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Brain, Body, Hands: Meet Sky Glabush, Canada's Most Restless Painter



Sky Glabush in his London, Ontario, studio with *Portrait as Gertrude Stein* and *The Gate* in December 2012 / photo Robert Nelson

by David Balzer

“To live with your mind in the past,” writes Augusten Burroughs in his latest book, a curious, wry self-help manual entitled [This Is How: Proven Aid in Overcoming Shyness, Molestation, Fatness, Spinsterhood, Grief, Disease, Lushery, Decrepitude & More](#), “is to live in a fantasy world where nothing new or original is created. To ‘understand’ one’s past is to handle clay that no longer exists and shape it into a bowl nobody can ever see or touch.”

The statement reads, like all of [This Is How](#), as both wise and satirically disingenuous. Contemporary self-help culture (and, arguably, contemporary culture at large) is, of course, obsessed with exorcizing the what-has-come-before. In pop-therapy terms, one measures time traumatically: one gets over it. The idioms run rampant. Put it to bed; put it behind you; let it rest. Live in the moment.

Just under a year ago, at the time of my studio visit with Sky Glabush—a man with an unruly and unorthodox childhood to match anything in Burroughs’s memoir Running With Scissors—he appears to be following this conventional wisdom. Glabush has made his name as a painter, but has decided to take a hiatus. Painting—its histories pendulous, its precedents intimidating, its execution exhaustingly demanding—has become burdensome.

“I hope I never go back to working in that singular way again,” Glabush vows jovially as he walks me through his garage-studio in the industrial west end of London, Ontario.

The last six years have been both difficult and triumphant for the artist. In 2006, Glabush got a teaching position at the University of Western Ontario, and soon after decided, on feeling alienated from southern Ontario culture and landscape (he had moved to London from Edmonton, where he completed his MFA at the University of Alberta), to immerse himself in it. The result was “Renting” (2007–10), a series of large-format landscape paintings of mid-century homes in London that, now, are often occupied by students. The paintings are realist, a bravura display of technique. (Glabush, whose previous work always contained degrees of abstraction, calls them “conservative,” though as a colourist he is anything but.) In their attention to quiet, crepuscular moments, they recall, at times uncannily, the famous, late London artist Jack Chambers—to the point where they might be viewed as exercises in painterly method acting. A few showed at Toronto gallery MKG127 in the winter of 2009. The reviews were strong. National curatorial interest followed, as well as a Bank of Montreal commission. There was a waiting list for new paintings, which, due to their scale, went for tens of thousands of dollars each.

“I started to feel super-suspicious of my motives,” says Glabush. “I thought, I could just keep doing this for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to do that.”

What happened next was 2011’s “Background,” Glabush’s second MKG127 show that, in a sharp left turn, took the form of an installation. Prints, watercolours and, in the middle of the gallery, an odd larva-like sculpture carved out of basswood appeared to investigate vague, 1970s notions of spirituality in art. It turned out “Background” was autobiographical, dealing with Glabush’s father’s stint in rehab, and his subsequent conversions to Free Methodism and Baha’i. It was a little eccentric. In the wake of the success of “Renting,” MKG127 director Michael Klein was, by Glabush’s account at least, nonplussed.

“He didn’t come to London to see the new work and I didn’t send him photos,” says Glabush. “The install was his first encounter, and his reaction was quiet and cautious. So I took him for pizza. I said, ‘Michael, what’s the matter?’ He said, ‘Oh, nothing.’ I said, ‘I can tell you’re really upset. Why don’t we just talk about it? If you have questions, why don’t you give me a chance to just answer them?’ Then he said, ‘Okay, what are you doing?’”

Glabush and Klein smoothed things out, and the new work—stately yet vulnerable, oblique yet intimate—was well received. Nonetheless, when Glabush returned to his studio after the opening, there was a crisis. “It was the first time in about 12 or 15 years where I moved back, in a way, to first-year art school,” Glabush says.

The objects surrounding Sky Glabush in his studio during my visit attest to radical experimentation. Some might deem them art-therapeutic. He's trying out ceramics, for instance, the result of which is lying on a long table: a series of small, round pots—modestly successful attempts at the difficult craft. Elsewhere are Arte Povera-style sculptures composed of found objects, some of wood, some of sediments of sprayed salt.

