

**Jeff Nye**  
**Abandon, by the old dirt road**

Jan 6 – Feb 4, 2012



*Abandon, by the old dirt road, oil on canvas, audio and projected video, 2006*  
Courtesy of the Saskatchewan Arts Board Permanent Collection

**Opening Reception: Friday, January 6th 7–10 pm**

(the artist will be in attendance)

**Art Crawl: Friday, January 13th 7–11 pm**

**Artist talk and workshop with Jeff Nye**

**Sunday, Jan 8th 1-4 pm**

An introduction to the use of charcoal drawing  
in stop motion animation.



**HAMILTON ARTISTS INC**  
ARTIST RUN CENTRE

## ***Introduction***

“Abandon, by the old dirt road” offers a poignant view of rural Saskatchewan through Jeff Nye’s auditory and visual mediation of the passage of time. Nye’s work furthers stop motion animation (a decidedly Canadian technique historically refined within the National Film Board’s experimental animation lab led by Norman McLaren). In this inter-media investigation, the artist applies layers of paint to canvas within a superimposed video triptych, thus transforming the ephemeral passage of one season to the next into a flowing series of captured moments recorded on the exterior panels of the installation. The central panel of Nye’s movements reveals the aesthetics of the action of painting through stop motion, and the body betrays a kind of self-conscious labour at work within the production of this apparently effortless representation. An awkward physical exchange of identification ensues between the viewer and the artist through his endeavour to recall and grapple with imagery related to questions of memory, remnant, nostalgia, and progress.

Community as place and value is the symbol most associated with the rural landscape. Yet the rural landscape is no longer secure, and is increasingly marred by an imposed *relic landscape of abandonment*: barns, churches, schools, businesses, and train stations stand empty (...) The continuing expansion of capitalism is accompanied by countervailing tendencies towards homogenization (...) and similarly, decay in the form of vacant buildings is also very much evident in Saskatchewan’s cities.<sup>1</sup>

In Ontario, there has been a consistent decline in the number of farms during the period from 1971 to 2001. In Hamilton, between 1971 and 2001, 837 farms disappeared. A 2003 report on the status of the local agricultural community in Hamilton noted that the benefits of maintaining a strong agricultural community include preservation of history and tradition amongst other cultural, economic and health-related benefits not easily quantifiable and often ignored within economic analysis.<sup>2</sup> Nye’s work is particularly compelling at this juncture in considering the impact and cultural importance of the rural environment within both a rural and urban context.

*Irene Loughlin*

*Programming Director, Hamilton Artists Inc.*

1. Widdis, Randy [http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/geography\\_of\\_saskatchewan.html](http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/geography_of_saskatchewan.html) accessed Jan 30, 2011

2. City of Hamilton Agricultural Economic Impact and Development Study <http://www.investinhamilton.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/AgReportExecSum.pdf> accessed Jan 29, 2011



*"echolocation" – installation in the farmhouse, 1999*  
Photo credit: Patricia Holdsworth

## ***Abandon, by the old dirt road***

On a hot summer day in 1986, a handful of boys followed the dirt road out of their grandparents' rural acreage. The boys playfully approached the basement of a recently burnt-down, abandoned farmhouse that lay in a field nearby. They prodded among the stone, the wood, and the rusted nails. They were looking for something, I guess.

Although I was one of those boys, I can't remember what we were hoping to find. I am certain, however, that we knew we would uncover something. Our basic intentions were to investigate and to not get caught – to seek and hide.

The location from which this memory is drawn is the initial source for *Abandon, by the old dirt road* – two abandoned houses which stood only yards apart along a little-used road in rural Saskatchewan. The making of *Abandon* has entailed a search for meaningful connections between my identity, these rural sites, and the discipline of painting.

*Abandon's* two stop-motion video pieces are projected onto one of the gallery's walls and upon two large monochromatic paintings. The animations, edited from footage of the making of each painting, act as mnemonic devices that reveal the imagery concealed

beneath the final painted surfaces. Each video is presented as a loop in which unfurnished and decrepit rooms are gradually painted in. The interiors within one of the paintings become buried beneath drifting snow. Out of the resultant whiteness another room develops and becomes covered until each room in the house has been depicted. A similar process is revealed in the second painting/projection, in which the rooms are consumed by fire. The alignment of the paintings with the projections also creates the illusion that the paintings are progressing on their own. Because of my personal attachment to these places, *Abandon* is also a self-portrait. Video of me mixing paint at my palette is visible between the two paintings. The same editing that provides the illusion of animation to the paintings has created the fitful-looking movements in this scene.

