

## director's foreword

### A kind of logic

A diagonal grid of antique tin ceiling tiles lines the ceiling of Daniel Hutchinson's studio in a derelict storefront space on Ottawa Street in Hamilton. When I visit in January, 2016, a peeling skin of paint hangs from the ceiling in large flaps, some of which have already fallen onto the floor below.

Hutchinson got his MFA in Halifax at NSCAD University (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), a school famous for conceptual rigour. The foundational painter at the college then was the late Gerald Ferguson, who executed severe, programmatic work, often in black industrial paint on unprimed canvas. There are some superficial resemblances between the two artists' work. Both, for instance, employ the technique of frottage to draw patterns from their environment into their paintings. Known as tough and uncompromising, Ferguson nevertheless flirted with colour and the decorative, coyly advancing towards, and retreating from, hints of the decorative.

There is no such coyness in Hutchinson – even if many of his works consist entirely of a field of black paint. Like the “black square” paintings of Kasimir Malevich (and also like the strictly orthogonal compositions of Piet Mondrian), Hutchinson's paintings are full of surface incident. His signature technique is to apply the paint in finely grooved brushstrokes that catch the light like the surface of a vinyl record, producing an ever-shifting visual experience organised into patterns that may be abstract, pictorial, or reflective of decorative patterning. He first draws on that surface, in charcoal, the outlines and inner contours of a visual form, before applying paint “to reinforce the drawing.” It is the physical (very low) relief pattern, rather than colour or tone, that generates the image and its three-dimensionality.<sup>1</sup>

Hutchinson also paints on the reflective foil of rescue blankets; metallic, like the tin ceiling tiles whose paint flakes and falls around the artist in his studio. Hutchinson, given to methodical procedures, finds that foil surface “responsive”; his idea of response seeming to arise from his brush's meticulous dialogue, conducted with squeegee or trowel on a surface that has little absorptive capability. This

painstaking procedure allows the applied black mark to sit in the surface rather than on it.

In the first presentation of the exhibition, *Bright Black*, at Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Hutchinson's work appears in a space adjacent to *Mid-Sentence*, an exhibition by fellow painter Rachel Beach, who also studied at NSCAD, and whose later teaching there overlapped with his own. For Beach, whose work has long favoured bold colourations, painting has led her to create freestanding constructions of folded, painted planes. Seeing these two explorations of three-dimensionality in a painting practice, side by side, draws attention to some resonances between the two artists' practices: a dialogue between grey or black monochrome and floral colour; between flatness and three-dimensionality.

Hutchinson's *Everything* – its surface rippled like ocean wave patterns, or a rumpled piece of cloth – is an example of the larger, entirely (at first glance) black paintings in the exhibition, in which an intense blue glows from within, inhabiting the blackness. Hutchinson's engagement with colour and the decorative, although pursued with great intentionality and control, is not, like Ferguson's, a grudging one. Rather, Hutchinson is willing to risk a more sensuous embrace. He finds “something decorative” in abstract painting, and his practice “approaches the ornamental.” Hutchinson speaks of his works “warming themselves to references in other media” such as textiles.

Born in 1981, Hutchinson grew up with a decorative vernacular of the 1970s, embodied in upholstery fabrics. Ottawa Street historically boasts a concentration of fabric retailers, and the textiles he sees there stimulate the painter's thought processes. In his most recent body of work, Hutchinson introduces brightly coloured fields of floral patterning inspired by printed fabrics. In contrast to the textured black, these new coloured elements are painted very flat, the surface prepared with an orbital sander before the application of gesso and a thin layer of wet paint, which is further flattened with a broad flat brush.

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1. All quotations from the artist are from a studio visit by the author, 21 January 2016.



*Fiction's Fiction* Image courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto

In *Fiction's Fiction*, a fuzzy floral pattern, like that of a 1950s housedress, enters the painting from the bottom corners. It encounters a predominant black form that drapes like a curtain being raised on a proscenium to start a new performance. (This allusion to stagecraft recalls Hutchinson's graduate work at NSCAD, where he worked diagrammatic images of theatrical spaces into the surfaces of his black rectangles. Sometimes he allowed small dollops of brightly coloured paint to drip down the surface in a controlled manner, suggesting a figural presence centre stage.)

