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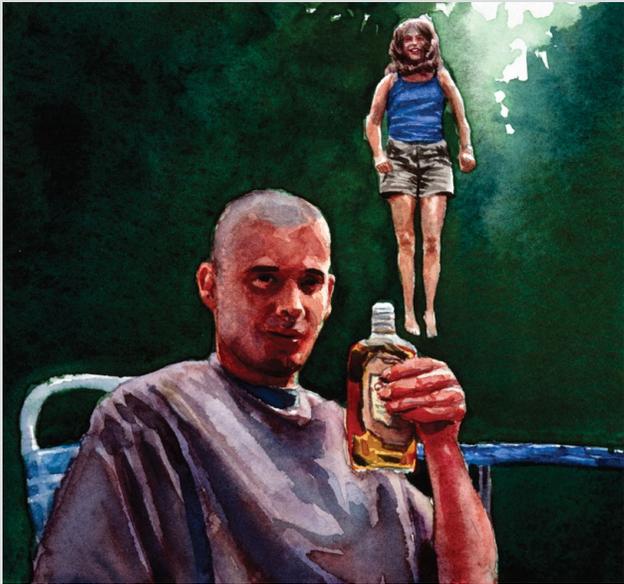
From Photo to Fine Art: Tim Gardner's Transformative Paintings

TIM GARDNER, *The Nature of Things*, 1998, watercolor on paper, 27.3 x 18.4cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY PAUL LASTER



TIM GARDNER, *Untitled (Sto with Girl and Liquor)*, 1999, watercolor on paper, 14.6 × 15.2 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

Artists have been using optical devices to assist in the making of paintings and drawings since the Renaissance, or at least according to the Hockney–Falco thesis.¹ The theory advanced by artist David Hockney and physicist Charles M. Falco argues that certain Old Masters including Caravaggio, Leonardo da Vinci, Jan van Eyck, Rembrandt, and Vermeer, and the French Neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres employed optical instruments such as the camera obscura and lucida, and curved mirrors, to achieve more acute aspects of realism.

In the 19th-century, the Impressionist Edgar Degas used his own photographs of portraits, dancers, and nudes in addition to photographer Eadweard Muybridge's cabinet card pictures of horses in motion for his paintings, pastels, drawings, monotypes, and sculptures.² Meanwhile, during the Modernist period, the notorious self-taught painter Francis Bacon made use of found photos torn from books and magazines, and also commissioned *Vogue* photographer John Deakin to create portraits of his friends and lovers,³ which became source materials for the distorted figures in his canvases.⁴

In contemporary times, artists ranging from Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter to Andy Warhol and Richard Prince have readily employed photography in the making of their artworks. Thus, there is little surprise that the Canadian realist painter Tim Gardner works mainly from this medium to create his watercolors, pastels, and oil paintings of friends, family, and everyday things. When Gardner got around to using photographic imagery as the point of departure for his work in the mid-1990s, the practice had become common.

Gardner started drawing as a child, and became serious about pursuing an art career in high school when his teacher encouraged him to put together a portfolio. Graduating with a BFA from Winnipeg's University of Manitoba in 1996, he held his first solo show of paintings, based on snapshots of fellow workers on a tree planting crew, at the city's Plug-In Contemporary Art.

He used these paintings toward his graduate school applications for Yale and Columbia. While he was accepted by both, he chose the latter for its "laid-back" atmosphere and its location, which puts New York's vibrant art scene close at hand. While at Columbia, he started making watercolors from earlier snapshots of his brothers and friends in Ontario, where the Gardner family had lived before moving to Manitoba.

Partly inspired by the voyeuristic paintings of suburban adolescent sexuality by Eric Fischl, and the punk, homoerotic paintings of skinheads and military cadets by Attila Richard Lukacs—whom he worked for as a studio assistant while at Columbia—Gardner's watercolors caught the attention of photographer Collier Schorr, the 1999 visiting artist at Columbia's MFA program. Schorr went on to acquire Gardner's works for her private collection, and recommended him to New York's 303 Gallery, where she also showed. The gallery presented a selection of Gardner's realistic watercolors of people in rural settings in its May group exhibition, even before he graduated.

His first solo show with 303 Gallery in January 2000 sold out and garnered critical acclaim. Exhibiting sensitively rendered paintings and watercolors depicting carefree middle-class youths traveling to, and partying in, different parts of the world, Gardner hit a chord with viewers that resonated beyond the Gen-X subjects being illustrated. "I'm thinking of the pictures from an art perspective, what the work represents, and about role playing," Gardner told *Rolling Stone* in 2000.⁵

The work lacked the distanced coolness of appropriation art. Instead, it took one into the thick of things, capturing the rite of passage to adulthood, like Larry Clark had done in his 1995 movie *Kids*. In fact, Clark had also been a visiting artist at Columbia and—according to Gardner—took a liking to his work.

