



JAMES LAVADOUR: *The Properties of Paint*

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Rebecca J. Dobkins and James Lavadour

I see time, space, and event in the properties of paint. The properties of paint are infinite, and a painting is a model for infinity. The essence of painting is an organic event.¹

In 2000, the painter James Lavadour began a body of work that came to him with a force he describes in volcanic terms—an explosion, an outflowing of energy. Up until that time, Lavadour was best known for kinetic landscape paintings that are evocative of the geological forces that shaped the earth of his homeland, the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. Working in tones of earth and fire, Lavadour uses processes of layering, scraping, and wiping that in macrocosm and over millennia also formed the hills and ridges the artist grew up walking, around the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

What becomes clear when Lavadour speaks is that he understands painting to be not merely similar to forces that shape the earth but a physical force governed by the same natural laws. His paintings themselves are works of natural and physical forces, in which the properties of paint are revealed—the visceral physicality of liquid and mineral, its interaction with gravity and surface.

I am interested most in paint when it is flowing in mass, and the particles of pigment are like rocks in a flood stream moving and fanning into sedimentary masses. Things happen, patterns appear, objects emerge. A painting is not created, it is revealed. To me, it means we are alive and we are connected in thought.

Born in 1951 in Pendleton, James Lavadour grew up in a family “where everyone made or did something that could be called art.”² Lavadour’s father, Joseph, came from a Native family with many branches—French Canadian, Chinook, Walla Walla, and Assiniboine Sioux—and his mother, Colleen, is of German-Irish descent. Lavadour began seriously painting by the time he was twenty, and among his first works were abstract landscapes he produced using food coloring and watercolor.³ Much has been made of the fact that Lavadour is a self-taught painter, yet he was not isolated in a self-contained world. The land itself was Lavadour’s teacher. Regular hikes through the hills on the Umatilla Indian Reservation provided rigorous training in the powers of observation and the processes of geologic time.⁴

In the 1970s, Lavadour moved back to the reservation from Walla Walla, Washington, where he had finished



Untitled
2000
Oil on paper
19 x 27 1/2"
Courtesy of the Artist and PDX
Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon

(cover) **Cache**
2007
Oil on wood
12 panels, 24 x 30" each; 72 x 120"
overall
Courtesy of the Artist and PDX
Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon



Scaffold
 2000
 Oil on wood
 9 panels, 20 x 30" each; 60 x 90"
 overall
 Collection of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute,
 Pendleton, Oregon

high school, and began to work for tribal government in education, social services, and land-use management. During these years, he pursued his art, and key figures in Pendleton and in the tribal community helped him connect with the broader art world. By the 1980s, he was showing widely, with work chosen for exhibitions at the University of Oregon's Museum of Art, the Portland Art Museum, Sacred Circle Gallery in Seattle, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Heard Museum in Phoenix. Realizing that his success was made possible only through the support of others, Lavadour sought a way to assist other emerging Native artists on the Umatilla reservation and beyond. The concept for Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts was born. Founded by Lavadour and several collaborators in 1992, the institute's mission is to provide

educational, social, and economic opportunities for Native Americans through artistic development.⁵ It offers workshops and classes in traditional and contemporary arts, and it emphasizes the role art can play in Native communities as an economic and cultural resource.

Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts, which is housed in a former Catholic mission school on the Umatilla reservation, has become known for its print studio and for the museum-quality work produced there. This emphasis on printmaking has its genesis in a 1990 fellowship Lavadour held at the Rutgers University Center for Innovative Print and Paper. There, working with master printer Eileen Foti, Lavadour was introduced to the techniques and analytical thinking involved in printmaking. This in turn profoundly affected the way he paints, teaching him to deconstruct the processes involved in his work. He began to separate the stages of an individual painting and conceive of a painting as being formed of many successive layers, like a print.

I'm most interested in the physical properties of the work. Once I learn how to do one thing, I apply it to other things. I'm working on an entire body of work as one work. The palette keeps shifting and changing, and I keep learning. Sometimes I might work on sixteen to twenty paintings in a day but only with one color. I might send them back to the closet for six months or a whole year before I begin to figure out how to go beyond where I was.