Hutchinson is "interested in troubling minimalist rationality." He notes that Malevich, a canonical touchstone of minimalism, is "assumed to be reductive," a presumption forcefully contradicted in the actual physical presence of that artist's work. This complicates received ideas about

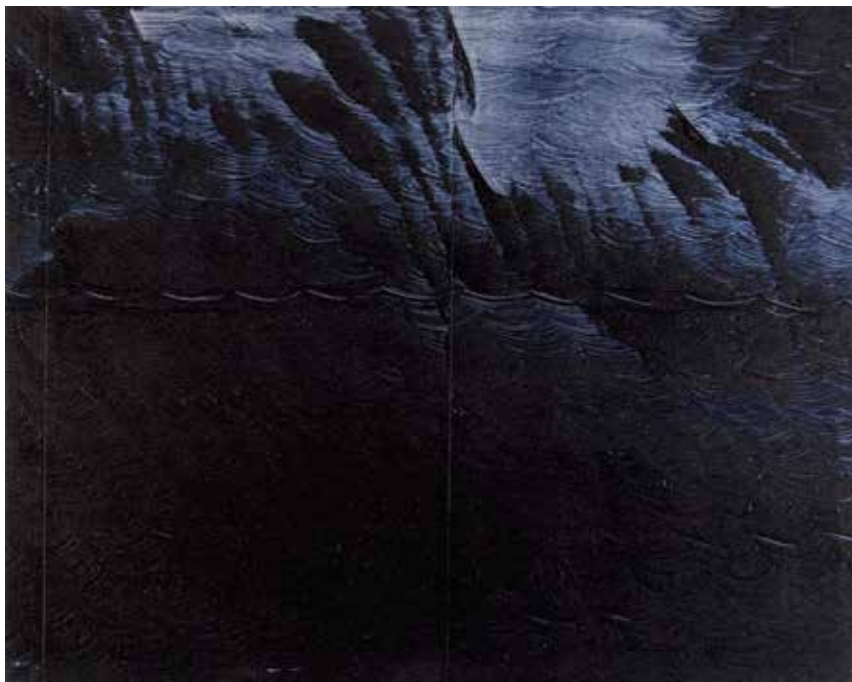
purity of form. Hutchinson allows himself to step outside of orthodoxy, even while maintaining a certain procedural order. "I'm not interested in rules anymore," he says, "but I do like having a kind of logic."

The artist's current work explores classical decorative forms such as the acanthus and arabesque. Opposing the aesthetic hierarchies associated with class and gender, Hutchinson seeks to "recast the ordering of painting and textiles." In *It Could Be You, It Could Be Me*, vivid floral patterning frames a central mass of articulated black, its crumpled outline and contours suggesting a sheet being pulled away. This theatrical reveal is just another instance of a drama that has always been present in Hutchinson's work, for the searching eye.

Robin Metcalfe



*It Could be You, It Could be Me* Image courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto



*Sixteen Days at Sea 04* Image courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto

## artist's statement

### Notes on *Bright Black* paintings

Most of the paintings I make could be characterised as near black monochromes—not because they are always single hued or resolutely flat, as most good monochromes usually behave—but because they maintain a taught link to a tradition of once radical abstract painting through non-compositionality, reflective surfaces and dynamic viewer interaction. The works call attention to dialectical relationships between representation and abstraction, process and image, colour and non-colour, and minimalism and decorative ornamentation. The paintings in *Bright Black* make up two bodies of related studio investigation: the easel-sized 8 x 10 inch frottage paintings from the series *Sixteen Days at Sea*, and *Mirror, Mirror*, a group of large canvases featuring observational paintings based on found textile patterns obscured by large black forms.

For the series *Sixteen Days at Sea* I used a frottage technique to pull and scrape cool black oil paint over silver emergency rescue blankets bought from the army surplus shop around the corner from my studio. This thin and responsive surface permits the exploration of this highly objective technique, where a large tool like a squeegee or a scraper reveals the image of textured surfaces below without the encumbrances of intentionality, skill or wilful desire found in traditional representational painting. These frottage surfaces index the studio floors and walls, found textiles, and even other paintings from past bodies of work. The frottage works selected for this exhibition are each derived from a single 8 x 10 inch panel painting originally exhibited at Angell Gallery in 2013 for a series of weather prediction paintings entitled *Almanac*. The original painting could be described as an array of repeating arcs painted with a flat half-inch brush and thick black oil paint in a serial pattern from top left to bottom right—essentially a delineated grid in a repeated pattern. In contrast, the frottage paintings derived from that uniform grid painting are anything but predictable or even. Each pass of the squeegee over the same original painting produces strikingly unique compositions. What was once a flat application of painted arcs is transformed into a most nuanced—even photographic—series of images with references to seascapes, landscapes and even the figure.

