

UNTIDY GEOGRAPHY

Mike Gough's *RETRACE*

THE ROOMS, ST. JOHN'S NL

One of the most striking things about Mike Gough's paintings is the space within them. Stark white and, in once case, black ground makes up most of the surface of each composition. By isolating every mark, whether precise or gestural, the artist has exposed the sometimes untidy struggle of his creative process. This is not a technical struggle, but the struggle of remembering, of pulling images from physical and emotional experiences, rather than from visual references.

Two large canvases anchor *RETRACE* (on view from Dec. 20, 2013 – April 20, 2014). In the first, *Trust In This to Guide You Home*, the shape of a boat is evoked in the foreground. While the general

form of the vessel is present, its precise outline seems to oscillate. The artist has drawn several different hulls, one on top of the other, like layers of preparatory sketches, but without one highly polished version to hide all the work behind it.

The shape of a narrow harbour entrance is more certain—hills sit solidly on the waterline. The texture of the stone, however, is comprised of layers of handwriting in graphite. Like a sort of visual aphasia, the structure of language is present with the appearance of words and sentences, but devoid of legible content. These notes are a constant motif in Gough's work, providing a strong, wordless, narrative drive.



Mike Gough, *Trust In This To Guide You Home*, 2013.
Acrylic, enamel, pastel and graphite on canvas, 152 cm x 183 cm.



Mike Gough, *After All We Are A Product Of Time*, 2013.
Acrylic, pastel and graphite on birch panel, 122 cm x 91 cm.

Down by the shore, parts of a settlement seem to be missing—perhaps eclipsed by a large patch of bright red glinting off the water. This mark could be read as sunlight, fire or even blood, setting the landscape off-kilter once again. Along the hill though, as if sprinkled by a hand from above, several tiny wooden houses are rendered in crisp, photographic detail.

The second large canvas, *You Will Return And Know The Place For The First Time*, plots the curve of a steep city street with the dark blue silhouette of two figures climbing the hill. Along one side are thick, vertical stripes of colour—signifiers perhaps of the iconic painted houses of St. John's. At the top, a group of structures look like church buildings, with a graveyard marked by a wrought iron fence. Underscoring all of these marks though, are the same layers

of handwritten script, like banks of fog. This is emotional geography, rather than a cityscape.

A series of five paintings on birch panels occupy the main wall of the exhibition space. In the first, *After All We Are A Product of Time*, a dark formation arches over a street of row houses. This is not a protective structure, but a confining one. In *Face to Face*, a horizon is constructed completely from lines of handwriting—piled on one another, rubbed out, crossed out and rewritten, sometimes violently.

Fear Of Losing You is perhaps the rawest of the group. Drawn in one long overlapping spiral, a long tunnel darkens to black at the centre of the composition. A yellow/gold stripe spikes towards this point from the bottom of the panel, growing brighter as it narrows into infinity. In *We Made This Our Home*, a group of buildings is underpinned by a colossal dark structure, as if a patch of the city was scooped up along with the ground underneath it, and marooned like a ship or perhaps an island, in the sky. *Remember, You're In Good Hands* examines the dynamic between a group of figures gathered around the central subject of a woman, whose features are washed out by white paint, using brushstrokes that seem to indicate both comfort and confrontation.

RETRACE is the result of Gough's Elbow Room residency at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery in St. John's, and the exhibition reflects this concentrated period of visual and conceptual exploration. Several pieces though, indicate exploration in other directions. Displayed as a set with *Paint Study I*, *Paint Study II (Black)* sets the stage

for Gough's experimentation with dark ground. The panel *In Search* evokes a very different atmosphere, where bright colours and bold gestures turn sharp and harsh. Neon signs at night may not be warm or comforting, but provide direction nonetheless.

The topography Mike Gough has mapped in *RETRACE* includes numerous gaps and erasures. Some elements are clear, while others fade into the background. A few are lost in layers of mark making, obscured by multiple attempts to get it just right. Crucially, it is in this vulnerability, in the space opened up by these uncertainties, that the viewer finds room for their own experience. ■

Jennifer McVeigh is a writer and editor living in St. John's. She can be reached at jennifermcveigh.nl@gmail.com.