

the strange space that will keep us together
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Interview with Wil Murray
By Jacqueline Mabey
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Jacqueline Mabey: When did you start making things?

Wil Murray: As in paintings or anything?

JM: Anything.

WM: I guess a couple years before art school... 'cause there was the mail art project and stuff like that. I mean, I could try to count drawing guns when I was eleven years old, but actually making art... there was the Panopticon mail art project that was sending razor blades through the mail with "Good Luck" tags attached to them. A lot of that was influenced by industrial music: Throbbing Gristle and Genesis P. Orridge.

JM: And I'm assuming also Foucault, because your name was Panopticon [laughs].

WM: Yeah, I half read *Discipline and Punish* and decided it was a fantastic name. And it wasn't really in use at that point, it was a relatively weird name and concept.

JM: How did you come across the book?

WM: I don't remember, actually. It was just when Foucault was what every intellectual was slapping around, and I think it was through Jesse Proudfoot. We were trying very, very hard to be up-to-date in our intellectualism [laughs].

JM: At age...?

WM: Seventeen? Eighteen?

JM: Okay.

WM: I think that started just after I finished high school and I went to Europe and tried to suck up whatever European culture I could. And hit on mail art and photography and some noise music performance. And that became my portfolio for art school. It had no drawing or painting in it at all. Yeah, that was when it started.

JM: That's when it became an intentional thing, "I am making art."

WM: And because I had a good chunk of friends who were in art school at that point, I could leach off of them a lot of stuff about contemporary art making or, at least, twentieth century: mail art, Dadaism, fluxus, and all that sort of stuff.

JM: But I'm assuming before that point you had an interest in art making anyway; where you making music or...?

WM: Yeah, well I didn't really start making music until I was seventeen or eighteen, got a keyboard. Before that, through school, I guess I drew and painted, took art classes and stuff like that. I guess I had a paint set at home. My mother probably has a tonne of small paintings at home that I made, which are probably terrifically Goth paintings... eyeballs and... [laughs].

JM: What, if anything, do you feel like you got from art school?

WM: Actually, a lot. 'Cause it's like I said, I didn't paint at all until I got there. It was a shock to discover that I could draw relatively well. Technique, was a lot of it. My instructors there were leftover Modernists, a lot of them, who were really dedicated to charcoal drawing. And I was in the drawing department, which was an off shoot of the painting department where you could do whatever the hell you wanted. It came out of them saying, "Drawing is important." But really just sort of collected everyone who... I mean, most people in painting weren't painting. They were making installations. Most people in drawing were painting. So I wound up there, and started off doing really stark charcoal on paper stuff, really hard black line sort of stuff, and moved onto monochromatic paintings. But art school was great for coming into contact with a tonne of people- wound up hating a lot of them- and having access to printmaking and weaving and lots of things that are periphery thing that influence, if nothing else, color relationship. Weaving was really amazing for that. And it's what school does really well, which is really, really quickly gives you a surface knowledge of a whole bunch of things that you can then pick and chose from and jump in to a heavier, if you want, or dismiss.

JM: So why did you leave?

WM: It was in my second year... yeah, we'd gotten into drugs in a huge way. Which was great: doing tonnes of speed and sitting up for twenty-four hours with friends talking about art really sped up the process that is an at school- no pun intended [laughs]. It was that, it became a problem eventually. Initially it was great, I made more art than I ever had. Eventually it became I quit going to school, quit doing everything. And at the same time, just started to question why I was spending \$10,000 a year when I was constantly fighting against people, to be left alone in my studio to paint. And the realization, the second you leave art school you are an artist, I guess... you can stay in art school and be the best art student in the world- and this is how I saw it at the time- or "I can leave and try to be the best artist in the world." And it hit a point where I felt like I was working for school as well; being given two weeks to finish a painting, what do you do if it goes past that? And I had instructors who were willing to cut me a lot of slack, but... yeah: the combination of the drugs, wanting to get out of Calgary.

