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Vancouver is not where it is supposed to be

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Landon Mackenzie et Didier BIGO

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An interview with Landon Mackenzie (november 2009, Paris)

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An interview with Landon Mackenzie (november 2009, Paris)

DB : Landon, in your painting, you challenge the traditional representation of the world as a world of states (no national boundaries) and even as a world of natural geography (no differentiation between sea and land), and the effects are astonishing. Could you give us some elements about this eradication of the traditional boundaries ?

LM : Here we are talking about a specific piece called *Vancouver as the Centre of the World*, 2009, which began with questions of how I could reorganize the world onto a rectangular space while placing Vancouver at the centre. This geography seemed unfamiliar. It meant placing Russia above Canada over the pole without using a computer to figure it out. I started by getting several maps that are currently sold and still classically used. The ones where Greenland is long and narrow, the ones where it is big and broad, and as I was buying them the man in the store said, "You know, Greenland is actually smaller than Zaire". Though we know it intellectually it is still a shock to hear about this distortion because we actually start to believe the maps ! I went to examine his statement and two things happened : One is that I immediately reviewed the problem of what is in a name as there are several names attached to these two locations including contemporary, historical, colonial, pre-colonial and linguistic. The other is the fact that in square kilometers the country in question, now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the middle of Africa and on the equator, is indeed bigger than the space in the north despite the dramatically different representation in the world. On top of this add the reality that Greenland is shrinking as the ice cap melts or falls away, and that it is even smaller today than when the survey was taken. Further a map does not explain why this geography is politically not part of Canada as all the other arctic islands in the region are.

Landon Mackenzie's studio



Landon Mackenzie's studio with "Vancouver as the Centre of the World" in progress, 2009 with "Vancouver as the Centre of the World" in progress, 2009

DB : How do you make the choices that you do when it comes to the question of language ?

LM : In marking a map there is always the question of language and representation and politics. Should I only use English ? And what about selecting cities ? In many countries the capital is

obscure such as Ottawa and in others it is the dominant identity of a country. What if I leave out a city like Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world just to play it safe ? Can I choose Casablanca because through Hollywood it is one of the most famous ? In the end I found it so complex that I chose one continuous kind of space with hundreds of other connections.

DB : Why now ? You left your focus on mapping for a few years to concentrate on another body of work. What was it that brought you to this subject again ?

LM : One reason was that Vancouver is hosting the Winter Olympics of 2010 in February. This is where I have my main home and studio, and I wanted to respond and see if I could make something significant and get my “map of the world” distributed on the reverse side of the subway/public transit map and placed on the ceiling of subway cars during the event. I liked the idea of this presentation because in reality all maps are a construction and a kind of fiction. In the late 19th century the Olympics became re-organized under nation states and so to erase national boundaries symbolically was a simple way of commenting on this relationship in contrast to most maps or globes which show a colourful spectrum of individualized territories.

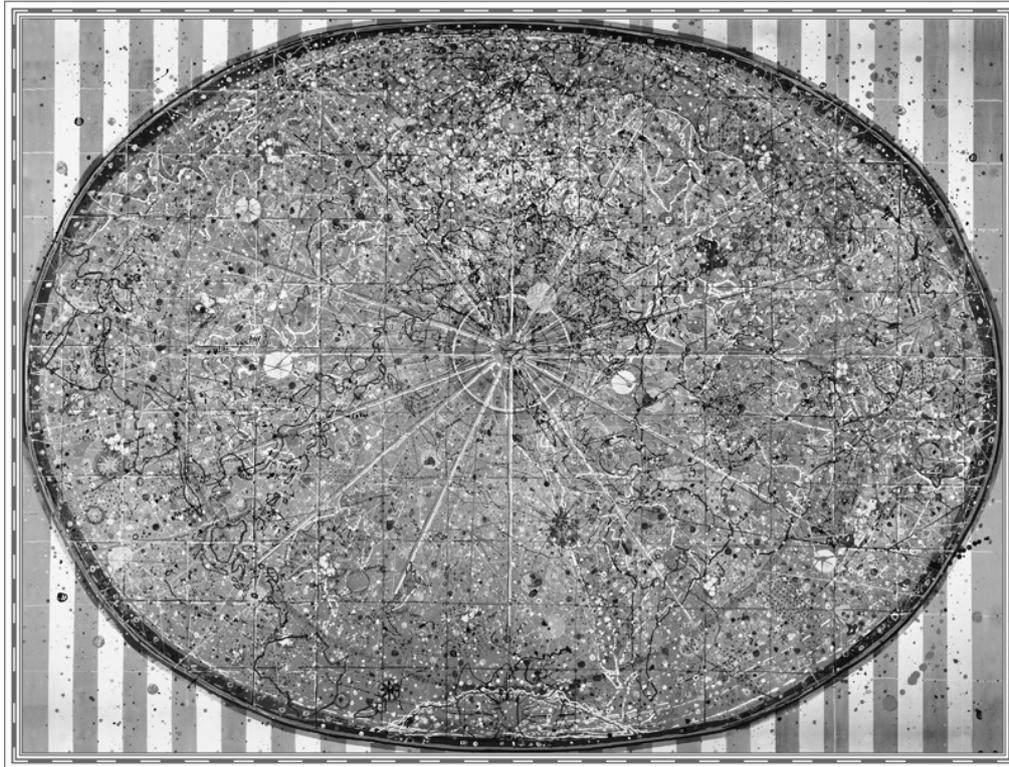
DB : Tell me more about how you went about it ? Are the ideas firmly fixed before you start or does the process of thinking unfold as you make the work ?

