

RE-CONFIGURING ABSTRACTION

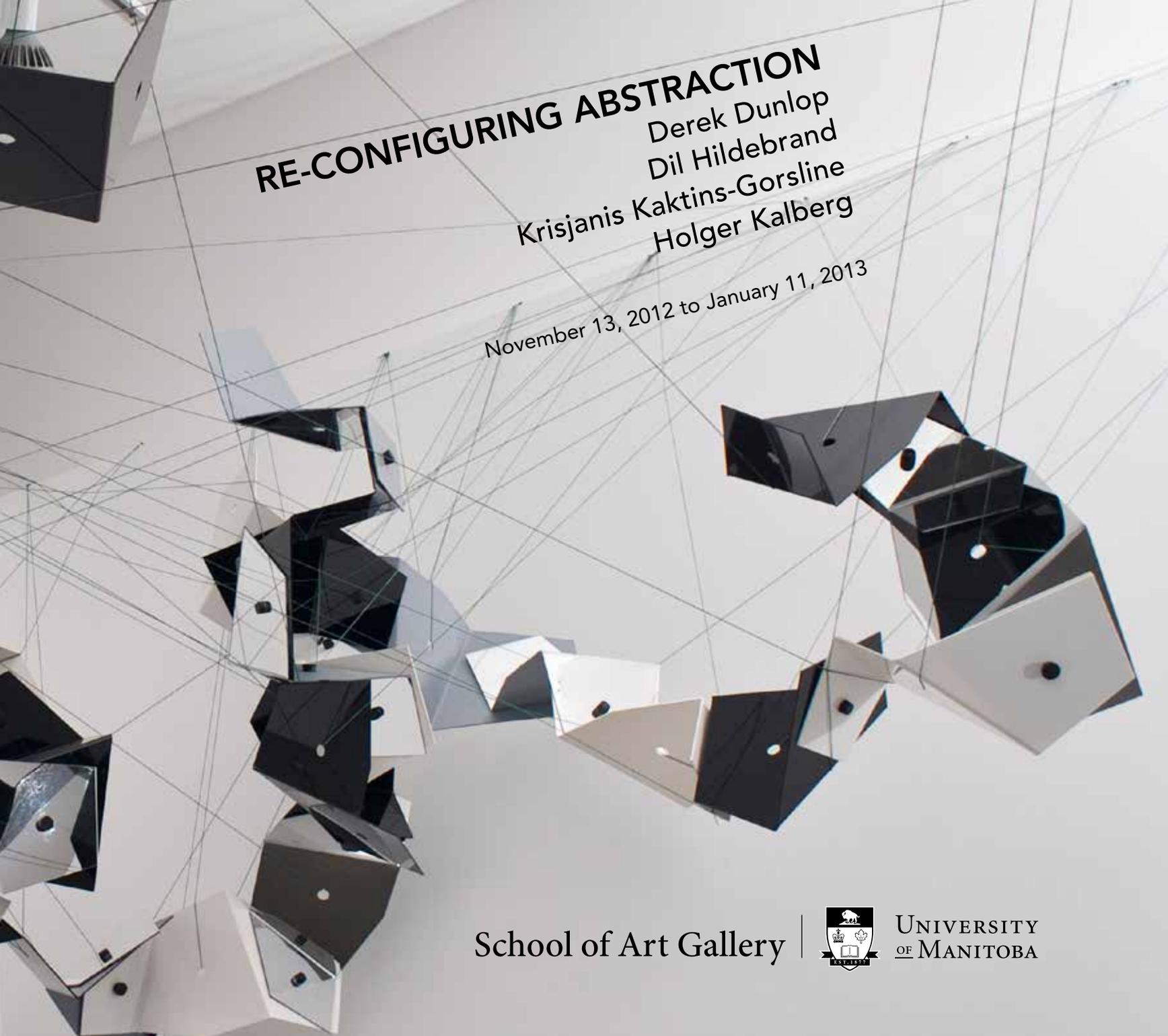
Derek Dunlop

Dil Hildebrand

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline

Holger Kalberg

November 13, 2012 to January 11, 2013



School of Art Gallery



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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Holger Kalberg, German, b. 1967, *Untitled Suspended Structure*,
2012, acrylic, string, silicon, installation dimensions variable,
approximately 182.88 x 304.8 x 304.82 cm, courtesy of Monte
Clark Gallery, photo courtesy the artist

