material. And for me, it's interesting because you start off as an artist working with materials that are readily available oil, paint, acrylic, something like that. But you're always kind of comparing yourself to the entire history of art because every mark is used with those materials. So, for me, I started using urethane that was like, every mark I make is new. And that's like, I can imagine. Imagine that like every mark you make is all of a sudden now new because you're using something that no one else uses. And it was, it was great for me. Like that was a good start.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

That's really interesting that connections Canadian Tire to now. Yeah, these part time jobs really influence what we do professionally.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

It wasn't Home Depot.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

It wasn't Home Depot, it's Canadian Tire. But as you see in some of these pictures that you have the canvas is on the ground.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

So, I've got a couple of these, actually.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

Yeah. Yeah. And you're using these tools that I don't really recognize, these long poles. So tell me about that?

Steve Driscoll
Artist

Yeah for sure. So, urethane is very runny. It's like a little bit heavier and less viscous than water. And so, it's kind of like almost like honey. So, if I was painting with it on the wall, everything would just rip off and I would have no image. So, over the years, I've always worked horizontally and I've always sort of built panels that are strong enough that don't sag in the middle and allow all the paint to pour into the middle sections. So, you can see me working, obviously, because they're large, I've seen them outside. I can't actually reach the middle of the painting without some sort of aid. So, I use these big broomsticks and I use stem brushes which screw onto the end of the broomsticks. I use really small brushes that have long handles on them, kind of like the one on the right there, you can see me working. So, most of the work is done with this sort of long five inch stained brush. And I get quite a bit of color and control out of it, surprisingly. But the sort of fine stuff happens with this this brush about this long. And it's got a really long bristles. But sometimes if I can't find the brush that makes sense for the marks I'm trying to make, I'll just make it. I'll screw a couple of brushes together or like a broom or like just lots of ways of putting paint down.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

So creative of you.

Steve Driscoll
Artist

It's out of necessity.

Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife

I understand. Yeah! So, I do want to talk about these images that you mentioned that you can see the maquettes or basically smaller paintings of the larger paintings that we have in our lobby. So, I'm going to talk

about the commission a little bit. So essentially, what we did is we reached out to Steve and said, Hey, you know, we really like your artwork and we would love to commission something for our lobby. And you were able to come visit us and check out the lobby before it was finished construction actually. So, you saw the bones of the building. But in our conversation, we were talking about how Manulife is very interested in sustainability and we have a lot of investments in Timberland, which connects to your connection with the with the environment and the landscape of the country. So, I just wanted to ask you what your process was like once you once you heard that and what inspired you to start creating that commission?

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Yeah, totally, I mean, asking me about forestry was kind of like asking what my kids would be like cake. I was like, yes, I do. I really like this. I mean, I spent so much time outside, I do hiking and I do canoeing, I do portaging, and I'm always outside and that's where I draw my inspiration. So, for this project, I thought that would be really fun. Like, one of my favorite things to do is go out and do long distance hikes and seeing the space and seeing how people move through the space. I thought it would be interesting to start doing one long panoramic kind of image, be more fun to do something like a storyboard where you get a story that tells over a series of pieces and it can be read both ways. So, using the idea of a long-distance hike, I kind of tried to pull out key stones, you might see along any given long-distance hike. If you look at, if you look at all the pieces, I tried to look at some areas which were like brambles where you really encompassed inside the forest. Other areas where it's like the canopy is gone. You get new growth growing from below. Also, that this golden light you get in the autumn time. And usually along these really long-distance hikes you get things like a vista. So, it's like often the turn around point. You go to this thing, you turn around, come back and there's these lovely long views of the forest that you can see, just like further than anywhere else that's kind of breathtaking in some way. So yeah, those were some of the inspirations for this series.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

And when you invited us to your studio, you had several paintings, smaller ones ready for us. And, Mike Shaw was there as well, and he was helping us decide between compositions. You were so kind to give us that input. What was that like picking all of those different compositions and then landing on these four.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Yeah, so taking those ideas of the different places within a hike, I was able to develop nine pieces and there were all these sorts of smaller five-foot pieces and smaller. And so, the cool thing was we were able to put up like four hangars because I knew there would only be able to fit four in there and then swap them out. So, it was like a Jenga game of trying to find the right color combination that worked together and also told the most accurate story or the most open-ended story to this, to this situation. So, and once I kind of got down to the four that I thought were a good set I invited Kelly to the studio and we were like, oh yeah, let's play with this. And so, she got to move them around and we ended up landing on the same spot, which was great.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

We did and that was one of my favorite studio visits ever. Like, the studio is fantastic and...

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

It's kind of a disaster. It's a mix between like a nice space and a disaster.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

I think it's more on the nice space.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Ok!

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

So just before we enter, the last question I have for you is; Your color palette. When you're out in nature, these aren't really colors that we see. These are far more saturated. So, what was the influence behind choosing these bright colors?

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

For sure, Yeah, it's a question I get a lot, actually. It's like, where did you see these things from? And so when I think about like a place, like if you're going out on the weekend, you go out with your family and you like, you go to this place, Oh, that was so much fun. I was like...and you're showing a friend. You're like, Oh, look at where I was. It's kind of like this, but not really like this. It was like, it looks a little different. I feel like there's, like a memory of a place which is so much more saturated than what you would actually show. Like what it actually looks like doesn't look like that. So, I started to think about, like, what are the colors in your memory that like saturate a place? And so I always experiment in the studio and try and get combinations of color that create that emotional reaction to a place and I always use those rather than trying to depict something.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

Absolutely. And I connect with that because I find that my memories are often brighter than the reality of it.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Or darker.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

Oh, my goodness. But yeah, no, I really do appreciate that choice that gives another feeling to the artwork. So, I think that's so important.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

And there's like an experimentation within the studio that's so important to the work. Like the materials are all different, the colors are all different. And that that level of experimentation is really what makes it fun for me as well, right? Yeah, trying to find new things.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

That's amazing. And I assume you must enjoy your work then.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I hate vacations.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

Who can't say that? That's awesome. But I just want to say thank you so much for coming today. It really means a lot to Manulife and having your artwork in our collection is such a privilege. So, thank you.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Oh, thank you.

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

And just for everyone here today, if they want to see more of your artwork and see what you're doing in the upcoming months, where can they find you?

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Yeah. So, Art Toronto is a good place. At the end of the next month, there's like all the galleries in the city and internationally get together at the Metro Convention Center end of October. There'll be some works with Tivoli gallery there. And I also have a solo show at the Tivoli Gallery in January. So lots coming up, which will be fun!

**Kelly McKenzie
Curator, Corporate Art Collection, Manulife**

Fantastic. Well, thank you again so much and we will be available for questions after this presentation and after the panel following. But again, thank you so much for your time.

**Steve Driscoll
Artist**

Thanks for listening.

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