LM : I only start with a vague impression and let the process lead me through my thinking. For example to deal with the problem of distortion and to find a better idea of scale I traced the continents from the sphere of a globe so as to not rely on a printed map. I redrilled the holes so that it was spinning not on the poles but at the point of Vancouver and its opposite. Then I purchased two thin plastic beach-ball globes that I could cut up with scissors to look at Vancouver at the Centre. But it still didn't really help, as now it looked like a daisy flower. To put the world back onto a rectangular 2.2 x 3 meter space I needed to make several drawings to figure out how to proceed. I ended up using an oval space and banishing the time zone stripes, similar to those in my day planner, to the corners.

The question of not dividing land from water was another decision I made along the way, not to privilege one over the other. Because I have a background in cartography research, I am familiar with maps that were drawn before Ariel and satellite photography that corrected the measurements and early amusing speculations such as fictitious inland seas in the old northwest. An animal, a fish or ships appear when there are gaps in certainty. My favorites are ones which were made using star fixes by explorers who charted the coastlines of continents. The stars and the compass rose were needed to make the calculations. I added quite a few of them into my picture and some of satellites as well, then space debris.

Over time I became more certain that I wanted my picture to reflect the disbalance that we have with our contemporary cleaned up Internet-ready Earth. I also wanted the ocean spaces to be very active and not just the space in-between landmasses as background filler. For someone with a Canadian background the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, the rivers, Great Lakes, arctic bays and passages, pole and magnetic north are part of my consciousness. Then there are the underwater Internet and phone cables, the shipping lanes and the migration routes, not to mention the food chain and its survival.

"Vancouver as the Centre of the World"



"Vancouver as the Centre of the World" (2009, acrylic on linen, 220 x 300 cm,) by Landon Mackenzie

DB : With all these factors that are of interest to you, why put the map problem in a painting, or why use painting as a method to explore these concerns ?

LM : It is helpful to back up and think for a moment about the centuries of landscape painting in Europe and North America and to question the supposed neutrality of this genre. For example a typical Canadian landscape is one depicting empty space, a construct of wilderness pushing back an English garden, a Mediterranean light and a London fog. In the landscape paintings of the 19th and early 20th century in Anglo Canada there are rarely any humans to interfere with the scenery and this ideologically served patterns of colonial settlement. And funny enough there is never any snow either, and given that people have lived in the space we call "CANADA" for thousands of years and that most of the country is under snow more than half the year this has got to be seen with a new eye. So I first began making paintings 30 years ago that challenged both those notions.

I am lucky that I came of age as an artist in the time of complete rupture and crisis in the discipline, with Conceptual art on the one hand and the end game of High Modernism on the other. I began painting after I had my graduate degree in Art because it seemed so forbidden and politically loaded. The cyber age gives painting new challenges that can be useful but in reality a lot of painting is boring, decorative, derivative and mediocre. But this is true of all disciplines and there is still some great work to be done.