JM: So you started painting in art school. What was the impetus?

WM: I guess I wanted to do more important work than drawing. There was no purity at all, I wanted to do "significant work" and that's painting. When I started painting, it was out of things like Ad Reinhardt and, I guess, Robert Ryman, and a really stark kind of idea... it was funny: it was more like a conceptual project of painting, like, "I'm going to paint...?[laughs] These are the painting that are the residue of the process." And then it was Heather Kvill went up to Edmonton and visited with Graham Peacock 'cause she knew him through some family, and came back with a slew of catalogues that lit me on fire. At that point I was still doing really hard math sort of things, but trying to introduce more color and brighter color. And then it became poured paint... it's funny, those artists that I was influenced by went over like a lead balloon at art school, but my paintings went over very, very well.

JM: How do you conceive of the works made previous to when you started painting, made in different mediums? How do you relate them to what you do now?

WM: Like the mail art stuff?

JM: Yeah.

WM: For a long time I had no...

JM: Because it is one thing for someone to enter art school as a painter and how they paint changes, it's another to change medium entirely is a different story.

WM: Yeah... for a long time I counted it as "that thing that got me into art school" and it was, I don't know, funny... Goth.

JM: [laughs] The word of the hour.

WM: I mean, you look on it in the same way as you look on the fashion you took on at that point. But later one, the biggest thing is that what I was doing then affected people. That's the weird reflection that I get back now, is that- you know, the razor blades in the mail and all that sort of shit- it really struck a chord that is really something like shock art that is still in my paintings and it's still a part of me. Which is "blah!" of the initial thing. And it was clever, it was pretty clever- that's not necessarily a good thing, 'cause clever falls on its face and you have to be more and more clever all the time. But I like it because... for a long time I wanted to push that away as part of my work, but then recognizing that thread is always there, the kind of clever and very immediate and to some extent shocking, to some extent meant to hit you over the head. And I like it. It's kind of a warm, soft... yeah, I was reaching really hard and it's a little bit embarrassing, but... I have to, at this point, say it counts. The paintings I was making in high school that my mother probably has I don't count 'cause they're something very different. But I was really working hard at making capital a Art. Yeah, I love it, I'm charmed by it.

JM: This is a side note the Panopticon project: I know that you put your return address on the mail outs; did you ever get anything back?

WM: Yeah-

JM: Because it's shocking, but it does have that transactional aspect, which is interesting.

WM: And that's- I think I was hoping for that, but no one took me up on it in any serious way. If I did it now I don't think I'd get many responses that were... because the thing is, with doing that, there's no guarantee that anyone you're sending it to has spent anytime thinking about what you would send in the mail. And then looking at the mail artists that I was influenced by a little bit, they sent out to an outlook that this was very current, this was what was going on. I think I got back... someone sent a Band-Aid back to the razor blade one. Heather sent back some magazine which she defaced, horribly, all the way through. It became jokey, which... it's the really serious joke thing that still continues in my work.

JM: And what mail artists were you looking at?

WM: Genesis P. Orridge was a big one. Then at art school, I never had him as an instructor and never really spent anytime talking to him but definitely wound up with a tonne of knowledge about him 'cause there was a book about mail art

that was put out in Calgary, it was Don Mabie, who in his mail art days was Chuck Steak. The problem that I had when I was in school was that he just came off as a hippie to me, so I really couldn't... he was connected with that whole seventies scene and I wanted to be very hard-assed about it and not hippie. So I didn't spend much time picking his brain looking into people sending steaks through the mail, putting mailing addresses on cinder blocks and dropping them in the mailbox, it was exciting. "What can I do with this?"

JM: What is your process in the studio? Do you go in with a set idea, how do you approach it? How do you conceive of yourself in the studio?

WM: Making the paintings?

JM: Yeah.