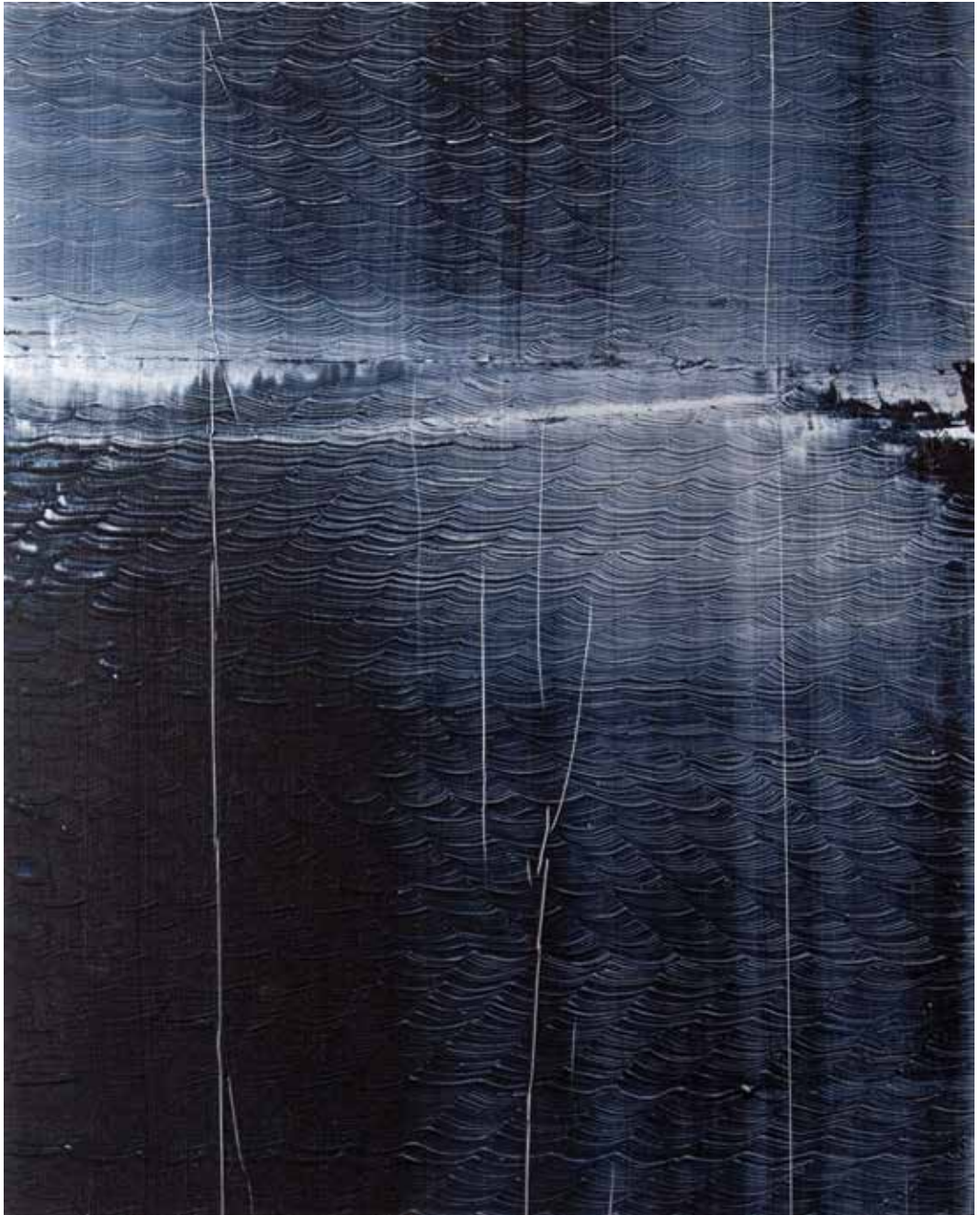
As a seemingly non-artistic, anti-subjective technique, frottage displaces intentionality and artistic will. However, instead of highly objective pictures, these