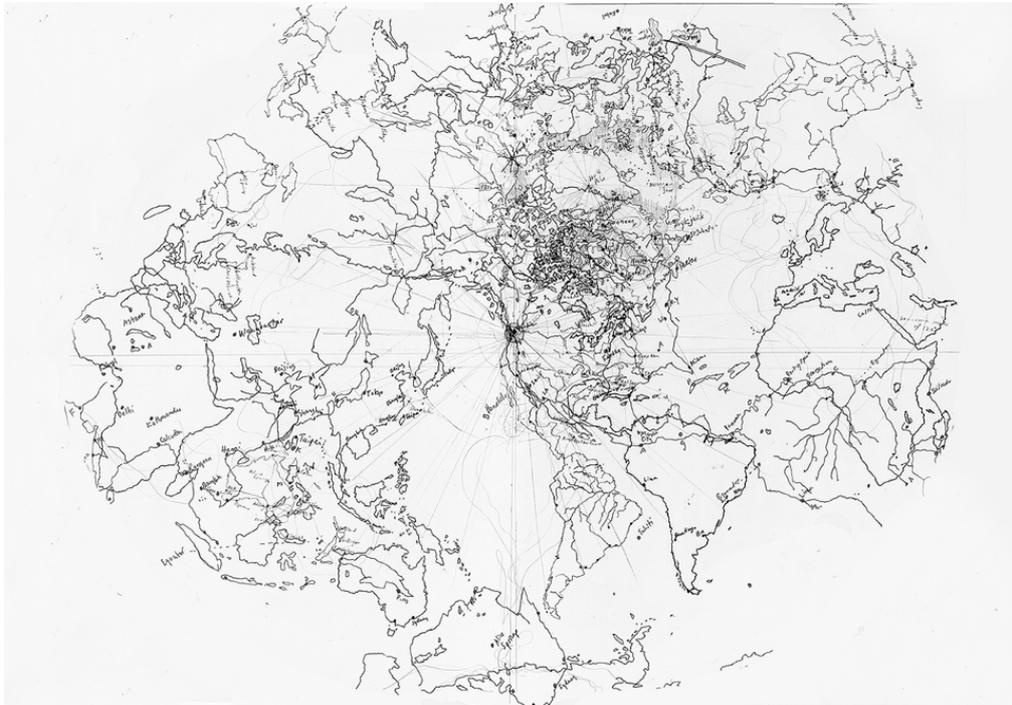
Painting can still be affective.

DB : Going back to the new work : Against geopolitics and a multipolar world of states, it seems that your world map is a map of networks, of nodes of networks (shipping lanes, internet networks, cables, airline routes, satellite networks). So, your different maps are full of different boundaries insisting on very old and very new networks, how do you choose among all of them, the ones that are significant ?

LM : I am interested in the ideas of networks : neurological ones, invisible ones as well as traces of them. Perhaps smuggling routes where there is no record kept or the migration routes of animal and sea life that we can't find reliable patterns for are good examples. For instance with the northern Caribou herds or Sockeye salmon in the west of Canada we insist that science will always tell us where they are, but it can't. I like the mix-up of low tech and high tech over natural systems. The Internet is in flux changing over from 40-year-old buried sea cables

that sometimes are broken by a fishing troller or small earthquake. Soon it will be a system of satellite technology, but in a way it is all just a magical kind of spider web that is unevenly applied. I am also attracted to physical networks like train tracks, hydro towers and wires and have used a lot of these in the past.

"Untitled map drawing"



"Untitled map drawing" (2009, ink on paper, 50 x 60 cm) by Landon Mackenzie

DB : Where does it come from, your interest in networks and the mapping of networks ? Could you explain to us your reflection and trajectory ? When did you begin these mappings and how has it evolved in your work ?