"I'm trying to allow my intuitive, responsive voice to get bigger and more powerful," he says. "This is one of the things that happened to Carl Jung, after he had his break with Freud, and he lost his job. He had nothing. He started playing with blocks, as if he were a child.

"The difference between Jung's and most people's nervous breakdowns was that instead of turning away from society, he faced it," Glabush elaborates. This is not a breaking down (nor, Glabush stresses, a breakdown even remotely close in severity to the one Jung experienced), but a building up. "I'm interested in the relationship between my brain and my body and hands. Ever since I was a kid, that was where the most powerful transformation was. I wanted to return. I wanted to make that quality literal and clear."

Now in his 40s, Sky Glabush is a successful mid-career Canadian artist. As a craftsperson, he is perhaps without parallel among his peers. He is, however, markedly unconcerned with consistency of style, which in contemporary art-world terms means branding oneself as instantly recognizable and marketable. To define Glabush is, on the contrary, to consider shifts, ones predicated on unusually self-critical and -conscious looks back. The past is Glabush's bully and teacher. It's always nipping at his heels.

Glabush was born in 1970 in Alert Bay, British Columbia, to hippie parents who had met at a commune in nearby Sointula. Glabush's mother was a painter and schoolteacher from Australia. His father was a painter and tradesman. Soon after Glabush's birth they moved to Sydney, where his mother's family lived. There, his father dabbled in experimental film. At four, Glabush moved with his parents to Fiji, then to Greece, then to the UK, where they participated in the same West London squatter scene as the Clash's Joe Strummer. His mother taught at a free school; his father worked as a carpenter. On moving back to Canada, after years of itinerant bohemianism that included rampant alcohol and drug use and an open marriage, Glabush's parents divorced. His mother settled in Vancouver, his father in Moose Jaw—where his car broke down on the way to a drug deal in Toronto, precipitating a check-in to rehab, and, later, an adoption of the born-again ethos of Free Methodism and Baha'i. This was the subject of "Background."

Glabush's youth was accordingly hectic. He left home (such as it was) at 16, intending to go to Belize but ending up in California. He lived in a van in San Francisco for a bit, going to Grateful Dead shows and dropping the requisite amounts of acid. Later he moved to LA, then came back to Canada, where he played in a Dylanesque folk-blues band. Somewhere around that time he finally got to Belize, on a bus, and stayed for six months. It was a heady period. At

a recent Toronto opening, fellow London artist Jason McLean assured me that Glabush has no shortage of crazy stories to tell from it. It appears he's only told me a few.

Such stories may explain the itinerancy of Glabush's own career—jumping fearlessly and perhaps recklessly from one approach to another—but they give little indication of his capacity for sustained practice-based and intellectual immersion. On entering the University of Saskatchewan in his early 20s as a mature student, Glabush began with English, specializing in Irish poetry. He tried out a painting class as an elective, and “fell in love immediately. Within the first couple of weeks, I knew this was what I wanted to do. I didn't know what it meant, how to do it, or anything about art. I knew nothing. But I was so into it.”

In a flourish of jejune enthusiasm, Glabush acquired a studio in downtown Saskatoon. Then, only a few years after he started painting, and while he was still in school, a funny thing happened: he began to show and sell work, prolifically. In a snap, he acquired a dealer—Calgary's Paul Kuhn, whom he cold-called after sending off some slides—and rapidly sold the minimalist encaustic-and-graphite works he was producing.

“That first year, I think I made \$25,000,” says Glabush. “It meant I could do this, that this was actually feasible.” After a flirtation with graduate English work in postcolonial theory, Glabush's early successes led to a residency in Leiden, Holland, after which he moved to Amsterdam with his wife and two young children.

Here, the first crisis of his painting career occurred: a real encounter with art history.

“I was at home with my two little babies in Amsterdam,” says Glabush, “and my wife was a lawyer and had a good job, so I just spent all day, every day looking at art: Hobbema, Ruysdael, Rembrandt, Vermeer, all the 17th-century Dutch painters I didn't learn about in art school. Formalist, high-key, non-objective, abstract painters had been the big heroes of art for me. I realized this was just a tiny tributary. Europe completely rearranged the molecules in my brain.

“At the same time,” he says, “it paralyzed me. I called the dealers I had in Canada at the time—all three—and quit.”