WM: It's weird, because at this point it is such a continual process and has been an unbroken process at least since... even in Montreal it has been three years now. And usually paintings are... there is always going to be another painting. And, generally, a painting is started with something in the last painting that was done that stuck in me somewhere. So starting off... and it's confusing every single time, starting a painting, figuring what I am going to do to it. And there are some concerns, now that I'm cutting and removing sections, there are ways I can prepare things that makes my job easier later on. But other times, it's just starting because I very badly want to start a painting. There's always a process of going, "Oh, God, am I really going to do this again?" But it's kind of a chain, where each one sort of lead into the next. And then there's times when thing break down, right now is one of them, I've just not worked, because there's times where you end up finishing four or five paintings very, very quickly. But it's... 'cause I make my own supports and stuff like that, so... I have to work on the physical object that is the painting long enough to feel like I can start it. And that's building, cutting, gluing, nailing, all that sort of stuff. It actually feels like mine by the time I'm laying paint on it. But laying paint on it, it's always a little, "Oh, God, we're doing this again?"

JM: Do you ever have the fear that there won't be another painting?

WM: No, because it's inevitable by the beginning of a painting that it will end. The terror is more that there will be a painting that just keeps going, indefinitely. There's a terror about that. And I suppose inevitably there is going to be one painting that does, you croak in the middle of it [laughs]. Last year, with the tonnes of writing about redemption, is that... the end of a painting is secured by it being started. It's going to happen. The period of time that it will exist in my studio for I have no clue, when I start, but it will end. I can't say that absolutely assuredly, but I realized this year, "Well, I've made about one hundred paintings." Experience would tell me that whatever I do start will end. And there's ones that go on forever and seem like they won't... and there's economic concerns... last year, being very broke, there were times working on paintings I couldn't afford to get the materials to make another painting after the one that I was working on. So I would keep working on a painting, simply because it was the only thing in the studio to work on.

JM: You said it's been an unbroken chain since you moved here [Montreal], but what about when you had to switch and stop using polyurethane? I remember you saying to me you felt like you had to relearn how to paint.

WM: Because the type of painting I do is really reliant on the type of material acts that was a huge switch, and I got really tight-assed for awhile, looking at the first paintings that I made. And last year it remained really, really tight-assed because when you're working and you feel like you don't have a handle on the material the temptation... well, it wasn't even temptation, because you have to go with it, you have to work with it long enough, you can't speed that up, you can't fix the learning curve so that it suits you better. And because I had a model... I mean, the polyurethane paint, I'd be doing at that point for five or six years and had a pretty good handle on the material concerns. But, actually, never had to consider that. Switching to the acrylic method, I had to consider my abilities with the material. Because with polyurethane it was just what I started with in art school and kept going and, by the point I had to switch, was actually getting a little tired of, because your tricks and your techniques become pretty pat. Especially with a material I had never questioned, it was just how I worked and what I worked with, you can't really see anything else to do with it. The acrylic made it so that I had to consider, "What do I do to a painting?"

JM: A question of influence: who do you cite as influencing your work? And how do you understand it playing out in your work? Because of late it has been a lot of Flannery O'Connor...

WM: It's funny, with the authors, Flannery O'Connor comes up... but I have to mention in that... I mean, in the last year of painting, I draw from literary works, and Djuna Barnes and John Hawkes and- I was thinking about it today- Thomas Mann, as well, it's that... I'm not a very good viewer of paintings, because I look at them as...

JM: You mean, paintings by other artists?

WM: Others' paintings, my own work as well, I can't even see my work. When I go to a gallery and look at other paintings there's a certain amount of shop talk in my eye. So with fiction, I can read and I don't write fiction and so it's a relationship of a viewer or reader. And with those authors, it was hitting a point of trying to figure out what- if any- story I was telling in painting and how whatever narrative might be there, how I was telling it, because with removing and adding sections it was becoming that the beginnings of paintings were being slapped on at the end. So the track of narrative, the creation narrative of the painting, how it tells its own story of being made, I started to consider that. And at the same time, my reading shifted, where I felt much more comfortable discerning that in writer's works. And all those authors, what is was that they weren't... 'cause previously it was things like William S. Burrows and cut ups and so forth, where you're dealing with, "How do I screw with the words and re-arrange them?" But all those authors, they adopt narrative in a pretty linear fashion and then work with in that on themes of terror and horror. That was the influence, 'cause I was looking at my paintings going, "OK, so I'm looking down the narrative of making of the painting. How do I play with that?"