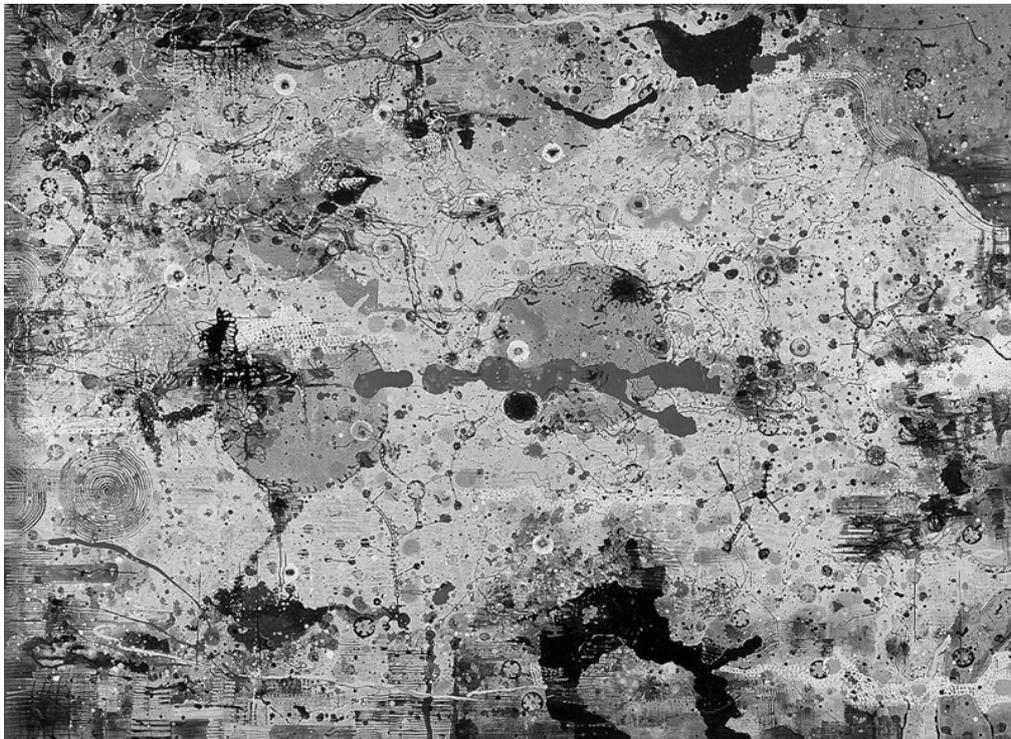
LM : My paintings since the late '70s became more map like over time and in the early 1990's I began a project which became a trilogy of about 30 large pieces over 10 years where I layered Canadian official histories with secrets. They were grouped under three titles : *The Saskatchewan Paintings*, *Tracking Athabasca* and *Houbart's Hope*. In 2001 I had some nervous system problems and was introduced to several kinds of brain imaging through the kindness of the Canadian taxpayer and our free health care. By 2004 I had put the material I was gathering on the brain together with my landscape approaches as a painter and was looking at the parallels in image and language with the brain as the new frontier. *Houbart's Hope (Blue)* ; *Tracing one warm line (2001-2004)* is an example. All the works in the trilogy were large, at 230 x 312 cm, insisted on the body of the viewer in reading the work. Art can't always be taken in intellectually.

"Houbart's Hope; Tracing One Warm Line"



"Houbart's Hope; Tracing One Warm Line" (2001-2004, acrylic on linen, 7'6" x 10'3") by Landon Mackenzie. Collection: Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal.

"Houbart's Hope; Crimson Lake"



"Houbart's Hope; Crimson Lake" (2001-2004, acrylic on linen, 7'6" x 10'3") by Landon Mackenzie

DB : The choice of color to create impressions of continuity while showing all the boundaries and limits seems very important, how do you achieve that ?

LM : Colour is key to most of my work. I think I have a low-level synaesthesia as I respond to colour very intensively and instinctively. In *Vancouver as the Centre of the World* I had intended to experiment with the typical blues and greens and beiges. At the start I rolled on an intense, deep cherry red colour with the idea of it being just a layer. It was intended to enrich the effect in behind the image and top layers, and metaphorically act like the blood bellow the

skin. It reminded me of delicious Victorian wallpaper. But when I saw it the next day, I was so taken with it and excited that I repeated a second layer to intensify it more. You have to picture a canvas three meters long stapled to the floor of the studio to begin the work. I knew I had something that I should use. It had a strange way of describing the land and the sea. I didn't want to conceal it. I put Vancouver in the optical centre and then began to outline the continents. Originally I assumed I would fill in the land space but then I realized it would be better if I was to repeat the continents as a reference to how the world turns. My approach is very time based working in bits over weeks and months to feel my way along. It is both informed and intuitive.

Detail from "Vancouver as the Centre of the World"



Detail from "Vancouver as the Centre of the World", 2009, by Landon Mackenzie

DB : what is your relation to place, to the local (Vancouver) in a world where circulation and networks are seen as central ? How do you connect place, subjectivity and mobility ?