As the projections cycle, the voice of Eleanor Tannahill, a member of the last family to have lived in one of the houses, emanates from a speaker. From another speaker plays the voice of Warren Tannahill, one of the last people to have lived in the house that was burnt down. The audio was abstracted from recordings of a conversation I had with Eleanor and Warren as they recounted their childhood memories of the two houses. The imagery in the paintings is based on this conversation, and from my own memories.

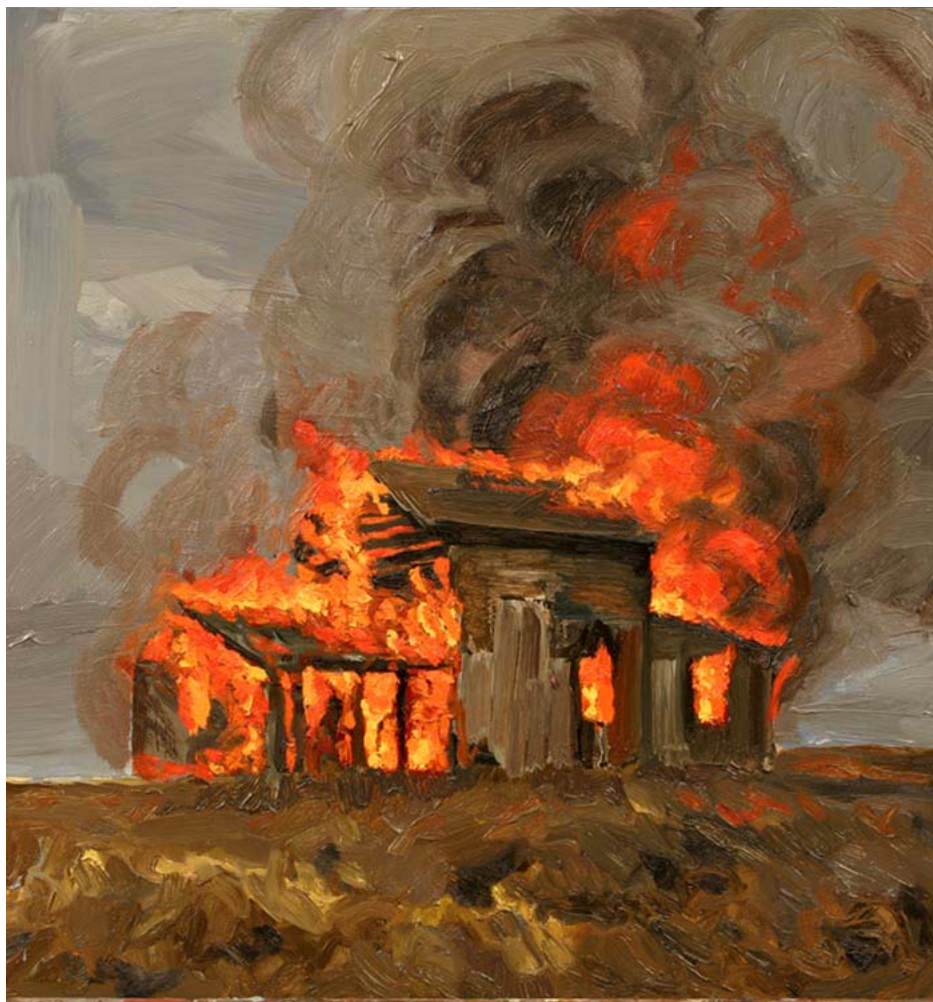
I approached *Abandon* like I approached the abandoned houses as a child. I was looking for something, but wasn't sure what that something might be. Problematically, a painting conceals as much as it reveals to the person in front of it – the artist included. Every brushstroke is a simultaneous act of revelation and concealment. The path that leads the artist to a finished painting usually becomes overgrown, making it almost impossible for the viewer to discern all of the artist's steps. Something is inevitably buried within each painting, even if it is only the raw support. Often I wonder if these hidden elements are what keep us transfixed in front of paintings – inviting the viewer into another game of hide and seek.

*Jeff Nye, 2011*

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*Jeff Nye extends painting into video, sound and installation art. Shared experiences of place and time are his primary interest. He has a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from Concordia University (1998) and a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Regina (2007). Nye has received grants from the Saskatchewan Arts Board, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Scholarship. He continues his daily art practice in his studio on the edge of Flying Creek Valley, Saskatchewan.*

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*House Fire*, oil on board, 2006

Based on photographs taken by the artist's grandmother of the other house burning down.

