

## THE ARCH: A CONVERSATION WITH TRAVIS MCEWEN

November 22, 2017

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*Travis McEwen's practice perches on the peripheries, revels in ambivalence, and assembles plans for worlds rich with inclusion. He engages with representing those historically under-represented, constructing spaces for the composite, the othered, and the marginalized. McEwen primarily works through the medium of painting and strives to "queer" the genre of portraiture, utilizing an intense palette and a delicate stroke.*

*Over the last two years, McEwen's practice has swelled to include not only the cast of his quasi-utopic speculations, but potentialities of landscapes and structures for them to be with.*

*On September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017 Travis McEwen's The Arch: Plans for a Heterotopic Space Opera, opened to the public at dc3 Art Projects, marking McEwen's return to Edmonton and his first solo exhibition at the gallery. While he was in town, Jessa Gillespie from dc3 Art Projects sat down with McEwen to discuss the growth of his creative practice, his education in Montreal, and the theories behind his work.*

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**< jessa gillespie >** Let's start out with where you are from.

**< travis mcewen >** Well I was born in Red Deer, and spent a total of two weeks there. Then, I was adopted and spent basically the first 25 years or so of my life in Edmonton. I did my undergrad here.

**< jessa >** What first drew you to art-making?

**< travis >** I guess the cliché: I've been drawing since I can remember. I was an avid drawer as a child, and continued on with it. I was really lucky, I had a lot of educators who encouraged it and were very patient with me, because I definitely drew more than did anything else. So that helped. But I went and did fine arts in post secondary because I didn't know what else to do, and I was like, *I'm good at this I guess?* I started out at Grant MacEwan and transferred to the University of Alberta. I didn't know what I was going to do with it though. I thought earlier on that maybe I would end up doing illustration work for books or whatever. In a way this show is me coming back to really early interests, as I was a nerdy kid who liked science fiction and fantasy.

< **jessa** > Right, you always think about the career.

< **travis** > Exactly, but then I ended up in post-secondary, and that helped me figure out what I was actually interested in pursuing.

< **jessa** > What did your practice focus on in your undergraduate degree?

< **travis** > It has always been figure-oriented in some way. I've always been interested in depicting the human form, as well as including some sort of referential material in the work. It may seem silly, but I just really like drawing people. In my final year I was doing these drippy portraits, one of which ended up being a part of NextFest and on the cover of Vue Weekly, both of which were such nice opportunities. These portraits became about my own experiences being a queer person and my relationship to gender. I was very aware that during that time that my relationship to gender wasn't quite as fixed as many other peoples around me.

So that was 2007, in 2008 I had a show at Latitude 53 in their old space. These new works were all young people in transition, on the cusp of being older or experiencing puberty. There were things changing, exaggerated in terms of expressions. I was applying the paint really thinly, in sort of a scrubby way. They had a pastel feel and were fuzzy, out of focus. These also remained quite naturalistic, in terms of skin tone and hair colour.

< **jessa** > Naturalistic meaning...?

< **travis** > Brown hair, blonde hair, nothing out of the ordinary. Various Caucasian skin tones. Nothing like what is up here today.



*Untitled I (From a Radiant Heterotopia), 2014, oil on canvas, 12 x 10 in.*

< **jessa** > So you went to the University of Alberta for your undergraduate degree, and then did you take any time off afterwards?

< **travis** > I worked a bit at The Paint Spot and at Gravity Pope. At first it was fine, I was able to keep a day job and paint in the evenings. But I found that increasingly getting harder. I had already thought that I would like to go to grad school, but I wasn't sure where yet or what that would look like. I got to this point where I needed that time to be able to do this thing, and not really worry about other stuff. I also had, and have a lot of really great friends from doing my BFA at the U of A, but at this point all of our working spaces were in different places, and so I was missing that sense of community. One where other people are making things around you, and you're surrounded by it all the time. So that really pushed me to apply to graduate school.

< **jessa** > Definitely. Being inspired by your peers is huge! And getting critique as well.