LM : The idea of doing a work where I had Vancouver as the centre was timely because of the Olympics which I think are going to signal a new subjectivity for the city in contrast to how it was historically portrayed. I didn't want to just cut and paste it east/west. I had the problem of reorganizing it centrally from north to south as well. It resulted in me drawing a stretched and very large Russia over the top, and sneaking the South Pole up from the bottom. I chose not to shift the orientation from North. In the end it doesn't say that much about Vancouver itself, but it suggests that the centre is where ever you are at the moment. I am like many people a bit uncertain about in my relationship to place but I am strangely always home when I am in my work.

DB : Can you say more about Vancouver and it's locality and mobility in the world since you have chosen to place the rest of the world around it ?

LM : Vancouver is in an interesting location of opportunity because in contemporary transportation we are the closet international city/port/airport to Asia from North America and in the same time zone as LA. I like the idea of 9 hours to Tokyo / 9 hours to London, 10 hours to Shanghai / 10 to Madrid, but also to look over the North Pole to Moscow which may soon be possible. Diagrams in airline magazines with the little red lines are always missing after I have been on a flight. This area where Vancouver now stands was depicted for centuries on the edge of the earth and shown practically falling off the top left and this has effected our perception

of ourselves. We continue to feel remote and to be Euro centric as British Columbia. Those who are not of Asian heritage are used to thinking of a space like China or the former USSR as being far, far away ; a mixture of geography and language as it appeared to us growing up on every school classroom wall. There is a whole other piece to this discussion that has to do with our disconnection to the southern Hemisphere.

DB : So do you think there is a connection with the imagination and the image of the map and of a perception of identity ?

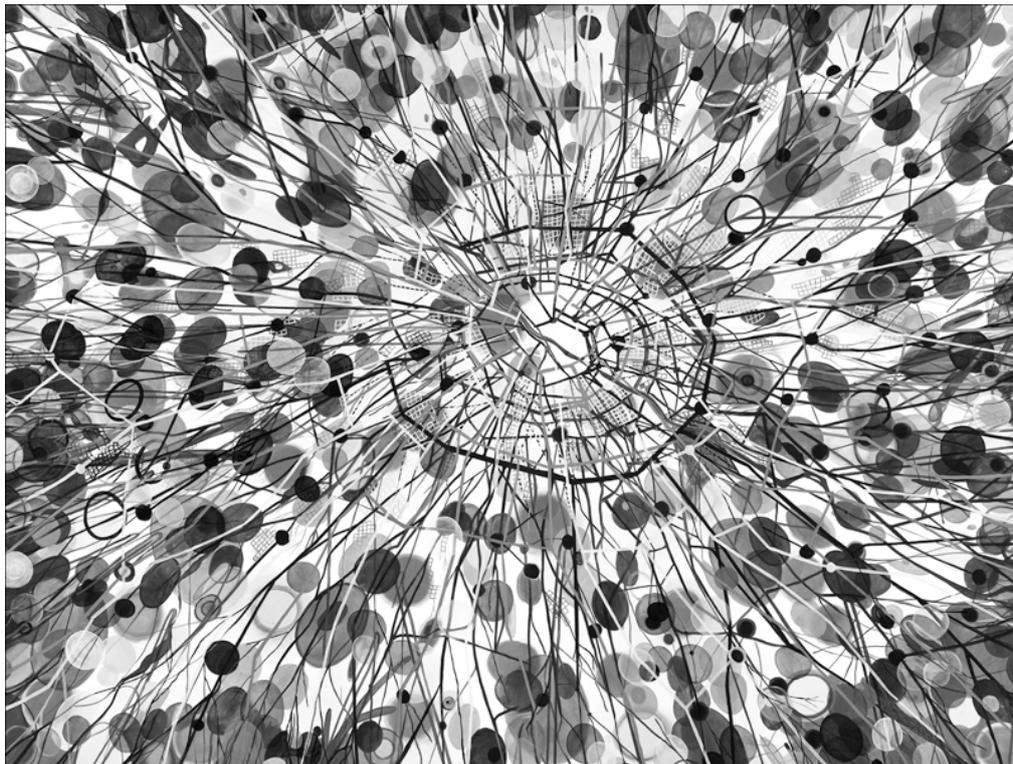
LM : I have no doubt of it especially as this perception has begun to change. We now see more maps where the Pacific Ocean is centralized.