JM: Because it is interesting- in casual conversation and skimming your blog- it seems you cite music and literature more frequently than art.

WM: Well, there's a certain embarrassment with citing painting, because right now the painter who interests me most who I've never, ever seen a work in person is Rosenquist. And the problem is the second I say that, people want to tie Rosenquist to my work and the Pop elements become what people talk about and people look for it in the work, so I'm usually pretty quiet about my influences. And because for so long I was touting the New New Painters as a huge influence in my work and still are... it's partly a strategy on my part to remove myself from those connections and to make the job of critics and writers a little more difficult and make them reach a little further. Partly because there isn't a lot of writing about my work going on, and it's that-

JM: So you don't want to pigeon-hole yourself from the start?

WM: I don't want to do it myself, I'm interested in seeing what other people do with it, the comparisons they find. And anytime it has happened it's been really interesting and pretty fruitful for me because it guides to other painters to be looking at. But I'm also not... this is the funny thing: I'm not a painter because I'm a big fan of painting, that wasn't the impetus to become a painter. I wanted to become a painter because- initially, when I was at school- I could fuck shit up. I didn't mean to become a painter. It wasn't out of a great love of painting, it wasn't as a fan of painting. I liked it, it was great... and still can't cite a lot of painting that has really affected me. It's a joke among people who know me, "That's why your paintings are so weird." Because I guess I don't look at painting that hard.

JM: You said, a way to "fuck shit up." What was ACAD like? The painting department was a lot of installation. So was it a reaction against that kind of work?

WM: Yeah, it was. I was a reaction against bad conceptualism. For a long time I just universally hated conceptual art. The thing is, that I am making conceptual art in the end... But, yeah, it's that there was a lot of bad conceptual art. And it's the academic art work where writing about the work is done in a parallel fashion to the work and both suffer a lot of the time. And that's what I was finding. So I took on the role of being some harsh formalist, that you can do when you're twenty years old [laughs], be really hardcore about it. And the New New Painting stuff I could skew to my own ends. And be a bastard at school. But the thing was that the paintings were nice enough, I mean, people loved them. So you're allowed a space of being... it's the art school rebel role where, with a grin, you're trying to screw people. But, yeah, it was a reaction against bad conceptual art which, in art school, is pretty much the currency, a lot of the time. That's what a lot of people are making, 'cause you're rewarded for it as well. And most the people who are making that don't make anything at this point, they just stop, and that was the thing that was really clear, is that with the very bad conceptual art that was going on at art school that it only existed because school did. And from there... you know, I've started to like a lot of conceptual work, but it's stuff that has to be able to exist in the world.

JM: Did you have a network of painters in Vancouver? How did you exist, artistically, within that city?

WM: I knew one other painter that... he shows somewhere in Vancouver, Paul Nicholas. He was a friend and he painted mainly out of his house. Some commonality in our works, he was moving to abstraction from more figurative stuff. That was the only relationship I had to another painter in the city, I think, who was working hard on things. And was working. I mean, yeah, he worked a full time design job and worked out of his apartment and had shows every so often in coffee shops and that sort of thing. But art-wise? I dated a girl for two years who was at UBC and so came into contact with all those people and still know some of them and a lot of them like my work a lot. Jeremy Todd was one of the few people... and it was him visiting my studio to see Ingrid [Petro, Murray's former studio mate]'s work, at one point, and took a shine to the work. And actually he's the only one from the Vancouver art world at all I had any connection with and eventually we did a show together. And what was telling, what he did was the *Five Painters* [Helen Pitt Gallery, 2004] show, which was him putting his foot down and saying, "No, it's a radical move to do this at an artist-run centre at this point." Which I liked and thought was a relatively brave move because in Vancouver... it's just, the other hard one is, I don't meet other painters. They're in their studios. It's not a very social art practise.