RE-CONFIGURING ABSTRACTION

...considering here and now

The impetus for this exhibition came out of a desire to show a contrasting perspective to contemporary practice that is currently linked to Winnipeg.¹ This was coupled with an interest that was sparked while I was project managing the 2008 Winnipeg Art Gallery's retrospective exhibition of the work of Bruce Head (1931–2009),² considered one of the four grandfathers of abstract painting in Winnipeg. Although they *liked* to referred to themselves as “The Four Musketeers,” Head, along with Tony Tascona (1926–2006), Winston Leathers (1934–2004) and Frank Mikuska (b.1930) were the first artists in this city to dedicate themselves in a concerted

¹ Concurrent and contemporaneous exhibitions *My Winnipeg*, at the Plug In ICA and *Winnipeg Now*, at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, characterize contemporary artistic production in Winnipeg towards representational, figurative and narrative-driven concepts and output. Full disclosure: I played a significant role as part of the selection committee for *Winnipeg Now* during my tenure as the Curator of Contemporary Art and Photography at the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

² This exhibition was mounted at the Winnipeg Art Gallery from September 11, 2008 to November 30, 2008, and curated by Amy Karlinsky.

fashion to the investigation of abstract imagery in their art practices, starting in the early 1950s, when they were still students at the School of Art.

Now in 2012, fast-forwarding sixty years,³ moving through and out of the other end of modernism, my inquiry lies in where abstract painting resides today. With a particular nod to the “Winnipeg connection,” after taking a temperature of the “local” environment, my survey led me to explore a specific type of abstraction, one steeped in the modernist tradition. This mode of abstraction centres on the conflation of the figure-ground relationship, which goes back to the very core of what is considered abstract painting: where confusion occurs between what is the subject and what is the object.

Dil Hildebrand (b.1974), Holger Kalberg (b.1967), Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline (b.1980) and Derek Dunlop (b.1978) are certainly not “The Four Musketeers.” Although they are all connected to the School of Art in some fashion,⁴ as former students and/or instructors, and are acquainted with each other’s work, they are not a “gang” of abstract painters in any sense of this 1950s slang. Each works in his own highly individual manner. As a curator, I have done what a curator does. I have brought together works by these artists that share a certain sensibility with one another in order to partake in a conversation; in this case about a specific type of abstract painting. All four of these artists are highly

cognizant of the machine of modernism, yet they are not concerned with being part of a style. Instead, their work collectively is about communication, and each is coming to abstract painting as a new vehicle or means to add something to the larger discourse.

Of the four artists included in this exhibition, Dil Hildebrand’s work could be considered the most “representational.” Aspects of the real world, such as the ubiquitous cutting board and architectural plans or models, are direct references made in his paintings. With Hildebrand’s most recent pieces, he is following a trajectory that he started in 2011. As a means to push his work forward, Hildebrand consciously let go of the illusionistic, atmospheric landscapes or architectural interiors that populated his earlier explorations. As a consequence, he reduced his reference points to the basics of compositional planning. The skeleton of the grid and the materiality of paint have become his primary touchstones.

³ This fast-forwarding means skipping over a number of significant artists who practised abstract painting and were connected with the School of Art, University of Manitoba; in particular Ken Lochhead (1926–2006), Robert Sakowski (b. 1943), Diane Whitehouse (b.1939), Alex Bruning (b. 1937) and Don Reichert (b.1932). Unfortunately, given the tightly focussed nature of this exhibition and the limited word count of this accompanying essay, a discussion on the work of these artists is not possible.

⁴ Dunlop has been an instructor; Hildebrand received his first two years of undergraduate instruction; Kaktins-Gorsline is an alumnus and current instructor; Kalberg is an assistant professor.