In every newspaper or magazine I can usually find a sanitized cute logo of the world making it seem innocent and attainable. It is usually in the ad for a bank or as a weather picture. Vancouver is conscious of being a community of immigrants beginning 150-200 years ago and accelerating dramatically in diversity in the last 50. There is widespread awareness and acceptance of this as a good thing but also an acknowledgement of a complicated and systemically prejudiced relationship to the aboriginal peoples of the region and of the work still to be done to correct that. Global trade, travel and business is a given but so too is the small united-nations assembly at every high school dance. There is a 5 meter painting of mine called *Map of Vancouver* which was commissioned for Simon Fraser University's Centre of Dialogue that attempts to reflect these concerns.

DB : How do you see the consequences for human beings to represent and to live in this world full of multiple but quite porous boundaries instead of the straight lines of geopolitics ? Do you think one day your maps will be nearby the state minded maps in manuals of geography ?

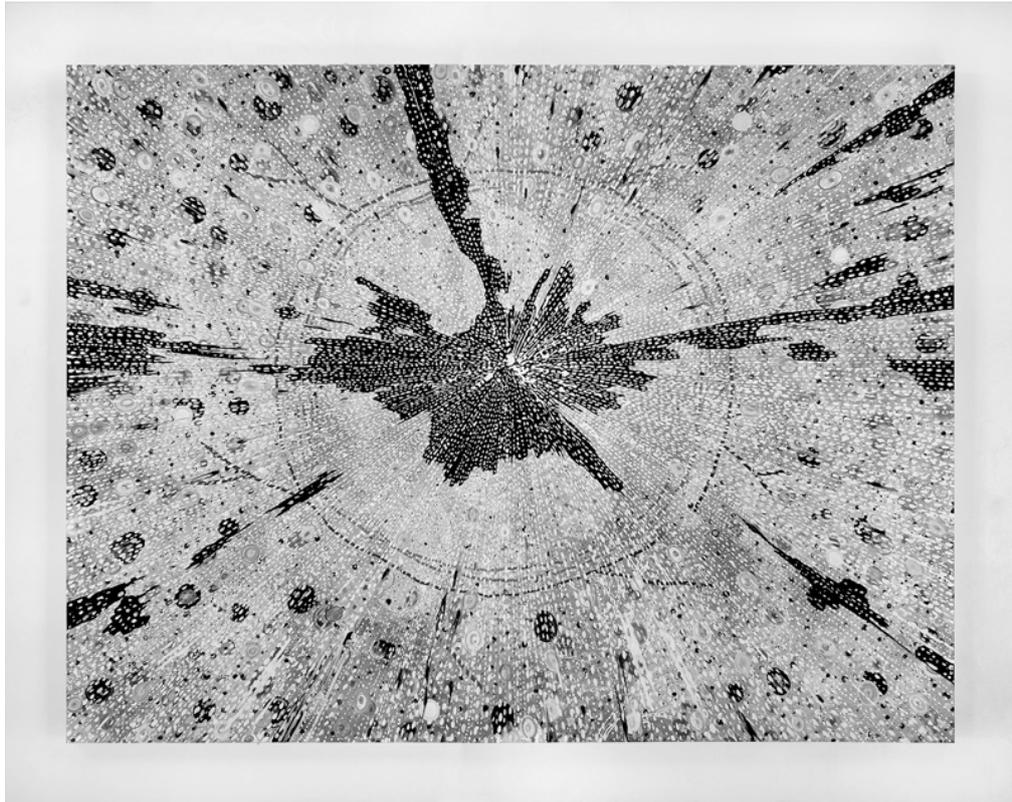
LM : I think we are moving in that direction. The question : "Where are you from ?" is curious and complicated for most of us. We all know people who were born in one continent, who moved with their parents to another, went to study university and get married in a third and now live in a fourth. It is relative and relevant even if you've just bounced all over one country as I have. Many Canadians hold two passports and travel regularly. So small network lines of connection to millions of personal maps would be a lovely thing. Two recent paintings called *Point of Entry* (2009) or *Neurocity* (2007) are not specifically about this but some of these ideas are in them.

"Neurocity"



"Neurocity" (2007/08, oil on linen, 220 x 290 cm) by Landon Mackenzie

"Point of Entry"



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Landon Mackenzie is known for her large-format mapping and abstract paintings as well as her expertise in cartography research. Her work is in many museum collections across Canada including the Vancouver Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Canada. She is Professor at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver.

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Entrées d'index

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