## ***On Intergenerational Time***

*Obviously it's symbolic, it works on both levels. I don't want to tell you too much, I don't want to spoil the film... uh, but, I'll just say: ICARUS. Okay? If you know what I mean, great—if you don't, it doesn't matter. But you should probably read more.<sup>1</sup>*

Time sneaks up on you in the prairies, which is funny if only because nothing else can. There's an old joke that says you can watch your dog run away for three days there; similarly, though perhaps more benevolently, we might describe it as the only place in the

world where you can see a whole train all at once.<sup>2</sup> The point is that time passes differently. It compresses and expands unlike anywhere else. There's a general sense that, without the rush of city life, without appointments and deadlines, there's simply no meter to time's passage. This is untrue, of course, as the social rule can only follow from a natural one. And on the prairies, rhythm is set by seasons and not by schedules—your calendar trumps your clock. How else could I have spent a quarter of a century there, without even realizing it until I had departed?

I think of this as I watch Jeff Nye's body gyrate and twitch in *Abandon, by the old dirt road*. In the projected world of *Abandon*, we see the artist at a plinth in a virtual studio, endlessly mixing paint without applying any of it directly. Is his solitude the disconnected retreat of the willfully ignorant, or has he transmuted his brush into a wand in order to geomantically pull the very elements from his palette? Neurotic adjustment and calculation-by-feel are the ingredients of his entire performance, and there's no reason detachment and manipulation can't both be indicated by his projected presence.

Locked in an endless, jittery loop in front of his palette, Nye performs for us in stop-motion, the cinematic language of expansive time. Stop-motion is typically reserved for events on a geological scale, for things too grand, too extensive, too gradual, too planetary for us to perceive properly in so-called "real time" (a construct I began to seriously question thanks to Nye). Indeed, such events need to be compressed temporally for us to even recognize them as events at all... because there are some processes for which we just don't have enough life.

Although we are denied visual access to Nye's painterly act, the paint manages to gradually occupy the two canvases that flank him. It seeps up from below in browns and ochres like rising damp, it drips and flows and smothers and composes. The vaguely architectural forms it comes to describe are soon consumed with new paint, paint of a different colour and a heavier stroke that cannibalizes the older paint. Drastic flashes obliterate stable stairs and earthen platforms; built environments are laid to waste in scenes of fire or of snow. And like the farm house Nye's title suggests, his canvases, too, have been abandoned in the studio and gallery, left to their own development, to grow and mutate in resigned, entropic solitude, and to have images placed upon them by unseen forces.

All the while, disembodied voices of both sexes vibrate up from under us. They propose possibilities for spaces, or rather former spaces, tentatively; their memories have been fragmented both by the passage of time and the mediation of it. Like Nye's body, the voices of the elderly are divorced from a sensible sequential narrative, as bits of architecture and autobiography bubble to the surface unpredictably.

“I don’t know where in the heck that chimney was.”

“I think there were a couple of stairs from the kitchen...”

“Bedroom. This is a window... window.”

“I don’t even remember you being there.”

“Do you remember any wallpaper?”

“... And then they moved on.”

This last phrase resonates with me particularly poignantly. It reminds us that narratives of departure must surely find their way into any description of the contemporary rural experience, and that these narratives fall to the next person to tell once the original storyteller has departed. It further proposes that the subject to whom we are listening—and indeed, whose story we are watching—is the one who remained and that the narrative itself is more expansive, more geological, more earth-shifting than a simple re-telling can contain. And so of course we can’t watch it in real time—this is a story we need to hear in distant packets of memory, in a darkened space where time passes differently.

*Lee Henderson, 2011*

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*Having studied art in Canada and Berlin, **Lee Henderson** furthers his time- and lens-based artistic practice while writing and teaching Media Art, Computer Science, and Photography at the postsecondary level, currently at OCAD University. He continues to exhibit in Canada and abroad. Through installation, video, performance and photography he negotiates the persistence of collective histories and the brevity of individual lives.*

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1. [24 Hour Party People](#). Dir. Michael Winterbottom. Perfs. Steve Coogan, John Thomson. Film. Revolution Films, 2002.
2. I jotted this down at The Power Plant, in a panel discussion by Toronto’s Book Club. I had thought it was Micah Lexier’s line, but he denies having said it. So I’m happy to steal it from the aether.

**Hamilton Artists Inc.**

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Public Hours Tuesday – Friday 12 – 5, Saturday 12 – 4