Hildebrand, *Tracing*

Tracing (2011) is the oldest piece presented by Hildebrand and is an example of the dramatic break he made with representational imagery. Here the grid becomes the subject and flips up onto the wall, where dots of different sizes slip or slide out of order, leaving traces of their expected placement. The blackboard-like patina is countered by the pristine band of white at the bottom of the painting. This relatively small and perplexing work has led to more monumental pieces, such as *Domestic Arrangement* (2012). Bridging a completed painting unto itself and a well-developed study for a later work to come, *Tracing* marks a significant break that prefigures Hildebrand's current investigations.

Domestic Arrangement places the grid as the ground upon which an elaborate architectural structure is built. Employing a limited palette of greens, whites and browns, Hildebrand is drafting and imagining a construction that looks like the marriage of Kurt Schwitters' (1887–1948) *Merzbau* (1933) with a shantytown house. Stairways, archways and porticos delineate spaces. Textural elements push the compositions into the space of the viewer. Although Hildebrand has moved stylistically quite a distance from his earlier work, he hasn't completely abandoned his expert handling of *trompe l'oeils*. Discrete little areas of illusion occur in the work. Planes of white double as walls and blank canvas. The repetition of elements is countered with intriguing combinations. The controlled nature of this painting balances the

inherent asymmetry and the tenuous relationships between colour, line and form. Replete with associations, Hildebrand's constructions will never be fully realized in a three-dimensional format. Instead, they stand as gifts of potential, play and imagination about the (im)possibilities of architecture (made out of paint).

Also following this aspect of control and nod to architectural references is the work of Holger Kalberg. His earlier paintings of modernist houses provided him with a good deal of critical attention. As a means to get beyond this subject matter and direct his work into a new realm, Kalberg began reworking the less successful or not fully resolved paintings from this earlier series. By scraping, sanding down and painting over the canvas surfaces, Kalberg started incorporating collage in a conceptual manner, borrowing various elements from art history, in terms of imagery, techniques and styles, and bringing them together in one work. Kalberg's paintings are also like a visual manifestation of an encyclopedia of the history of abstract painting, where pages are ripped out and scrapbooked together to create new relationships and associations.

This is quite evident in the work *Prop 1* (2012), which is dominated by an atmospheric plane of green that pushes in from the sides, framing a quasi-figurative form. This figure/head-like form acts like a window onto the remnants or ghostly traces of an earlier image of a



Hildebrand, *Domestic Arrangement*



Kalberg, *Prop 1*



Kalberg, *Prop 3*

modernist building. The “haze” of green refers to 1960s Colour Field painters such as Jules Olitski (1922–2007). It closes in on the interior form that is the silhouette of a biomorphic sculpture that Kalberg made. Here is another dip into the traces and tropes of modernism, this time reaching back to Surrealism and the work of Jean Arp (1886–1996). The dominating central image of *Prop 1* recalls the work of Painter Eleven artist William Ronald (1926–1998). Now a completed painting, the earlier or original subject is transformed, references have collided and been mixed together, creating combinations that delight as much as they confuse.

Challenging the limits of painting are Kalberg’s suspended structures, which fall under the notion of “hybrid practices,” where painting manifests itself in a different format. A collage of angled polygon forms grows like a complex protein from the corner of the gallery. This piece holds the potential to continue to reproduce, threatening to invade the entire gallery space. The limited colour palette of black and white suggests that a late 1950s painting by Paul Emile Borduas (1905–1960) has been replicated and produced a 3-D skeleton. As discussed with Hildebrand, and will be later referenced in the work of Dunlop and Kaktins-Gorsline, patterning is an important feature, giving Kalberg’s suspended structures strength and stability. According to the artist, he is “working on the intersection of abstraction,

representation, craft, design and commodity ... [and his] works are assemblies and collages that function as a delivery system for the desire to have meaning while at the same time resisting it.”⁵

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline comes to his form of abstraction in an almost playful manner. He received earlier critical recognition for his surrealist, biomorphic, figurative work, where the grotesque and the beautiful commingled to create extremely uncanny, visceral associations. In the past year his painting practice has made a dramatic shift in content. Intrigued by the shapes that were created on the newsprint sheets of paper he used to blot his earlier representational work, he began creating stencils from these mono-print forms. These by-products, mirroring or echoing the shapes he created while painting unusual humanoid forms and faces, have now become a system of malformed templates opening up a whole new range of opportunities for the artist.