Glabush began landscape painting, at first copying famous depictions of Holland, and later doing studies of modernist housing complexes in Amsterdam. He returned with his family to Canada in 2003, and, shortly thereafter, when he entered an MFA program in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, cast his gaze on similar architecture in the Canadian West. This work has the air of the Leipzig school: painterly paintings, hyperconscious of planes and colour; abstracted figures in abstracted landscapes, lightly touched with myth and narrative.

The work is a prelude to “Renting,” with the latter's similar focus on mid-century built environments. Following this arc, one sees an evolving mastery of painting, technically and conceptually: a taking into account, with simultaneous humility and ambition, of the medium's long and hallowed traditions, and of where he might fit into them. As with many painters who choose this route, there is a death drive present. Such intent questioning of

painting makes its eventual eradication, or at least deconstruction, as a practice nearly inevitable.

But it also, while it lasts, results in a resonant, penetrating kind of material love. “For me, painting is always in real time,” Glabush avows. First, he praises James McNeill Whistler; then, he trenchantly explains his idiosyncratic theory that true modernism in art ended with Édouard Manet and Paul Cézanne. “Art history is not history,” he says. “You understand painting when you’re painting. Sifting through biographical details, or looking for a political wedge that opens up an avenue of criticism for an artist—that’s not interesting to me.

“Most of my favourite paintings, from Pierre Bonnard to Philip Guston to Luc Tuymans, are slightly failed promises,” Glabush adds. “Painting can sometimes be illustrative or indicative of, not the moment of pure insight or of absolute clarity, but the opposite: real misunderstanding. Part of the reason I painted those frumpy little houses in London writ so large was the tension between the emptiness of it and the grandness of painting.

“If they were little paintings, they’d be empty little paintings,” Glabush says, seeming to take glee in puncturing any sense of romanticism viewers might have got from the works. “But they were empty big paintings. There’s a lack of entry into that place of certainty.”

It’s September and Sky Glabush is painting again. This spring, he will participate in “The Painting Project,” a large survey of Canadian painting in Montreal spearheaded by Galerie de l’UQAM director Louise Déry. It was the “Renting” works that caught Déry’s team’s eye, but Glabush has proffered something else: smaller studies that he makes over the course of a day or two, and which reference and likely parody moments of formalist high modernism. One is called “Portrait as Gertrude Stein” (2012)—a hilarious, pretty/ugly exercise in expressionist portrait drag. Another reworks Manet’s “The Fifer” (1866), emphasizing its negative space and acting as an abstract study in white and off-white. If these are experiments, they are resolutely finished as such. A skilled hand and acute mind has, after all, created them.

“I had been lost in different things, feeling alienated from that métier and psychology of painting,” says Glabush over the phone, reflecting on our spring visit.

He mentions a show that had been planned for Chatham’s Thames Art Gallery, which was to unite him with Will Gorlitz and Mike Bayne, Canadian painters whose styles go well with the “Renting” landscapes but not with his new work. Glabush pulled out, but was offered a solo show at Thames in August. He decided to exhibit five of the crude sculptural objects he had shown me in his studio. “It fast tracked the questions I was asking,” he says. “Instead of opening things up, it brought them to a bit of a conclusion.”

Glabush’s new paintings are like nothing he’s done before. “I used to think about painting as though I had to put everything into a singular image, as if I were pressing a novel or movie into a single frame. But what if painting could be like a journal entry or a Tumblr photo—a

kind of moment?” he asks. “It doesn’t have to be this historical, teleological thing. The time of painting can be as fleeting as any other form.”

After all these years, Glabush’s investigations into the medium have, apparently, made it what it always was for him. Inherently therapeutic and vehicular, painting pulls us between the poles of past and present, not that they may be fully understood, but that they may be marked and, in whatever way, heralded. It is a self-revelatory medium. For Glabush, in the brief course of a day, it can demonstrate everything he’s learned, and everything he still does not know. And it can carry this knowledge forward, in both an indomitable and a comforting way.

“Paint is just one avenue for constructing a material image,” Glabush says confidently. “This return to painting has been less about trying to create an all-encompassing, archetypal moment. Painting has been demystified, but ritualized.”

It is now for Glabush, as the past is for all of us, “part of daily life.”