< **travis** > Exactly. A more constant dialogue. It's not like it wasn't totally there for me. I really appreciate what the Edmonton community had to offer me. I just wanted a more intensely focused situation, which wasn't happening all of the time while I was here.

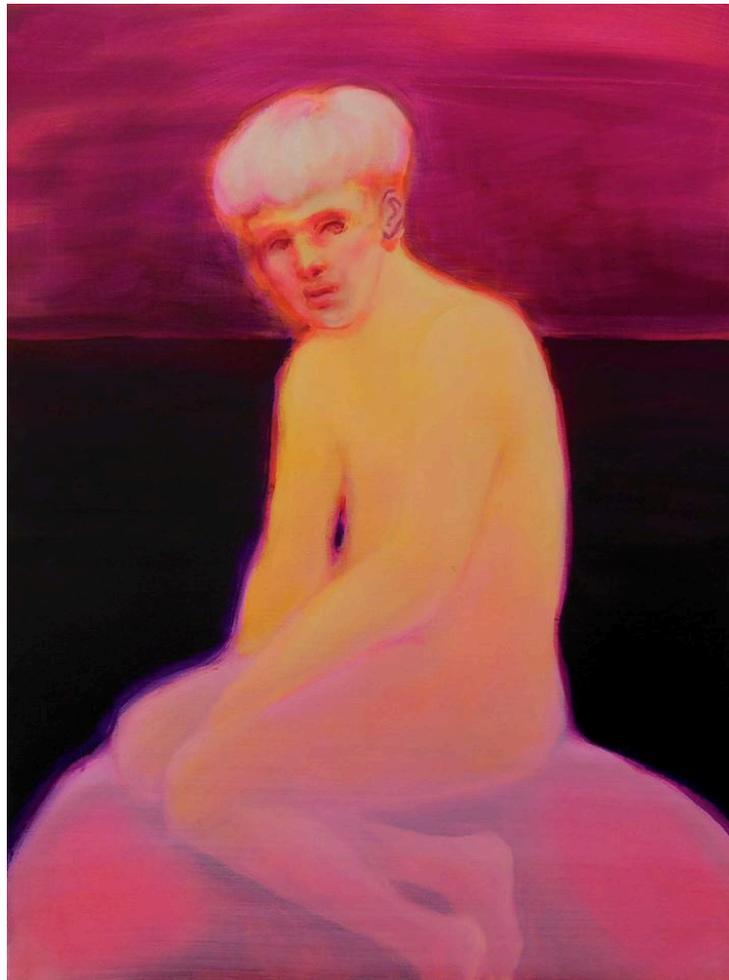
< **jessa** > So you decided to apply to grad school at Concordia.

< **travis** > After my show at Latitude 53, I did a lot of really random things, but still very portrait-focused. Portraiture has become a scaffold for me, a structure that I can work with and around.

Then, when I started at Concordia, I thought, *well I'll just keep making faces*. It allowed for me a freedom to decide how to use paint. If I have the subject matter there already, I can think about the colors, the paint application, what all of that means. I started off doing mostly one-off paintings. In junior high I used a lot of watercolours, and came back to it at this point while waiting for larger things to dry. I ended up really liking the sense of delicacy, how I could hold them in one hand. So, I started accumulating all of these little ones. One of my professors was asking how I was going to display these in our yearly graduating exhibition, prompting the series to slowly become realized in these salon-style groupings. I originally liked the isolation of the portraits, but then when they were grouped together I realized how much they were in conversation with each other, even if they were their own image. It seemed to make more sense, as they helped each other carry a presence. This was when I started thinking about the paintings themselves as a component to an installation rather than as a discrete object. And in regards to the conceptual nature of the work, the ways in which queer people find community (whether that's online or wherever it happens), we are holding space together, not physically, but in these virtual spaces. This realization reinforced the arrangement of the work.

< **jessa** > Your grad exhibition at Concordia, what did that consist of?

