

Presented by Latcham Art Centre



# Both Sides Now

Paintings by Gary Evans & Frances Thomas



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Front cover:

Gary Evans, *Open Field*, 2021, oil on canvas, 61" x 60"

Frances Thomas, *Orange Portal*, 2020, acrylic on wood, 40" x 60"

Images courtesy of the artists.

# Both Sides Now

Paintings by Gary Evans & Frances Thomas

In *Both Sides Now*, Gary Evans & Frances Thomas exhibit two strikingly distinct approaches to abstract painting, and pathways that are embedded with an undeniable *je ne sais quoi* that tethers their organic language. The title of this exhibition is inspired by Joni Mitchell's song of the same name and provides a lyrical entry point into the connection between the work of these artists; the two modes in which they paint, the way they address their subject and surface, and the hard to define connection between Evans' use of density and Thomas' tendency towards space.

Painting for Evans begins with a view to the outside world, which he internalizes and articulates subjectively creating hybrid realities with otherworldly connotations. Thomas works from within, responding materially to the experiential and mystical. No starting point or conclusion are the same. The working methods of both artists include observations of the world and intuition drives their investigations with paint.

Ultimately Evans' and Thomas' abstractions lead them to a common middle ground, located between the real and the imaginative. When viewed in concert, within this rich visual dialogue, their work offers us both sides of a similar journey. As with all good art, we aren't given all the answers, we "really don't know clouds at all".

Guest curated by Carol-Ann Ryan.

## ***Both Sides Now: Paintings by Gary Evans & Frances Thomas***

Affinities between painters and the way they work is not unusual. Art history has taught us that artists, traditionally painters, learn by observing and copying the works of others. This practice was born in workshops and ateliers in Renaissance Europe and in more recent history “schools” developed wherein a group of artists did not copy one another per se, but rather subscribed to a similar ideology. This notion is probably best known through the mid-20th century work of the Abstract Expressionists in the United States and the Automatistes in Canada. Contemporary painting, however, is not as clearly defined. Anything goes - artistic precedents are freely quoted and approaches to the medium of painting are as varied as the painters themselves.

It is intriguing to find two painters whose work is very much of this moment - experimental and very personal - yet alike in ways that are evident and elusive at the same time. For years I have admired the work of Gary Evans and Frances Thomas, who make paintings in an abstract mode. My intimate appreciation of their work stems, in part, because we are friends and colleagues, part of a small but mighty visual arts community, who stay connected and support one another. But I am also a curator who, through exhibitions and studio visits, has watched their respective practices evolve; the ongoing dialogue between their work is clear. It is purely visual, a dialogue I have not heard, but I can see. It is communicated through paint and articulated on the surface of canvas or paper. Evans and Thomas work within a similar artistic language, but their unique perspectives broaden the conversation and provide alternative entry points into the same

discussion. They offer “both sides” of a visual exchange that does not have a conclusion, rather an ongoing tête-à-tête in paint.