JM: You're a solitary group [laughs].

WM: Yeah, so it's always a really weird thing to be in a room with a bunch of other painters because they all have a little bit of a scared rabbit look about them because, like- and this isn't a "Woe is me"- you spend hours and hours and hours doing something on your own, and there isn't a lot of work beyond it that requires you to work with other people- some curators, some gallerists, stuff like that. But there's no collaborations. In Vancouver, I did one studio visit the whole time I was there, which was with Sherri Kajiwarra, who's at the Bjornson Kajiwarra Gallery. But I had no community there. I knew some people who were in art school. And lots of people I knew liked my work a lot, mostly music scene people, it was centred around that. Always had amazing response from anyone who saw the work. But no one around who I felt was a colleague.

JM: So when you were there [Vancouver] you had the show at the Pitt, and Ingrid mentioned that you two would have studio parties.

WM: Yeah, and those were great. And that's what I meant about anyone who saw the work was quite excited by it, 'cause we used to have... one? Maybe two... 'cause there was one where tonnes and tonnes of people showed up and saw the work and really liked it. And I mean I always invited people up to my studio and we definitely drank there a lot before we'd go out. But it was always treated... and this is one of the hard things about Vancouver, I remember saying to people, "I'm a painter and I have a studio" and they treated it as a conceptual decision to be a painter, which was partly true, but it was taken as, "This is the marketing angle of what I'm doing." A very sort of meta relationship to things, when they'd come to the studio that's how it was treated. And it was heartbreaking, because it was hitting the point in painting where it was moving away from just being a conceptual decision to be a painter, because I was winding up in the studio all the time, working. And at some point you just kind of wind up at a painter, even if you didn't mean to. And I didn't know how to access

other painters if I wanted to, 'cause the truth is you ring anyone up and say, "I'm a young painter, I'd love to come visit your studio," they usually say yes. But was still at the point of hero-worship, where you didn't know that you could do that. And I was nervous in galleries, so I couldn't talk to anyone there, and didn't understand that everyone is basically working a job full time and is excited by any sort of difference. So didn't know how to do and just the climate in Vancouver at that point wasn't very receptive to what I was doing.

JM: So I guess the Helen Pitt show was the biggest show that happened when you were you where in Vancouver?

WM: It was one painting I finished in the studio I had after the fire, the one at Jesse [Proudfoot]'s house and two small ones that I had done in Montreal.

JM: So I have to ask about the fire... how do you understand it? How do you relate to all those lost works? Because it seems like- from what I understand- that it was right about that time that you were moving away from the grid paintings and had started building up the surface, but even... yeah. The fire. I don't know.

WM: It's... it's... uh, yeah. It's hard, because it takes on mythic proportions. But, I mean, yeah, the fire. It's funny because that's what I said earlier, there's one painting always that you don't finish, the fire was funny because it gave me sort of suspended reference without dying to works being unfinished and then a tonne of finished works leaving. The finished works... it was upsetting and certainly that's what people attach to with it, because when I say to people, "It was all the work that I did for three years disappearing." It was the loss of the space, because I wound up being able to work in a studio, being comfortable in it, and the space disappeared. The space and the tools and the rhythm of the work stopped. That was the hard part, that was the... because I can't, I mean, I can't even remember the paintings that aren't finished, that weren't finished, that burned... yeah. It was the stopping of working, beyond the immediate, "Oh, my God, the fucking studio's burning." Beyond that, I didn't mean to stop at that point. Witness to the heaviness of that, that's when I wound up back into drugs in a really, really big way. Because it was just... yeah, its really sad, I mean, you just get started and you just get going on something and it stopped. And that's when I was get more comfortable with galleries, I was starting to have some plans, and it seemed a little bit less insane to be doing this and, you know, it's gone. And then everything just feels like a compromise afterwards, it feels like, "Well, I'll find another studio." And, of course, everyone's very supportive and saying, "You'll move one, you'll do something new," and it's just all that you're seeing is that you've stopped.

