

Outreach coordinator Callie Lugosi digitally sat down with artist Ian August to discuss his paintings that appeared in *Suddenly, no, at long last*. The group exhibition was viewable by appointment only from May 01 - July 31 at PLATFORM, and was curated by PLATFORM Director Collin Zipp. The show featured work by Lisa Stinner-Kun, Mark Neufeld, Ian August, Bret Parenteau and Sylvia Matas.

“How do we perceive nothingness or even fully know what it is? Everywhere we look we can see, feel or think something. Nothingness is by no means nothing. In artistic practices nothingness can appear in many forms and in many ways. Using nothingness as the initial starting point, the work in this exhibition explores emptiness, anticipation, the void, stillness and banality. The artists in *Suddenly, no, at long last* examine the many experiential qualities of nothingness in each of their works.”

Ian August is an artist based in Winnipeg. August’s recent paintings are inspired by the function of thresholds in Dutch interior painting of the seventeenth century. These works are characterized by multiple doors and windows commenting on each other to entice the curious gaze of the viewer. *At least that’s how I explain myself when I’m busted taking cell phone pictures of people’s windows*. August received his MFA from York University, and his BFA, honours from the University of Manitoba’s School of Art. His work has been the subject of many solo exhibitions, including *Plunder Dupes*, Actual Gallery, Winnipeg; and *Re: Build Them*, Gallery 1C03, Winnipeg. His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions.

Callie Lugosi: In your artist statement, you lay out your interest in the function of doors and windows in Dutch golden age paintings, and use that to jokingly explain yourself to the people that catch you mid-photograph. There is definitely a lighthearted, playful nature to this series of paintings. Would you say that your work’s relationship to that era of painting is more an homage, or parody?

Ian August: Oh I’d say it’s more of a homage definitely. I probably just turned it into a joke because I felt self conscious writing a serious artist statement.

This series came out of just trying to let myself get loose and paint whatever I wanted. After making a few paintings I noticed that most of them happened to be paintings of windows, so I started to look out for more windows to photograph while I was walking through town and it evolved into a series organically from there.

The paintings did not start off as a homage to anything but once I got a sense of where they were going I started to seek out writing on windows, doors, reflections, filters and trompe-l’oeil, mostly to give myself something to think about while I was painting, but it did inform the work as it developed.

In the Dutch interior paintings, I like that the door was usually used as the site of spicy drama or ill deeds. It seems like so much extra work to paint an elaborate doorway just inside the frame of a painting for the purpose of containing the subject, but it is totally worth it because the subject of the painting would be rather dull if the viewer didn’t feel like they were eavesdropping or

sneaking a voyeuristic glance. After thinking about that a while I went back and painted the green window frame onto the *Pho Que Huong* painting after it had been sitting around for a month and it finally felt finished.

CL: Regarding the body of work's relationship to the Dutch masters... Paintings from that era/locale almost always imply a scene that is going on out of view. Your work contains no people but some of them still suggest some kind of liveliness or human activity. Did you purposefully leave people out of your images?

IA: Leaving people out of the scene is probably a hold over from an older series of paintings that I did dealing with Modernism and the Bauhaus school. At the time I liked the idea that all the modernist architects only cared for the photos of their buildings, that they designed them for a 2d view and that living in the structures was secondary. All of Le Corbusier's architectural documentation was framed as though someone had just exited the room, and left some driving gloves on the table or a fish on a plate. I liked to think that these photographs of implied narratives were his end goal and that the houses were designed mostly as stage backdrops for them. I ran with this idea and built my own miniature spaces, set dressed them to show the remnants of a scene and photographed them to be used as the source material for paintings. They did not show people and I am likely still working in the same vein.

CL: *Flowers in Bloom* is an outlier in the series, in that it's almost abstract. The other paintings have titles and pieces of information within them that are more easily identifiable. What is its relationship to the other works?