In 1995, Lavadour returned to Rutgers for a second residency. While there, he engaged in wide-ranging conversation with a physicist who remarked that the drips and gestures of Lavadour's work could be

understood in terms associated with the physics of flow—phrases such as “cosmic vortex,” “turbulence,” and “fingering instability” (what happens when liquid behaves unexpectedly). Around the same time, Lavadour read a book on the history of Chinese landscape painting that illuminated the notion that painting is not simply a process of depiction but rather a physical experience of understanding the nature of the world and the cosmos.⁶ Layered on top of Lavadour’s already deep foundation, these influences informed the body of work he began in 2000.

I had been painting before but not like this. In June of 2000, I just began. I made hundreds of paintings. Simple marks and events at first, then compounding layers and passages of time. Everything that I know and remembered began to cascade before me. I began to paint in an outflowing burst. I was shaken by so much energy. I felt I was in a small house as some giant form—the shadow of a cloud, an eclipse—passed by.

During this initial creative explosion, Lavadour created thousands of drawings and thus attuned his hand to a new way of working. He surrounded himself with music, particularly that of jazz composer and performer John Coltrane. In Coltrane’s later work, Lavadour heard a process of deconstruction and reconstruction that inspired him in his own artistic searching. Coltrane led him to Indian and other Asian music, which, in their elements, represented the rhythms of earth and landscape in ways new to Lavadour.

He eventually brought together two strands of his work—his landscapes and what he variously calls “interiors” or architectural “structures” or “abstrac-

tions”—in the new images. The first steps are visible in three untitled works on paper from 2000, in which the architectural abstractions are formed in part through the dripping of still-wet paint and the eventual inversion of the images.

Structures and landscapes begin to intersect in large-scale paintings composed from individual panels. This intersection is clearly manifested in the luminous *Scaffold* (2000), which combines expressionistic landscapes with haunting overlays of red and white structural elements. In *Flag 2* (2001), more minimalist architectural abstractions in red and black are interwoven with landscapes that employ not only the earth tones of pre-2000 work but a blue-white wash on the central panel. The four points of the star found in traditional Plateau weaving are found in both compositions; echoes of Plateau geometric designs resonate quietly through these and many of Lavadour’s works.

I use two elemental structures, a landscape and an architectural abstraction (a vortex and a grid). There’s the flow of landscape and then the intersection of the architectural structure, which is just like being in a room looking out a window, with floors, angles, walls, doors, ceilings, pathways. A painting is a complex event with many things going on at multiple levels. Close, far, color, layers, scrapes, and drips all swirled around by memories. I keep it all organized with structure. Structure is the bed to the river.

By the time of *Deep Moon* (2004) and *Blanket* (2005), the landscapes and architectural abstractions flow together in images that are not solely intersecting but compounding (to use Lavadour’s term). Referring to *Deep Moon* in the catalog for the 2005 Eiteljorg Fellowship exhibition, art historian W. Jackson



Ice
2007
Oil on wood
48 x 60"
Courtesy of the Artist and PDX
Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon



Deep Moon
 2004
 Oil on wood
 9 panels, 24 x 30" each; 72 x 90"
 overall
 Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, Portland,
 Oregon

Rushing III writes, “The process-driven image speaks more than ever of the subjective logic of artistic vision. Color is freed from the job of evoking nature as seen, implying instead the mind’s eye....”⁷ Yet this interpretation fundamentally misses the aim of Lavadour’s work as he conceives it. This is not imagery simply in “the mind’s eye” or the imagination. The fantastically vibrant compositions evoke nature not as seen on a mere surface level but as a dynamic process, as an agent of upheaval, waves, and flows. These processes swirl around the relative stillness of the central panel, suggesting that what we

see on the surface is a result of the turbulence underlying the physical properties of the landscape—and of paint itself.

What a painting does is bring you out to the edge of perception, out in that place where there are processes happening that we’re not usually aware of. Painting is a telescope pointing into worlds we cannot otherwise see. There is physicality to perception; there is humanity in the action of making a painting.

Like *Deep Moon*, *Blanket* brings us to the edge of perception or, as Kathleen Ash-Milby, curator at the National Museum of the American Indian, has suggested, to a place of transcendence, each panel being “a glimpse into a universe that teems with color and light.”⁸ Stepping away allows the whole to be seen as a complex weaving. Standing near brings into view the raking and scraping on the surfaces, drawing attention to the almost infinite number of earthly movements captured in stop-motion fashion by Lavadour.