JM: Well, because it's like a stoppage of self.

WM: Yeah. And because one of the difficult things was that when I arrived in Vancouver I had stopped painting, in Calgary, and had stopped for about nine months. And re-starting is really, really hard. I mean, even when I moved to Montreal, re-starting is- if you stop- is really, really difficult. Which is my best advice for art making: *keep working*, even if there is nothing there just keep working! Because trying to re-start is so hard. You're so wracked with doubt. But it's funny, the fire's a theme in my work I can't even place. I can very much do it

in sort of practical ends of working and what it did to my life and stuff like that. And I suppose it probably did do something to the paintings but can't even...

JM: Yeah.

WM: Because there was a break and then had a studio for a month in a basement on Abbott [Street] that the fumes were so bad I got kicked out about after a month, did one painting. Knew I was leaving at that point, so it was all very temporary, but try to still be a painter... and, yeah, nothing 'til about three or four months after I got to Montreal. So that break is so intense that the event of the fire I can't even track.

JM: So how many works did you lose?

WM: Probably fifteen, something like that. I didn't make that many paintings when I was in Vancouver. Fifteen over three years seems like a very small amount. There was probably more, but I wasn't as prolific at that point in painting.

JM: And you were also working full-time.

WM: Yeah, working full-time. And I just wasn't in the studio as much. I would go two week stretches without going to the studio. And worked on one painting at a time. And it was the polyurethane so the drying time was a lot more. But, yeah, I guess, fifteen paintings, for sure, gone. There's two that still exist, on that Gavin [Sheehan] has and one that I couldn't find if I tried, because it's sold. No idea where it is at this point.

JM: Do those works that are gone still feel like yours?

WM: That's the problem, work that's done doesn't feel like mine anyway. It was really hard to explain to people, because it was upsetting to lose them but my part in them is done once they're finished. I don't miss them as much as I don't miss paintings when they're sold. My part's completely done, once they're on the wall, they're not mine anymore. I don't know whose they are, but they're not... paintings that I have around that are done, I love them, they're great, but I don't even look at them that hard. I'm amazed when people look at them because of the things that find, other people look a lot harder at my paintings than I do when they're done. 'Cause like I said, I feel like I don't even see them. They're bits and pieces of work that I did over a period of time so I can't see them as whole most of the time. Once they're on a wall at a gallery it's easier, 'cause they're out of the studio, for one thing. And for me they're objects, they're not "paintings" because I have them in my hands, I carry them around on the street, they come on the metro with me [laughs], carry them around the studio, so they're really, like, these things that may as well be a piece of furniture. Which is disheartening to people sometimes when I say that. It's taken as... arrogance? But it's really just, I don't know... I don't know what my relationship is supposed to be to finished paintings. Half the time they seem like a pain in the ass. It's whatever that's being worked on that has my heart at any point.

JM: Well, I guess because the "job" part of what you do starts.

WM: Yeah, and that's the thing: in the context of doing a show, the paintings become the thing that are driving the show, so they become very, very different objects. And- this is the best thing about having not had a fire in Montreal [laughs]- there are paintings around that are now three years old. And I get to

see them occasionally. And there's ones in Ottawa that I don't get to see that often. And then I can see them.

JM: After time has passed.

WM: I just hung one the other day for a friend and it felt like I could see it because it had been long enough, it hasn't been in my face, it hasn't been sitting in the studio, and I've forgotten a lot the bits and pieces of making it. So I can look at it as a finished thing, as a whole image instead of just a bunch of chunks of paint that I put on.

JM: I think that's interesting, especially in connection to the issue of photography and your work, that your work often does not photograph well... they kind of skirt this major way that we see the world. Do you think about that? How do you relate to that?