IA: I think that I would prefer to be an abstract painter but I've never really figured out how to give myself the license to do it. I usually start paintings by trying to make them as abstract as possible, skirting an easy reading, but I usually can't help myself and get carried away putting details in. Some paintings hold on as abstract longer than others. This one is one of the only facades so it was easier for it to remain a bit confounding with its one field, straight on view, odd scale, and the repetitive pressed tin.

With these works I was also trying to think of them as Dutch still lifes, with all areas in focus, over the top definition on water drops and bugs with highly rendered hairy legs. I tried not to hold back on the detail with these, going into the vines, dried berries and shadows. I went overboard other ones too, making them grimmer, adding stucco chunks and fruit stickers, but no matter how cluttered they got they still had a calmness to them. It could be that trying to simultaneously do abstracts and render them in high detail kind of cancels each-other out.

CL: There's an interplay of interior and exterior in all the works. Looking at the paintings, it eventually becomes that your view is from the outside looking in. It's not immediately clear because of how the subject matter is cropped. Would you say that this vagueness of perspective is an important element?

IA: In the past I've processed a subject through a series of abstractions by translating between real location to photo to model back to photography and finally painting. With these window paintings, I think I'm drawn to them because there are so many layers of abstraction built right into the one image from the start. There is the facade of the building, the reflection of the outside, the grime on the glass, any decals or stickers on the glass, Bars or signs hung just inside and then finally the interior of the space. As a painting exercise I get off on trying to figure out the order of layering that needs to happen to get the painting made.

Vagueness of perspective is definitely an important element and getting it right keeps me on my toes while commuting. The windows look different on different days and I can play with the cropping every time I pass until I get it right. I also enjoy being on the lookout for new ones, and if I'm too lazy to snap a pic of a good one it will haunt me a bit and I'll have to try to get back to it on another day. So there is also a bit of a game to find source material that I enjoy.

CL: In *Pho Que Huong* you can see two different kinds of trees: fake palm trees frosted onto the restaurant's window, and real trees reflected in that same window. I find this piece both funny and sad. There's a strong sense of inhabiting one space while wishing you were somewhere else; a kind of 'grass-is-always-greener' mindset. In this way, the work feels quintessentially Winnipeg. Would you agree? If so, elaborate?

IA: I've been looking into religious Flemish paintings from the fifteenth century that are obsessed with illustrating the difference between sacred and the profane zones. They are crammed with windows and doors and the paintings themselves are built on hinges to open and close in on themselves. They seem like a play between good and evil but what I like about them is that it is super confusing to figure out which is inside and which zone is which and once you get a handle on things it is still no clearer because both the sacred and the profane can represent either good or evil.

I like to think that these paintings operate a bit like that, by skirting an easy reading of where you are looking from or towards and maybe there's the added layer of the Winnipeg knack for subconsciously trying to calculate which one is better. I think that the windows of the shops and apartments also have a bit of a duality to them to start with. They are all adorned and meant to be decorative for both those inside and out, but beyond enticing a passer-by, they also serve to block the view of what's inside. This might be quintessentially Winnipeg as well in the way we like to foster the image of the friendly, welcoming prairie folk but we definitely start things off with a thorough guard up.

CL: Given that most, if not all of these businesses are closed right now and the only current possible perspective from which to view them is that of your paintings, do you think that the works themselves have adopted a new sense of isolation and longing?

IA: Wow, you are right. Even the stores that are open feel a bit like this when you are doing a curbside pick-up at a bakery and looking into the store at all the other stuff that you forgot to order online. I think the paintings are more like a prolonged gaze than a passing glance, and there is definitely a barrier at play, so that feeling of staring into a place that you are likely not going to visit sets up a vibe of longing from the get go, but it is definitely amplified by the current situation.

CL: In regards to the pandemic and your interest in the function of thresholds, do you view your work differently right now considering that the current function of most thresholds is to act as sort of partitions, instead of gateways?

IA: I don't know If I feel differently but, I don't think it's possible for the work to escape being read in this context, especially since viewing it requires an appointment for solo viewing in a sanitary gallery.