The post-adolescent scenes at the exhibition of his brothers Nick and Tobi, along with their friends, in moments of freedom included *Untitled (Sto with Girl and Liquor)*, in which Nick's friend sits in a lounge chair holding a pint of whisky while a girl bounces on a trampoline nearby, and *Untitled (Naked Runner)* (both 1999), where one of Tobi's pals runs on the school track field in the nude at night. "I lived in Ontario for pretty much [all]



TIM GARDNER, *Untitled (S in Vegas)*, 2001, watercolor on paper mounted on panel, 22.2 × 29.8 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.



TIM GARDNER, *Untitled (Family Reunion)*, 2001, watercolor on paper mounted on panel, 29.8×44.5 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

of my life," Gardner continued in *Rolling Stone*, "Then in my last year of high school, my family moved to Winnipeg. My older brother got to stay behind in Ontario, and I'd just end up drawing these pictures of him and his friends hanging out because they'd take a lot of pictures of themselves. So at the time my social life was like a vicarious social life through drawing these pictures . . . I've kind of stuck with that ever since."

His second solo show at 303 in April 2001 offered more images of juvenile shenanigans, along with portrayals of isolated subjects in nature and at family events. *Untitled (S in Vegas)* pictures one of Nick's friends with a drink under the city's glowing Flamingo Hotel and Casino sign, his red eyes revealing the realism of the moment rather than that of the actual scene. Meanwhile, *Self-Portrait: The Hi Line Trail* renders Gardner in shades, engulfed by nature on a dirt path in the Canadian Rockies. *Untitled (Family Reunion)* (all 2001) depicts nearly 100 members of his extended family, alongside a lake in the same region.

Expanding his range of male archetypes and personal iconography, Gardner's 2003 solo at 303 featured portraits of competing bodybuilders alongside his usual gang of revelers and more mild-mannered family members. A still life of a bottle of Crown Royal whiskey and a Christmas tree marked particular moments in time, while a northward view of Harlem as seen from Columbia and a nighttime panorama of Los Angeles as seen from the Hollywood Hills commemorated certain places in his life.

Subsequently, a solo show of related watercolors was staged at Stuart Shave's Modern Art gallery in London, where the artist would continue to successfully exhibit for the remainder of the decade. When he moved back to Canada in 2003, he began experimenting with pastels, which he would master by his 2005 solo show at 303. Taking old family photos, Gardner created a suite of medium-scaled portraits of his past: images based on his high-school yearbook pictures, formal representations of his brothers in their graduation outfits, and professionally shot photographs of the family from when the boys were children to their teens.

"Mainly I focus on the most immediate subject matter, so it's just elements of my life and people and experiences, places that are kind of close to me," Gardner declared in a 2007 podcast interview he did in London in relation to his solo exhibition that year at the National Gallery. "It's just about looking at who I am through where I've been and the experiences I've had."⁶

1 Hockney, David, and Charles M. Falco. "Optical Insights into Renaissance Art." *Optics and Photonics News*, no. 7 (2000): 52-59.

2 "Edgar Degas as Photographer to be Featured in Exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum." Archived Press Releases, December 11, 1999. <https://www.getty.edu/news/press/exhibit/degas.html>.

3 Editorial. "Francis Bacon—Photographs, Painting, Destructive Criticism and More." *American Suburb X*, May 29, 2015. <https://americansuburbx.com/2015/05/francis-bacon-discussing-photographs-painting-destructive-criticism-and-more.html>.

4 Halpert, Peter Hay. "Influence and Inspiration: Francis Bacon's Use of Photography." *Aperture*, 1996.

5 Udovitch, Mim. "Hot List." *Rolling Stone*, (September 14, 2000): 10.

6 Episode 3. The National Gallery Podcast. Podcast audio. January 2007.



TIM GARDNER, *Untitled (Manet)*, 2009, watercolor on paper, unframed: 27.9×38.1 cm, framed: 53.3×61 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

The museum exhibition occurred due to the persistence of his dealer Shave, who took actual works with him rather than transparencies to the preliminary meeting with curator Christopher Riopelle, who saw a relationship between Gardner's work and the institution's Old Masters paintings. When he was invited for a residency at the museum at the end of 2005, the artist paid close attention to the rendering of clouds in JMW Turner's paintings at the National Gallery and studied its vast collection of Rembrandt portraits, and passed countless hours at the British Museum researching John Singer Sargent's watercolors.