WM: What I've realized, with abstract painters, everyone suffers. Almost all abstract painting looks like shit in photographs. Not like shit, some of it looks very good. But not the same as when you see it in person. I think about it a lot, because in the summer of last year I was trying to figure out how to photograph my works, because it is- in the art world- it's how your work is traded among people and how it's seen, often what you're judged on. So my job has been to get people in front of the work itself. And at the same time- and this is where its treating yourself in the third person- you have to look at the images of your work and take them relatively seriously, but they're not actually work. And it does, it has affected my work, because once I hit the point of going, "No matter what I do they're gonna photograph like shit," that was the impetus to have them coming out more, physically, from the painting, and then starting to use brushes and render form. That's from looking at photographs and going, "No matter what I do they're not gonna represent it so I might as well go ridiculous both directions." And the difference is, too, having some gallery representation, shows are coming, the photographs become just representations of the work, as opposed to what I have to put into the world to have people judge what I'm doing in the studio all the time. Having a little more clout in the art world, people understand that. More people have seen the work in person and aren't just relying on the photographs. And by the same token, I see the paintings as finished compositions in photographs better than when I'm standing in front of them., which is always interesting. And get tricked because, usually, working on shows, I look at photographs so much that I start to think that that is what the painting looks like. But it's... yeah. They're representations of the work that are necessary. And are sometimes interesting, 'cause with Ken Moffett, talking to him, and him suggesting that- 'cause I was talking about some work photographing better than others- and he said that, "Yeah, it's the ones with strong compositions look better in photographs." Because they don't rely on texture and things like that as much. A lot of blacks and whites always photograph beautifully. You have to think about it because you have to see photographs of your work all the time. And for a time I was considering- 'cause I do some collage stuff, at home, with images of the paintings-at one point using those in the paintings, working them up, like Rosenquist, gridding them off, and

painting them on a painting. And that may be a project, eventually, but... I'm not a good enough painter [laughs].

JM: What are your interests in doing this show? How do you see it, how do you understand it?

WM: It's funny, because it's the same overlap for me. It is... of course I have Prodigal Son dreams of going back to Vancouver-

JM: Yeah, my friend Julie was like, "Oh, le phoenix, il est comme le phoenix!" But I told her, "I don't want to do that."

WM: Which, yeah, it's inevitable. It's the same dream of giving an artist talk at the school you went to. Yeah, and then the overlap in personal lives that we have is really amazing for this. The excitement for this is that it's guaranteed that it will get some writing done and it will get done by you which... and with the Montréal-Vancouver thing, the attachment I have personally to both those places is so heavy. And because... yeah, there is a little bit of a Machiavelli thing where I like that that overlap is there and there's tonnes of people I can trust will say wonderful things about me [laughs]. I don't know, it's the retrospective dream, which isn't as grandiose or arrogant as it sounds, 'cause of course you take account, artistically, what you've done over time and to do it myself is, absolutely, terrible arrogance. To have it taken on by someone is interesting, because it's... because I hate my own biography at some points because it is rich as hell [laughs]. I mean, I was talking to Andrew Wedderburn last night about this, watching your own biography get constructed outside of yourself is a terrifying thing that happens, especially when you've got pretty good events to fill it up. But, yeah, my excitement with the show is that it's a long enough period and because of the overlap, where you know a lot of the people that I know in Vancouver I think that it can be worked on long enough and hard enough that the pat "drugs and fire," triumphant, heroic-

JM: "And doesn't he dress funny" [laughs].