Kaktins-Gorsline holds a deep interest in patterning, particularly the key role it plays in biological structures,⁶ a role it also plays in abstract painting with its inherent duplication and repetition. Deceptively simple, pattern is

⁵ Holger Kalberg, artist statement, 2012.

⁶ Conversation with Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline, October 5, 2012.



Kaktins-Gorsline, *Inspector (Inspector)*

a powerful design element that can slip quite quickly into a trick or crutch. However, Kaktins-Gorsline does not shy away from it, and in his new paintings he attempts to subvert the power of pattern head-on. This challenge is highly indebted to his engagement with the painting process and the materiality of the medium.

There is a sequential, almost evolutionary nod to the development of these new works, such as *Todd Glass* (2012) and *Inspector (Inspector)* (2012). As mentioned, the stencils come out of the earlier paintings, as do Kaktins-Gorsline's palette and painting techniques. He purposefully and mindfully began taking note of what colours he used most frequently and the methods he employed to apply paint to the canvas. From this inventory of stencils, colours and approaches Kaktins-Gorsline constructed a rudimentary deck of 34 cards, one for each of the aforementioned variables. Incorporating chance and randomness in a prescribed manner, the artist literally "draws" what he is going to paint next. In other words, he uses the deck of cards, much like the child's folded-paper fortune-teller game, to determine what stencil, colour and painting procedure he is going to exercise to create his next pattern application on the canvas.

Incorporating this systematic process, each painting creates new problems and variations and moves further and further away from the starting point, while at the

same time circling back through the pattern. With Kaktins-Gorsline's work it is important to consider that the process is a means to an end. This artist is dealing with circumstances as they unfold, which can create happy accidents or difficult challenges. The novel system he has constructed cannot predict what is going to happen next in his painting. It feeds into his goal of rearranging this mode of abstract painting instead of critiquing it; he is interrogating its fundamental structure from the inside out. Once Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline has completed a series of paintings, normally marked by an exhibition, he destroys almost all the stencils and cards and starts anew, creating a new set of rules to play in and around.

Perhaps the most "abstract" of this foursome is Derek Dunlop. Like the other painters, his roots come out of representational imagery; however, over the last couple of years his work has made a noticeable shift towards pure abstraction. Dunlop's practice is heavily indebted to the drawn line and in that respect shares a certain sensibility with the work of Hildebrand. However similar to Kaktins-Gorsline's painterly process, Dunlop's employs "stenciling, diagrams, engagement with materiality, and chance, creating systems,"⁷ from which he works through. Over the past 6 years, he has progressed from creating stencils from patterns noticed on TV (particularly drawn from Iraq war imagery), to wall paper appropriated from pornography, to military/historical/science diagrams, to his own digitally created drawings.⁸

In the work included in this exhibition, Dunlop replicates the short-hand computer drawing until it covers the canvas. Just as Hildebrand returns to the basics of the grid in his own practice, Dunlop executes that same exercise, yet in a more controlled and discreet fashion. Where Hildebrand produces controlled explosions, Dunlop pulls back to the very essence of the image, as evidenced in *systematic (white)* (2010). In this work, a tassel-like form is repeated in a lattice formation. The extreme subtlety of colour and the network of the overall form turn the process of looking into a meditative rumination. Moving criss-cross along the canvas, the eye begins to notice slight differences in each of the markings, creating delicate patterns that appear and disappear as quickly as they are noticed.

Two years later, this “overall” effect Dunlop is developing with his most recent 2012 *untitled* “square” paintings pulls the image back even further to focus on one individual segment of his earlier grid works. Like Kalberg, Dunlop’s “squares” are directly engaging with art history and the history of paint, specifically to the work of Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) and Suprematism as well conceptual painting from the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ Fundamentally architectural in their structure, the square images are delineated by a series of purposeful colour transitions produced within an economical palette.