paintings achieve a surprisingly varied field of marks and rich chiaroscuro tones, which can appear simultaneously as an image *and* a reductive abstraction; a photograph *and* a painting; a hand painted mark *and* an impression of surface; or even a digital print *and* a photogravure. During the making of these works, it became clear to me that the process of finding the art was akin to a voyage at sea, where a ship is subjected to the will of natural forces that shape the energies spent trying to navigate a predictable course through known waters. The most meaningful paintings come from these unknown territories: the variegated gashes and marks left by folds or wrinkles in the foil, and the swells and depressions of tone that result from uneven pressure and speed as the paintings are executed.

The paintings in the series *Mirror, Mirror* are also made to seek out form that escapes intentionality, relying upon generative processes through experiential engagement. Audiences take part in forming the image through physical interaction; as the viewer moves in front of these paintings, the gallery lighting plays across thick brushstrokes of reflective black oil paint, illuminating forms and casting pools of shadow that enliven and activate the surface. Aerial vistas, landscapes and seascapes are once again alluded to, here in the topography of brushstrokes rendered based on found textiles. The intention of these works is to record the observable features found in the study of drapery and pattern while allowing each brushstroke to build upon the previous in a process that creates its own representation, partially detached from the original subject matter.

In both series, the paintings suspend several levels of signification simultaneously. They exist also within an irresolvable location in time. For example, the materiality of black paint and reflective, mirror-like silver surfaces acknowledges a *present tense* viewer here and now. Meanwhile, the indexical trace marks the *past tense* coexistence of a physical action with its absent correlate—the studio floor, walls, and the signs left behind by the maker. Finally, the representations—if they exist—are by-products of anonymous labour and the will and desire of some viewers to project space, figuration and even narrative into the paintings. These paintings are outside of time, tradition and intentionality while beholden to all three.

Daniel Hutchinson



*Sixteen Days at Sea 05* Image courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto



*Sixteen Days at Sea O2* Image courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto

## Finding the Arabesque in the Abstract

A line of bright pink paint peeks out from beneath the blackness of Daniel Hutchinson's painting *This Then That*. I trace the line with my eye until it blends into a fold of thick black paint, emerging again only as the brush stroke unfurls across the canvas. As I train my eye to discern the minute textural details that characterise Hutchinson's paintings in his exhibition *Bright Black* at Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, I'm uncannily reminded of how it felt to practice in my former ballet studio. Hutchinson's paintings, at first glance, are flat black monochromes. Their clean minimalism, objective colouring, and two-dimensional composition classify them as the conceptual offspring of the likes of Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg and Kazimir Malevich. But my muscle memory, more than my formal observations, tells me that this classification isn't quite fitting. The lines and textures in Hutchinson's work remind me of the lines I used to craft with my body in ballet class as I held my arabesque position at the barre. Like Hutchinson's paintings, the arabesque is made up of a network of small movements, of physical details, that each contribute to the appearance of an unmoving whole. Standing in the arabesque, one leg balances on the floor as the other floats out behind me, resting in a strong but lightly held right angle. The arms settle into mirroring postures, with one limb held in oblique suspension in front of me and the other reaching out to my side. This is an exercise in strength, balance and stillness. Later, this shape will be used as a transitional choreography, preparing the body for a turn or leap. But for now, it is unmoving—or appears to be. In this posture, limbs are constantly lengthening, muscles constantly activating. The arabesque relies on these subtle and continuous adjustments to create the illusion of control and stability.

Hutchinson's work features the same balance between tension and fluidity, stillness and movement. Initially, the work in *Bright Black* is striking for its bold and blunt composition. The blackness that grounds the paintings in perceived two-dimensionality appears authoritative, impenetrable and unmoving. But the work's ostensible flatness is disrupted by almost prismatic and iridescent

surface incident that lends the paintings unexpected depth and motion. Within the blackness, spontaneous forms emerge that aren't quite representational but aren't quite abstract either; they aren't quite moving, but they aren't quite still. Instead, these seemingly oppositional qualities in Hutchinson's paintings engage in a reciprocal choreography that renders distinction not only impossible but irrelevant.

