

# GLIMMER

BEN REEVES' LATEST PAINTINGS  
OFFER A GLIMPSE FROM SUBURBIA

BY LIZ WYLIE

Last year, Ben Reeves moved from downtown Vancouver to Tsawwassen, mainly from a need to find lower-cost housing rather than by choice. In a sense, relocating to the suburbs has been a coming home for Reeves, who grew up in the North Vancouver community of Lynn Valley. Art history buffs will recall this once-rural hamlet was where F.H. Varley lived in the mid-1930s, and where he painted *Dhârâna*, his iconic portrait of Vera Weatherbie.

Reeves was keenly aware of this history growing up and mentions Varley as an early artistic inspiration. "We lived in a small shack that had been a farmhouse in upper Lynn Valley before the roads were put in," he says. "I remember imagining that it was the same one that appeared in a small watercolour of the area by him."

In Reeves' latest paintings, he both mines and limns the suburbs as a generic place, a locus of the mind, in much the same manner as the American novelist Jonathan Franzen. Although detailed, Reeves' depictions of garden hoses, parked cars and mute houses are generalized, not specific, and the suburbs are considered as places from which to look out and, in Reeves' case, to also turn around and look back at the spread of Vancouver.

In *Midnight*, for instance, we peer through a blue-hued forest, its tree trunks in Art Nouveau curves that recall Tom Thomson's *The West Wind*, to a shimmering city on the plain below, its streets lined with lights like sparkling jewels. There are shades of Edvard Munch's northern landscapes here, and also Pierre Bonnard's painting, with its luscious, almost formless passages that are more about paint than representation per se.

Reeves, who shows some of this new work in a solo show titled *Glimmer* at Vancouver's Equinox Gallery from Sept. 10 to Oct. 15, lives enthusiastically in the world of painting, both current and past. He's a voracious looker at art, and must fight to leave this behind when he enters the studio, or risk being overwhelmed.

A new element in his work is collage, generally pieces of linen canvas, stuck on and then painted, often forming a certain shape, for example, that of a tree trunk. These elements play the same role as did raindrops and clouds of cigarette smoke in two earlier series, emphasizing the flat surface of the canvas while engaging in a representational role.

"The collaged canvas pieces are a way of interrogating materials and methods of constructing a picture," says Reeves. "I've been collaging with pieces of cut canvas, so it is a way of acknowledging the picture's





support. At the same time, it is a useful way to build a picture – to enhance range and depth ... Cutting out a shape is different from building one with many brushstrokes.”

The use of the linen pieces calls to mind frottage, a process devised by Surrealist Max Ernst, in which he rubbed pigment across his support with burlap underneath, creating an anonymous but enlivened area of texture. The same interplay between real stuff and depicted stuff is present in Reeves’ collage works. In fact, the interplay between representation and pure painting is something he often explores, pumping up one aspect of this dialectic in some paintings, and the opposite one in others. This balancing act between opposites makes the work exciting for a viewer.

Trained at the University of British Columbia, then in London at the Chelsea College of Arts, and with a few short stays elsewhere, Reeves has lived since 1995 in Vancouver, not a city known for its support of painters. Reeves remains positive, however, suggesting the Photo-conceptual tide is ebbing.

“In many quarters, painting was considered reactionary and its intellectual dimension was not fully understood or respected.” Painting, he says, has largely regained respect in the last decade or so. “Painting had to rediscover its own autonomy and therefore asserted those qualities unique to it. In this way, abstract or non-objective painting has reasserted itself and found a niche in Vancouver. Because photography had cornered the market on representational practice, representational painting has been slower to resurface.”

When looking at Reeves’ paintings, one might sense his hard-won achievements, working, as he must, against his own artistic predilections so as not to fall into a rut. “I have to deliberately stop myself from employing technical skills to solve pictorial problems, or to make things look good,” he says.

“If I employ an older technique, I am not learning anything new. I’m not interrogating anything. It’s like applying old answers to new questions: it becomes too comfortable . . . What makes painting so compelling is that its own body is stuff of the world. Painting is such a remarkable mix of philosophical meditation and material fact, often in tension with each another.” ☐

LEFT: *Basement Suite*, 2016  
oil and acrylic on canvas, 61" x 47.8"

BELOW: *Midnight*, 2016,  
oil and acrylic on canvas, 80" x 90"