The three paintings in this exhibition have an ethereal

quality, in no small part due to what seems to be an internal light glowing from the centre of the canvas. Their floating squares become meditative foci, simultaneously open and contained, where silence and void are balanced between evidence of human mark-making and signifiers. Poetic and mysterious, Dunlop’s paintings border on the spiritual and evoke a state of mindfulness in the viewer. A balance between temporality and timelessness play out in his work, with his inherently static paintings seeming to possess almost imperceptible movement.

Perhaps the most subtle paintings in comparison to the other artists’ works, they are by no means delicate. There is a strength and toughness to the handling of the medium. The application of paint may be measured, but without question it is also purposeful. Dunlop is “approaching painting as a conceptual artist, thinking about painting as the best medium suited for asking [and] probing difficult questions about spirituality, ... visuality, utopia, [and] difference.”¹⁰

Excited by this recent development in his practice, Derek Dunlop is at the very beginning stages of mining

⁷ Email correspondence from Derek Dunlop, November 6, 2012.

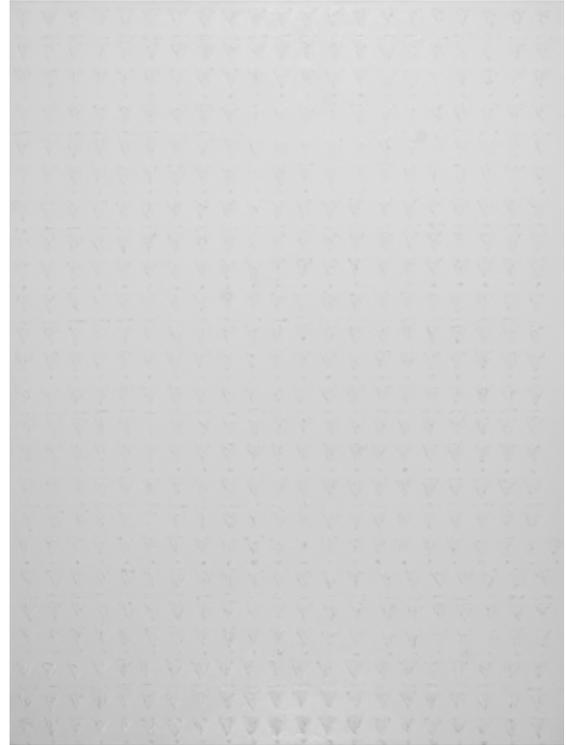
⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Kaktins-Gorsline, *Todd Glass*



Dunlop, *systematic (white)*



Dunlop, *untitled*



Dunlop, *untitled*

this trajectory of investigation. His inclusion in this exhibition was a means to steer this conversation about abstract painting toward another project, one that looks at abstraction in terms of pure form and the materiality of the medium itself. This mirror exhibition will occur in the coming season but is not intended to be a “part two.” Instead, it will continue the loop of this inquiry, looking for connections, acknowledging differences and perhaps even identifying patterns. Given the work presented here and plans for future exhibitions, it is clear that abstract painting is very much a richly challenging contemporary practice.

Mary Reid

Mary Reid would like to acknowledge Denis Longchamps for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, as well as the artists for their generosity extended towards the organization of this exhibition.

List of Works

Dimensions are in cm listed as height x width

All photos are courtesy of the artists

r = reproduced page

Derek Dunlop, Canadian, b. 1978, *systematic (white)*, 2010, oil and pencil on canvas, 91 x 152, collection of the Artist, r 12 right

Derek Dunlop, Canadian, b. 1978, *Untitled*, 2010-2011, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76.2 x 60.96, collection of the Artist

Derek Dunlop, Canadian, b. 1978, *Untitled*, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 50.8, collection of the Artist, r 13 top

Derek Dunlop, Canadian, b. 1978, *Untitled*, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 58.42 x 58.42, collection of the Artist, r 14 bottom

Derek Dunlop, Canadian, b. 1978, *Untitled*, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 50.8, courtesy of Michael Gibson Gallery

Dil Hildebrand, Canadian, b. 1974, *Tracing*, 2011, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 30, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain, r 3

Dil Hildebrand, Canadian, b. 1974, *A Small Distinction*, 2102, oil on canvas (mounted on panel), 68.5 x 53, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain, r 16