The resulting work, however, was still consistent in subject matter with his earlier ones, ranging from pastels of his father and brothers in nature to watercolors of an ice hockey team and a lone basketball player at a community playground. "In a lot of the images you see these figures that are sort of uninspired guys that aren't usually aware of what's going on behind them," Gardner explained in the podcast. "I was really inspired by the idea of the sublime, like you see in Turner's work, but trying to look at it from more of a contemporary standpoint."

At Columbia, Gardner was a teaching assistant to Archie Rand, a figurative painter who had been exhibiting since the 1960s. Rand was a champion of Gardner, and encouraged and challenged him by saying that one day he may have a show in a museum that also exhibited Rembrandt. This became true in less than ten years' time. The National Gallery experience led Gardner to realize where his works could go.

For his 2009 show at 303 Gallery and his 2010 exhibition at Modern Art, Gardner created watercolors from his own photographs, primarily of lone figures in urban and rural landscapes. The compositions are more considered and fabricated. For example, *Untitled (Manet)*, of a man contemplating a Manet painting in Paris's Musée d'Orsay, is actually a composite of different images. The works are also more allegorical, with *Men Hitting Rocks Into the Ocean* and *Untitled (Man looking for beer)* (all 2009) appearing to comment on the raucous youths of his earlier pieces—observing that some people attempt to hold onto their youth through aimless activities, while those who went too wild end up derelict.

All of the works during this period were watercolors, which were becoming more atmospheric and larger in scale, requiring more time. Painted in transparent layers, watercolors cannot be corrected, but he enjoys its immediacy. "You can mess up a whole painting with one mistake, but that's what I like about it—that element of risk," Gardner shared in a 2014 *Canadian Art* article.⁷

7 Laurence, Robin. "Tim Gardner: Mountains, Moonlight, Masculinity." *Canadian Art*, March 7, 2014. <https://canadianart.ca/features/tim-gardner-mountains-moonlight-masculinity/>.

8 Wiebe, Christabel. "Tim Gardner." *Border Crossings*, no. 137, March 2016.

His 2013 solo exhibition at Vancouver's Monte Clark Gallery, which has continued to exhibit and represent the artist since then, offered a selection of pastels and watercolors of solitary men in nature. The pastels *Brian*, *Larry Bird Shirt* and *Roy with Red Cup* (both 2012) grew out of his urge to do portraits again. These images are composites, with mountainous backgrounds from other pictures, and characters from Gardner's photos of fellow tree workers from his university days.

Although *Figure with Full Moon, Kits Beach* is a fully fabricated watercolor composed from an altered day-shot of the beach, with a figure inserted, *Headstand*, with a man balancing on his head atop a mountain peak, was based on an actual photo of a student of his brother's during a class outing. *Mt Shasta in Moonlight* (2013), a sublime landscape of the snowcapped mountain under a starry, moon-lit sky, was also included. "Because of their significance to climbers," Gardner stated on the phone when we were discussing the work, "I consider mountains to be a subject matter for portraits"—a statement that underlines his passion for the outdoors.

"I've been exposed to mountain culture since I was a baby," Gardner revealed, "I'm really interested in climbing. I read a lot of climbing books, and years ago I saw a parallel with painting in how it's so monotonous and meticulous. The things these guys write about, like being stuck in a snow cave for a week, while having to make it seem interesting. There's also been the influence of my dad, who was a geographer, and my mom, who was a family therapist. I took the physical, landscape side from

my dad and the human side from my mom. I think a lot about the person and why they are in the natural setting. I'm interested in the boundary between them, which is why there's often a fence, railing, or window sill separating people from nature."

He became even more experimental with watercolors for a 2015 show at Winnipeg's Lantern Gallery. Painting a collection of vintage whiskey bottles that belonged to his wife's grandfather, who owned a local bar, the artist set up the still life photos on white paper in front of a window, and then realistically rendered the bottles on various colored backgrounds with a wet wash. The light shining through the brown bottle of Canadian Club casts an amber glow through the glass, while the aura of the clear bottle of Seagram's Crown Royal burns radiantly. A 2016 review of the show in *Border Crossings* commented that the split dark-light fields of the backgrounds recall Mark Rothko's fuzzy abstractions.⁸

Gardner's follow-up solo with Monte Clark in 2015 focused on nocturnal scenes, inspired by the woodblock prints of the 20th-century Japanese artist Hiroshi Yoshida, who created daytime and nighttime versions of the same image. Again, Gardner used his own daytime shots, digitally darkened before being reproduced as watercolors. *Two Men in Canoe, Lake Louise*, which places the rowers in a sublime setting, and *Man Washing Face and Big Dipper* (both 2015), which captures someone cleansing himself on a dock, both use figures culled from Google Images.