WM: Yeah, which, I mean, I do a good job of doing myself and I have a huge attachment to because I love those themes. And the dress thing, and stuff like that... there's stuff about being a peacock, about being a terrible introvert that plays extrovert fairly well, something my paintings speak to all the time, and kind of requires my larger social and colleague group to inform it because left alone in the studio, I don't really exist. Half the time I'm terrified that I shrink beside my paintings. Also, it's that I'm interested in having writing about my work, but what I'm finding is that people have a lot of difficulty writing about my work because I don't know what to say about it, and I often feel that the people around me speak far better than I do about it. If you want to know about my work, talk to Jesse [Proudfoot], talk to Justin [Evans], talk to Gavin [Sheehan]. I can talk to you about the work I'm working on, and get drunk and tell the stories of my fantastic biography. But my own history in paintings... I want someone to take account for, so I could see, 'cause I don't see it. It's the "I didn't mean to be a painter" thing, it's that. And that's the excitement. I don't know, 'cause I think there is always a desire to hear your own story told in some way. And half the interest is a very self centered one of just seeing how it plays in the world, and then it's one of, the excitement is actually about you write it, my excitement is about working with

people that I know, that I want to work with, and they're not stepping in to write about my painting as a complete outsider to the world I live in, but as a relative insider. That's where these shows become interesting.

JM: Okay. So your thoughts in general of the themes that have been coming up this year of terror and redemption... and the going back to religion thing, because it is interesting... and as some kind of sympathetic "in" to the work...

WM: Yeah, this is a difficult one... because my finding of that, finding out that I am a Catholic, and even saying that- especially knowing it's recorded- it's really... it's coming to it obliquely, it's less- 'cause lots of people I talk to say, "Oh, you've found religion," or have come back to it and, hell, these are baby steps that I don't even know what I'm doing, I haven't been to church or anything like that. But finding out the kind of morality that I deal in the treatment of the world, in the treatment of weakness, the treatment of redemption in a huge way, that's where it really came out of, is a very Catholic relationship. I mean, talking about the paintings having their ends guaranteed by their beginnings, where something is redeemed from its start instead of it being responsible for its own redemption, that's what I was struggling with last summer, in painting and also sort of in living, because you live a very different way if you assume that your redemption is secured and there is rituals involved in maintaining it, as opposed to you have to do a lot of work to secure it. And my paintings come out of much more an idea that they're secured from the beginning and that their ends- redemptive or not- are guaranteed. But I don't- and this is where it gets a little murky- because I come into things at the studio... there are things beyond your finger tips, where I can account for much of what goes on in the studio, there's some stuff that I can't. And this is a really unfashionable section of art, where in the studio I don't feel particularly alone. There's something else there... a willingness to attribute it to God is not so comfortable. But there's a bigness there that a lot of art I don't think speaks to. Or if it does, speaks to it in a very, very trite matter. And maybe the other thing I'm hitting is that maybe this isn't to be discussed, maybe everyone's looking at art and understands this, that it's not just an intellectual practice of displaying your sort of sophisticated view of the world, but that there is in good art...

JM: Something sacred.

WM: Something sacred. Yeah. And something about hugeness and bigness. And the horror and terror parts in that are both the horror and terror of finding that. And I really think in living there is a baseline of terror that guides a lot of things. 'Cause it's that thing where I don't exist without other people but that other people part is terrifying and I don't ever know what I'm doing. And embrace that. It's not an eradication of those things which are terrifying, it's saying, "No, terror is really a baseline," and that's when you're able to be in the world... but with that terror, it's the generosity of understanding everyone's there, everyone is in terror all the time, and that people do wonderful things and awful things in the name of terror. Yeah, but this is where it all gets very tricky, because I don't know, this stuff is so... it's hashed out in the studio and in living. And that's- this is funny, this relates back to Montreal, this community that's I've found, they very much live with a similar relationship both to art making and to living, which is

expansive, or an attempt at it anyway, 'cause you can't claim an expansive life but you can claim some sort of attempt at maintaining one. Because it's very difficult not to eradicate the parts of your world that terrify you. Because it's thumbing your nose at safety a little bit, but it's not some stupid no fear thing. Because it damages you, I damages other people, and you do horrible things. And that's painting: you sort have to come into contact with where you're a monster and then be generous with yourself and everyone else who is.