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On the back wall of the gallery, small specks of light are reflected above a line of ten 10 x 8 black paintings. In a room dominated by the stark contrast of black canvasses on white walls, the light is an unexpected invitation; it acts a guide, a hint, a suggestion. The paintings are part of a series titled *Sixteen Days at Sea*. Each work is painted on top of reflective and non-absorptive emergency rescue blankets. The light on the wall is an indexical trace of the blankets' metallic surfaces; it appears in flashes among the painted blackness, mapping the movement of the brushstroke and recording the spaces where paint and surface diverge. Hutchinson uses frottage techniques to push and pull paint over the silver blankets. The result is a kind of calculated spontaneity. The frottage motions, which rely more on the surface texture than on the artist's will, produce an irregular interplay between paint and material wherein one emerges as the other withdraws. The objective or even improvisational qualities of frottage, however, are disrupted by the methodological repetition of brushstroke. In each of the pieces, Hutchinson's brush moves in the shape of constantly repeated arcs, like the ocean waves suggested in the series title. This careful balance between the looseness of frottage and the tightness of the arcs results in deeply variegated textures that are at once fluid and controlled.

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Something about the light on the wall stays with me. It strikes me that the allusive quality of the index in Hutchinson's work acts almost as a prelude to a performance that we, as viewers, don't quite witness. Like

the held arabesque position, Hutchinson's paintings feel anticipatory, transitional, referential. Each surface stroke is like a well-practiced muscular adjustment, full of strength and continual motion, intended to craft a deceptively solid and controlled image. The scraping and sweeping brushwork, however, betrays hints of something more—a surface beneath the paint, a repeated motion—that gestures to deeper spatial planes and more prolonged performances. It seems that the brushwork signals not only what is beneath it—what it was—but also what it might be—or rather, what we, the viewers, might make it. The reflections on the wall, then, are like stage lights, signalling the beginning of a performance that I patiently await.

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The works in Hutchinson's *Mirror, Mirror* series bring us even closer to these imagined performances. If the reflections from the emergency rescue blankets in *Sixteen Days at Sea* are stage lights, then the paintings in *Mirror, Mirror* are the slowly rising curtains. Of the six paintings from this series exhibited in *Bright Black*, three feature completely black canvasses. With faint undertones of blue and pink peeking out from beneath the blackness, the paint glides over the canvas with the same intention, precision, and nuance as a toe sweeping across the floor and bending to a point as it leaves the ground. From these flowing, tactile brushstrokes, the pictorial emerges among the monochromatic. Here, Hutchinson's interest in and exploration of material possibilities is made more explicit. The lines and textures in these paintings simulate the folds and drapery of fabric. The next three pieces in the series pick up and expand upon this motif. In *Fiction's Fiction*, black paint cascades over a backdrop of bright pink, blue and yellow floral patterns. Similar patterns, featuring the familiar brightness and

colouring of distinctly 1950s textiles, re-appear in the next two pieces, *Facts are Facts* and *It Could be You, It Could be Me*. These displays of the decorative situate Hutchinson's paintings at a slight remove from the tradition of post-war abstraction within which his work is typically aligned. Instead, these works demonstrate an exploratory softness and cheekiness that escapes the objectivity of abstraction or minimalism. Inverting our expectations of depth, perspective and patterning, these pieces reveal depth where flatness is expected, and vice versa. The florals are resolutely unmoving and two-dimensional, while the black paint appears almost three-dimensional, as though it has been flung haphazardly on the patterned base. The eye-catching boldness of the patterns break up the blackness of the paintings, and of the exhibition as a whole, but still it is the profound blackness that takes centre stage while the patterning acts as its supportive backdrop.

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As I finish my walk around the gallery space, it doesn't seem so odd anymore that I am mentally placed back in the ballet studio. Hutchinson has a longstanding interest in theatre and spectacle, and although the works in *Bright Black* mark a departure from those ideas, elements of the performative linger in the motions of his brushwork. Just as the paintings in *Bright Black* engage in a dialectic duet between paint and material, they also invite the viewer to engage in a choreography cast with painting, light, space and body. If his paintings suggest a prelude to an unseen performance, then I wonder if the interplay between the gallery light and my body as I move around this work, observing from every angle, is an accepted invitation to join the dance.

Julia McMillan