**< travis >** They were paintings on canvas, all portraiture. The colours started getting more intense with these, a lot of vibrant pinks and greens and purples. I wanted to talk about these people's isolation and their difference, but to also have them be powerful or special in some way. I think pushing the palette in that direction really gave them a presence as well, because even if in the image they were isolated, this presence gave the figure an internal life. A lot of this body of work ended up being at the AGA for the Alberta Biennial in 2015.



*For Hans Andersen, 2014, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in.*

**< jessa >** Can you speak a bit about the experience you had during your time spent in Montreal?

**< travis >** I found the first few months really difficult. I had never lived anywhere else, and Montreal is quite different than Edmonton. Language being the obvious factor of difference, but also culturally, the arts permeate the city in so many different ways. Geographically and architecturally the way the city is oriented really screwed me up for awhile, and in the fall and winter the sky clouds over and doesn't un-cloud until the next year, so there's this iron curtain that sits above your head and feels very oppressive.

I wasn't sure what to expect going into grad school. At first I was intimidated. In my cohort there were a lot of guys making these larger, formal abstract paintings that were really big. I felt completely surrounded by a hyper-masculine group of people. I found myself wondering *is this the right choice, what do I do now?* In the end though, I felt really supported by all of these people. Professor-wise I felt challenged, but very again, very supported. Evergon was a faculty member of mine, and most of the other faculty were women, and with that there was a willingness to talk about certain subject matters I was interested in.

**< jessa >** Let's shift gears here and talk about your process, I understand you use few, if any reference photos. Could you speak a bit about your mental process when creating new works?

**< travis >** I haven't used reference photos for a long time, but it's something I've been thinking about a lot lately. At first I made that decision because it was a way of getting down to business, just putting things down on the support and going. Learning art in Edmonton means learning in a bit of a "hangover" from formalism and Greenberg's one time visit here. I learnt a lot from all of that, even though at the time it was frustrating. I slowly have come to terms with how deeply invested and concerned I am with the formal concerns of the work: paint application, colour, composition. And moving away from reference materials in a way gave me the experience of making purely formal work, but that still held something that resonated with me and with the outside world. It was initially really freeing, not feeling tied to a source image (not that I was ever especially interested in reproducing an image), but it was a way of working that hooked me and I've never looked back. I think in certain ways its allowed me to be non-specific, figure-wise. I have received some push-back on that in the past, with the critique being that it can dissolve the figure into archetypes. That's a risk there, but for myself it meant that I could talk about larger concerns rather than it being about a specific person. It's not one person's experience, it becomes a larger experience for certain groups of people.

**< jessa >** Absolutely, and within that ambiguity you are able to project. You're not spending time trying to figure out who this person is and why they are relevant.

**< travis >** Yes, exactly. They are invented or composites in a way. I think with lots of artists you're often just looking at these figures that are "invented," but of course they come from somewhere. You can't truly invent something you haven't seen before, it may appear that way, but there will always be certain curves, certain colours, something you have seen before. Maybe it was just the way the sun was hitting someone's hair one afternoon, or that thin line of yellow over there [gestures to a detail on the wall]. I've had people say *oh, you know that reminds me of so and so*, which of course is possible but obviously not intentional.

**< jessa >** So your physical process: do you make conscious decisions about palette, composition, etc. beforehand?

**< travis >** More as I go really. Especially now that I've been teaching the last few years, I am more aware of the decisions I am making. There is no wrong first move. I normally start with a warmer colour, and do the under-drawing with paint. The first few moves for me are up in the air, and then after that it becomes

more responsive and intuitive. And sometimes, I will find things not working and paint over all of it. That can allow for ghosts to come through.

Sometimes I will sit down, and I'll have a finished painting in three hours. And other times, it will take months. Often, I will spend a lot of time on one piece, but will have other things that are on the go. The longer something is in my studio and I can see it, the more likely it is that I will revisit it. It's best if something isn't in there for too long, as I tend to cannibalize my own work. Even post-exhibitions, if I have work left in the studio and I need a new stretcher, I'll just completely obliterate a piece and create a new support.

**< jessa >** Sometimes not being precious with your work can be a useful attribute.

**< travis >** Definitely.

**< jessa >** Let's talk about the exhibition. The title of the show is *The Arch: Plans for a Heterotopic Space Opera*, which references Foucault's essay, *Of Other Spaces*. Can you discuss in more detail how his theories have affected your practice?