Dil Hildebrand, Canadian, b. 1974, *Domestic Arrangement*, 2012, oil on canvas, 193 x 147, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain, r 5

Dil Hildebrand, Canadian, b. 1974, *Module*, 2012, oil on board, 68.5 x 53, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline, Canadian, b. 1980, *Todd Glass*, 2012, oil on canvas, 147.32 x 121.92, courtesy of Battat Contemporary, r 12 left

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline, Canadian, b. 1980, *Inspector (Inspector)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.92, courtesy of Battat Contemporary, r 9

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline, Canadian, b. 1980, *Whitehead*, 2012, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.92, courtesy of Battat Contemporary

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline, Canadian, b. 1980, *Zummad*, 2012, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.92, courtesy of Battat Contemporary, r 15

Holger Kalberg, German, b. 1967, *Untitled Suspended Structure*, 2012, acrylic, string, silicon, installation dimensions variable, approximately 182.88 x 304.8 x 304.82, courtesy of Monte Clark Gallery, r cover

Holger Kalberg, German, b. 1967, *Prop 1*, 2012, oil on canvas, 81.28 x 66.04, courtesy of Monte Clark Gallery, r 6

Holger Kalberg, German, b. 1967, *Prop 2*, 2012, oil on canvas, 137.16 x 182.88, courtesy of Monte Clark Gallery

Holger Kalberg, German, b. 1967, *Prop 3*, 2012, oil on canvas, 139.7 x 177.8, collection of Jeremy Caddy, r 7



Kaktins-Gorsline, *Zummad*



Hildebrand, *A Small Distinction*

About the Artists

Derek Dunlop was born and raised in Winnipeg. He received his BFA in Visual Arts from Simon Fraser University and his MFA in Visual Arts from the University of British Columbia. Since graduation, he has participated in group shows and conferences both nationally and internationally. He has a socially engaged studio art practice influenced by a variety of critical discourses including phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Over the past several years, he has increasingly committed to the materiality of paint, in which he sees a future for new and important aesthetic experience.

Dil Hildebrand was born in Winnipeg and obtained his MFA at Concordia University, Montreal in 2008. In 2010, Hildebrand participated in the 4th Beijing International Art Biennale in Beijing, China, and produced *Long Drop: The Paintings of Dil Hildebrand*, a monograph published by Anteism Press. With critical texts by Louise Déry, Richard Rhodes and Christine Redfern, *Long Drop* surveys a selection of Hildebrand's paintings on canvas and paper from 2006 to 2009. His work has been collected by major museums throughout Canada, including the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the National Gallery of Canada. He lives and works in Montreal.

Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline was born in Winnipeg. He received a BFA from the University of Manitoba and an MFA from Columbia University in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *Nervous Lattice*, at Battat Contemporary, Montreal, *Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, at Mullherin Pollard, New York, and *Krisjanis Kaktins-Gorsline*, at Heather James Fine Art Gallery, Palm Springs, California. Krisjanis' work has been featured in recent group exhibitions including *Indivisible* at the Foreman Art Gallery in Quebec, *Here We Aren't So Quickly* at Thierry Goldberg Gallery in New York, *The Phoenix Art: The Renewed Art of Contemporary Painting*, curated by Robert Enright, at Galerie Simon Blais in Montreal, and *The Open*, at Deitch Studios in New York. Krisjanis was a semi-finalist in the 2011 RBC Canadian Painting Competition. In 2011 he was also the recipient of a Canada Council for the Arts Research and Creation Grant. Krisjanis lives and works in Winnipeg, where he is an instructor at the University of Manitoba.

Holger Kalberg was born in Germany and currently lives and works in Winnipeg. Kalberg studied at Emily Carr University in Vancouver (BFA 2001) and the Chelsea School of Art, London, UK (MFA 2007). His work has been featured in the Vancouver Art Gallery's *Paint* and in a solo exhibition at Queen's University/Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, as well as in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Canada. Kalberg has received BC Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts production grants and he has been a multiple finalist in the RBC Painting Competition and the Celeste Art Prize in London, UK.