Painting is an ancient art. And as such it requires no less than a lifetime’s devotion. In return, painting transcends time. It lays the geology of the past open. Each layer is evidence of the sun that shone that day. Painting encourages one to see with an open heart. We must work to see beauty.

Lavadour’s very recent work represents the maturation of this extraordinarily productive period. In the course of experimenting with paint, Lavadour developed a technical means to make both the layers and the process of perception visible. He applies a wash of white paint and mica particles that he then partially brushes away from the surface of the paintings. In both *Hollow* (2007) and *Ice* (2007), the process



contributes to the creation of the architectural abstractions and generates an ethereal layer manifesting the physicality of perception he references. The surface plane is fractured into innumerable pieces, leaving traces of movements and moments.

Akin to the earlier *Flag 2, Wash* (2007) arranges contrasting panels in a manner that evokes the Plateau star, yet here the flow of landscape and the intersection of architectural structure are made significantly more complex by the effects created by the white wash. To draw the viewer into the multiple depths of the painting, Lavadour juxtaposes bold gestures of transparent ruby red, sunspot orange, and cool blue with strokes of deeper opaque colors.

This complexity continues in *Cache* (2007), a work that may be read as an embodiment of Lavadour's core values, his understanding of the place from which he comes, and his community's relationship with it. In the twelve-panel composition, surface variations created through the use of the white wash are suggestive of the multiple meanings of the word



“cache” itself. A cache is a storage place, a safe location in the mountains where people left goods before descending into the valleys to embark on the seasonal round of subsistence tasks essential to indigenous Plateau life. It is a storehouse of memory, a place to which one returns for sustenance. Arising from this understanding of the Umatilla homeland, *Cache* illuminates the point where humanity and earth intersect across generations of memory and geology.

My belief is that the earth is one country and humankind its citizen. This work is serving some kind of function in the world: it reveals things, it produces good things. Things that are connected to that original purpose of taking care of the land, creating a sense of social harmony and unity among all people.

River (2007) represents, if not the culmination of this period of Lavadour's artistic exploration, a signaling of what is to come. The essence of Lavadour's experimentation is captured here on a smaller, more intimate, scale. Lavadour considers these works to be the expression of an inversion of the initial outflowing of energy he experienced at the beginning of the period.



Hollow
2007
Oil on wood
3 panels, 36 x 48" each; 36 x 144" overall
Courtesy of the Artist and PDX Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon

The series of nineteen works invites the viewer to approach, to come close, to see these paintings as jewel-like artifacts of Lavadour's artistic processes and of the physical forces of the natural world. Suspended here, waiting for us to perceive, are the properties and possibilities of paint.

Like a river or a cloud, a painting is a moving, dimensional moment. A painting does not happen in one sitting. There are many layers, twists, and turns as it develops through time, just as a river continually takes new tributaries into its current. Turbulent and smooth, it flows forward. A river starts in the mountains and finds its path over great distances. A painting is a destination of many forces.

River (detail)
2007
Oil on wood
19 panels, 12 x 18" each; 12 x 342"
overall
Courtesy of the Artist and PDX
Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon



1. All quotations in this essay are from conversations between Dobkins and Lavadour and statements written by Lavadour in 2007.
2. Quoted in W. Jackson Rushing, "What the Ground Says: The Art of James Lavadour," in *Into the Fray: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2005* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 2005), 71.
3. For reproductions of Lavadour's early work, see Vicki Halper, *James Lavadour: Landscapes* (Spokane, Wash.: Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, 2001), 14, 17.
4. Both Rushing and Halper make points similar to mine here. See Rushing 2005, 71; and Halper 2001, 15.
5. See www.crowshadow.org for more information.
6. In a 2005 interview with artist Eva Lake, Lavadour discusses both his experience at Rutgers and the book *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China*, by Michael Sullivan (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979). See www.lovelake.org/event_of_painting_James_Lavadour.htm.
7. Rushing 2005, 80.
8. Kathleen Ash-Milby, ed., *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination* (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 29.

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JAMES LAVADOUR lives and works on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where he is artistic advisor to the Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts.



Blanket

2005

Oil on wood

15 panels, 24 x 30" each;

72 x 150" overall

Collection of the National Museum of the
American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

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