**< travis >** I'll be the first to admit, I'm no theorist. So the order of how I came to these things seem disjointed to me, but he talks about heterotopias as a space of otherness. He begins by talking about the mirror as an apparatus but also as both a utopic space and a heterotopic space. You're seeing yourself in the mirror and a space in the mirror that's reflected, but of course that doesn't exist, it's just a reflection of a space. But what the mirror does is allow you to see yourself in the space that you're in. This space could be many different things though, but lots of artists use the idea of a mirror, or of placing yourself somewhere, so you can see yourself in the world around you. This really resonated with me. A heterotopia will look like the space everyone inhabits, but it is doing something different for someone or for a group of people. This recent body of work focuses specifically on heterotopias, and spaces of otherness. A space that is within a larger space, and in some ways reflects the larger space, but that is different. I was thinking with these portraits of the spaces they were inhabiting, these virtual spaces, as a heterotopic space. It made a lot of sense to me, and made sense in terms of the spaces that I find myself and the spaces that me and my friends situate and create for ourselves. The other side of it for me is that there are heterotopias in real spaces and then there is the way in which people create spaces, so an art practice can be an act of world-building.

**< jessa >** So if someone has never read Foucault, and isn't familiar with heterotopias, how would you anticipate them engaging with the work?

**< travis >** I've been really deliberate aesthetically with this in referencing sci-fi material: book covers, 70/80s television shows. And I think that the signifiers of these strange superstructures bring up a lot of questions. They're arranged in a certain way, so there's not a narrative, but there are ways of creating a narrative out of it. If they are unfamiliar with heterotopias, then it won't be obvious in terms of explicit meaning, but I think it's about the making of these worlds and alternate spaces that are important.

It's not important for me that people know what a heterotopia is, because I think the experience of the work is ultimately what I am most interested in. The work is emotive, and the vocabulary isn't important.

< **jessa** > Have you experienced or found any heterotopias of your own?

< **travis** > Yes, but sometimes they are more permeable and diffuse. It has really manifested in my friend groupings, as I live in a bit of an intentional bubble. I know especially in the midst of the most recent American election, there is a lot of talk of echo-chambers and that kind of thing.

I love Edmonton but I found that living and growing up in Alberta really difficult in a lot of ways, especially being queer. This comes in and out of my consciousness, as the people whom I relate to most are of a specific grouping of people, which in some ways is intentional. It doesn't bother me for people to say *oh, well you are just making queer art or gay art*. It may be that you're forced into this space, but within that space there's a certain level of freedom that you don't have outside of it to do certain things. In a way you could see it as an ambivalent utopia, there are some things that are wonderful about it, and some things that are not. I choose to have those spaces, to seek them out.



Install shot from *The Arch: Plans for a Heterotopic Space Opera*, dc3 Art Projects, 2017.

**< jessa >** Within the title of the exhibition is mention of space operas, how does that play into the work?

**< travis >** It's not that it is a space opera, but it's a possible plan for one. The landscapes, the characters, the structures, all of the ingredients. I am interested in work that suggests the thing that it's depicting rather than the thing itself. I keep using the example of Christo's drawings of him and Jeanne-Claude's work, the architectural plans for yet to be realized projects. The drawing to me was always way more interesting than the physical work that was created by them. I could imagine it in that space without actually having to see it, and that really resonated with me. In a way, I'm trying to recreate that feeling here.

**< jessa >** You have introduced some sculptural work into this show, could you talk a bit about this new work?

**< travis >** Yes, well it's very new. I like that they sit as possible props or possible artifacts. Formally, colour and shape wise they relate to the painted works. It came about because I was waiting for a painting to dry, and I didn't want to leave my studio. For whatever reason I had brought this stick into my studio, and so I started painting it. I really liked how it worked, it became a little diving rod. But I just put it aside. Then I came across another Y-shaped twig, and I thought *oh, why not make another one*. It became a side project for me.

