

Interpreting the City: Nightscapes by David Wilson



Cambie at Hastings 42 x 42 inches Acrylic on canvas 2005

by Ann Rosenberg, Art Critic and Curator

There aren't many things that could get me off the bus before my stop, but a vibrant nightscape in the Aion Art Gallery on Main Street in Vancouver did just that. From a distance, and at a closer range, the painting was, apparently, a spontaneous interpretation of a city vignette on a rainy night.

Although it was only a couple of months ago, when I did speak to Wilson about the painting in the windows of the Aion, he told me that his art is seldom about a single local. He was pleased that I was still haunted by the neon blues and blood red reflections that swam over the slick, black pavement like tetras and by the buildings' windows that glowed like cat's eyes casting an eerie light on the brick and stone surfaces of the edifice.

What was happening in that piece and in the majority of Wilson's canvases has nothing to do with high (photographic) realism. There is a hint of gentle, smooth modeling of light and darkness such as Leonardo practiced in the Renaissance when he employed chiaroscuro in the creation of his three dimensional figures. More likely, if there are stylistic influences they originate in the cityscapes and nocturnes of late 19th century

artists Pissaro and Whistler and/or in early 20th century street views of Lawren Harris. What is obvious is that Wilson's art eludes obvious interpretation; it is always moving and different than it appears to be.

In the last few weeks I have had the chance to become acquainted with the artist's history and exhibition record. For a young, largely self-taught painter he has an impressive CV and his pieces are selling like hot cakes. People want to buy them not just because they are excellent but because they resonate with experience that the viewer shares with the creator. Even though a scene may not accord with a single "real" view, the parts and pieces Wilson brings together construct a satisfactory whole and are much like the way we experience an urban (or any) moment. If you have ever tested your visual memory of a certain place against reality you will be shocked by how "off" your recollection is, so if not the accuracy, why do these nightscapes attract? For me, the feeling of late night on the rain washed streets is palpably present and as a true Vancouverite I love the transformative power of precipitation, particularly in the evening. For me, the painting's high contrast black and whites, reds and blues, are like notes, syncopations of a jazz improvisation. The looking down from above viewpoint of *Cambie at Hastings* is reminiscent of the visual introductions to CBC and Global News where the incredible beauty of the city at night is as seductive as a diamond necklace.

Although Wilson's night scenes belie the exact truth in favour of emphasizing others, they grow from his deep knowledge of the Downtown East Side. His Abbott Street studio is just south of tourist-friendly historic Gastown and north of Drug Central at Hastings and Main.

As Wilson says, "the city surrounds us with largely unnoticed and seemingly abstract compositions. When those marks are observed from a distance definite designs begin to appear. They attest to North America's attempt to create order out of chaos—and my painting process works in much the same way."