The artist challenged himself to create oil paintings for his 2016 Monte Clark exhibition. Translating some of his earlier watercolors into larger canvases and revisiting past subject matter in new



TIM GARDNER, *Headstand*, 2013, watercolor on paper, 26.4×35.6 cm. Courtesy the artist; Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver; and 303 Gallery, New York.



TIM GARDNER, *Self Portrait with Old Piano*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 24.8×30.5 cm. Courtesy the artist; Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver; and 303 Gallery, New York.

photos, this body of work came together slowly due to what the perfectionist painter refers to as his “failure rate,” as he would start over or re-do certain areas. The attention to detail paid off, especially in *Corvette Night Scene*, a sort of mid-life crisis scenario of a man lighting a cigarette in front of his sports car while gazing at the moonlit water, and *Snowboarder on Vancouver Island* (both 2016), which positions a recreationist atop a snow covered peak as he plots his descent.

In 2018, Gardner returned to 303 Gallery. Seeing it as a homecoming, he made New York City the focus. Revisiting his old haunts like Columbia University and Riverside Park, along with newer sites such as the High Line, he created a visual love letter to the city. *College Walk*, a detailed depiction of the Columbia campus, took weeks to render, while *Night in Park* (both 2018), of a runner in Central Park, came to life quickly.

For his May 2020 solo exhibition at Monte Clark, Gardner stuck with watercolors. *Self Portrait with Old Piano* (2020) spans time as the artist is portrayed touching the instrument that he played in his youth, with his Columbia cap perched on a nearby coatrack. Meanwhile, *Breakfast Scene*, *Lake Louise* (2019), of a setting for two with a breathtaking view, and *Crown Royal Kitchen Scene* (2019), which stars the whiskey bottle in an otherwise mundane setting, offer fresh takes on the still life genre. *L.A. Morning* and *L.A. Evening* (both 2018) present views of a bicyclist going to work and coming home past the same spot in Los Angeles, reflecting Hiroshi Yoshida’s influence. *Black Cat on Window Sill* and *Tomcat on a Fence* (both 2020) play the same kind of visual trick, with the black cat moving in one direction and the gray and white feline headed the opposite way.

In the studio almost daily, with his work process remaining somewhat unchanged even as the subject matter has evolved, Gardner has created an autobiographical body of work. Although without a political agenda, he has moved with the times, shifting from youthful subjects to adult themes, and from the usage of film camera snapshots to digitally derived imagery. Subtly psychological, his art is exacting in technique, detached in scrutiny, yet majestic in its intimacy. Like a visual haiku, it says all it needs to say, in a poetically engaging way.

Tim Gardner

Iowa City-born Tim Gardner grew up in Canada, where he currently lives and works. He received a BFA from Winnipeg’s University of Manitoba in 1996, and an MFA from New York’s Columbia University in 1999. Since the late 1990s, Gardner’s watercolors, pastels, and oil paintings explored a specifically North American middle-class world of masculinity and the pictorial conventions used to document it. His early source material comprises photographic snapshots, either found or taken by the artist, that capture the rites of passage in which his subjects partake. Since then, his work has rekindled a sublime aesthetic of Romanticism, depicting his subjects engaged with the natural and urban environment. Nocturnal scenes influenced by Japanese woodblock prints further explore the identity of his figures amid sobering landscapes. Gardner has exhibited internationally, such as at the National Gallery, London; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Kunsthalle Basel; and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. His work is in the collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, among others.

Paul Laster

Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, artist, and lecturer. He is a New York desk editor at *ArtAsiaPacific*, a contributing editor at *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, and writer for *Art & Object*, *Time Out New York*, *Harper’s Bazaar Arabia*, *Galerie Magazine*, *Sculpture*, *Cultured*, *Architectural Digest*, *Garage*, *Surface*, *Ocula*, *Observer*, *ArtPulse*, *Conceptual Fine Arts*, and *Glasstire*. He was the founding editor of *Artrush*, started *The Daily Beast’s* art section, and was art editor of *Russell Simmons’ OneWorld Magazine*, as well as a curator at New York’s P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1. He most recently organized exhibitions for the Outsider Art Fair, Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York, and Intersect Aspen.