After my thesis I needed a break from heavy theory, and read all of the Dune novels. The image of deserts was in my head, eventually further fueled by a trip to southern Turkey which is semi-arid and beautiful, but yet another desert space. The work is not trying to be like this, but I was thinking about a return of practices that come with desertification, such as looking for water.

In my queer friend groups, there is a renewed interest in Pagan practices and witch aesthetics. So it also feeds back into that, things that become denigrated or looked down up, and maybe it's not rational or not purposeful, but we'll embrace these things to help us make sense of the world around us.

**< jessa >** How did you decide to display them with the paintings?

**< travis >** That only happened two days ago! Originally the plan was to have them on plinths, and I knew I wanted the tops of the plinth to be the same colour as the walls. I just assumed we would plop them in the middle of the room, because that's where you put things like that. But it just looked really bad. It was just happenstance that one was pushed up against the wall, but we liked it and just went with it. The painting in the corner has prongs within it, and I liked the relationship between those. I would like to say there is something profound and well thought out about it, but it was quite an accident.

**< jessa >** This exhibition in particular is quite unique, as your work stands beside your former professor, Evergon. Do you think that in having the two shows paralleled, it shifts the meaning of the work?

**< travis >** I honestly didn't realize that Evergon and Jean-Jacques would be the other exhibition until quite recently. I've always liked Evergon's work, and formally in terms of colour, the work sits well together. Some general themes overlap a bit, queerness or gayness, and I do find it interesting that they are landscapes/still lives, and they sit together well because of this.

**< jessa >** One of your paintings is in a photograph of Evergon's, how did this happen?

**< travis >** He bought it from me after I had been in his class, and it's in his house now I guess!

**< jessa >** Can you talk a bit about your relationship with Evergon, and how he has affected your practice?

**< travis >** I had him as a professor in a summer session between the first and second year of my MFA at Concordia. The way our group was organized was interesting, there was a lot of people working through themes of identity. It became a nice space of conversation around issues of gender, sexuality, race, so I think Evergon was a good person to facilitate. He's got quite a sense of humour, and he is very professional but also very casual in some ways. I felt at ease, there was a certain levelling of the typical pedagogical situation. He allowed for a flow of conversation that felt even-footed despite how experienced and knowledgeable he was. One thing I appreciated from him was a sharing of his own life and practice, it was really helpful to a lot of us in the class. There was a certain gentleness that I really appreciated.

**< jessa >** In that you're publicly making work about trauma and also community-building, have you found that it's affected you personally, or helped you develop tools for navigating the external world?

**< travis >** The earlier work, where it was even more personal, was helpful in that I was coming into it after the experiences were really acute. So I was revisiting it later, with distance. The experience of making things comes out of a need to do it and even though it can be a struggle, it also is relaxing. It brings a level of reflection. There are things that I think about, and so they just go into the work.

**< jessa >** Who were and are your creative inspirations?

**< travis >** A big one for me is Alice Neel, who is just the best period. I always been able to get so much out of her work (in person and some in reproduction), there is a sensitivity that comes through, they are paintings but not just images of these people. The formal language, paint as a material, is also really important to them. Weirdly also Willem de Kooning, some of his earlier figure work really resonated with me, as well as his work with colour. The photographer, Collier Schorr, has always interested me. I read an interview with her once where she said, *as a female photographer I never felt as though I could really shoot women, and so I was taking photos of men and young boys as placeholders for women*. She talked a lot about the gaze and what that means for a lesbian woman to be taking photographs of these adolescent men. These are what come to mind right now, but I'm sure if you asked me on another day my answers would be totally different.



**< jessa >** Lastly, is there anything you want to continue in your future practice, or new directions you want to go?

**< travis >** There are a couple of things floating in my head. For the last little while, I've had these collages on the go/on the backburner that I may revisit. I'm not a very project-oriented person, I'll probably just go back to the studio and start painting things and some of them will probably fit within this body of work, and maybe some of it won't. I will let the work guide me...I mean I do this in a way actually. *It feels like it wants that, so let's just do that.*