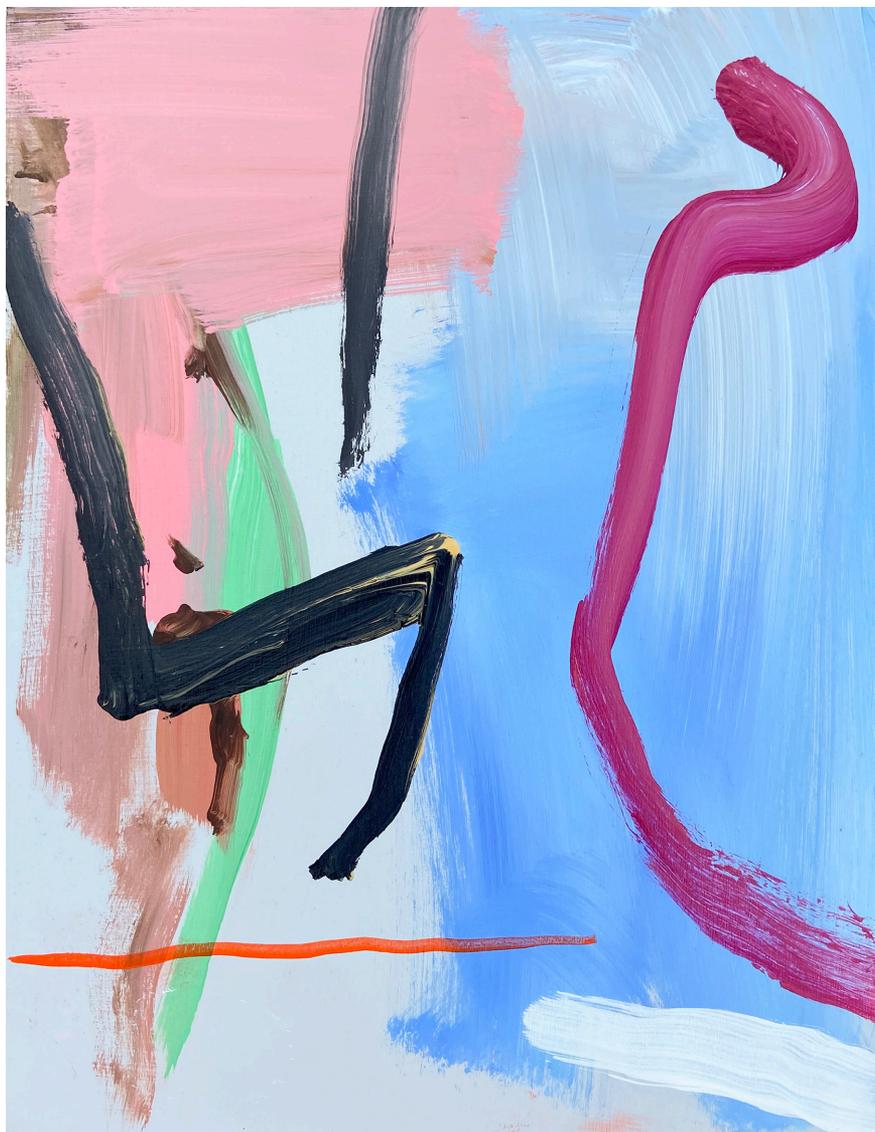
Gary Evans, *By The River*, 2020, 18" x 24", oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

Gary Evans’ recent work has been inspired by an appreciation for nature. During the pandemic lockdowns, long walks from his home studio in Alliston offered what he described as, “refuge, refreshment, research, [and] resistance”, while living through the COVID-19 experience. For much of his artistic career, Evans has found inspiration in the outside world, abstracting and inventing from the experiential moment. His method of improvisational drawing guides his melding of memory and imagination resulting in hybrid realities. Traces of landscapes and architecture often remain among seasonal colour and light effects. These elements are familiar yet illusory, juxtaposed within dreamscapes that belie specific time and place. This shift

in perception is underscored by bold shapes and form articulated in a varied use of paint application that creates a dense, often centralized, and active composition.

When she paints, Frances Thomas is drawn to the unknown and intuition is her guide. She is not interested in the straight translation of observed reality and instead engages with her experience of the immediate environment or the broader world. She paints to uncover emotional truth and describes her process as focused on the search and not the answers. Thomas' work is encapsulated by, "an inventory of marks and shapes that I build or make, and unmake and remake, just like a life, bits and pieces that can only ever be pieces...". As such, without knowledge of her methodology, there isn't necessarily a recognizable style from one series to the next. There is, however, a notable and consistent use of space and a vibrant energy captured by her brush.

Viewed in dialogue, we see two painters grappling with paint to communicate without words. A feeling, a memory, or an experience transcribed onto canvas in a formal language, most prominently, with gesture, shape, and colour. The engagement between the works of Evans and Thomas is focused on figure and ground played out in dynamic space with fluid paint application. Despite the clear difference between the use of space in their respective compositions, the tension and visual interest that is created by the relationship between forms is a common preoccupation. And sometimes, their independent studio practices birth paintings that are so alike in character the similarities are uncanny.



Frances Thomas, *Just Passing Through*, 2022, acrylic on panel, 16" x 12".  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Take for instance, *Midnight Rainbow* (2022) by Thomas. A thin veil of ground colour is punctuated by lively marks that dance around the centre and frame what might be interpreted as a horizon line and clouds in the sky. *Islet* (2020) by Evans is painted in similar tones, with an obvious suggestion of horizon behind organic textures that reference leaves, shrubs and grass. Both artists use space to guide the viewer's eye around and through the compositions; the placement of selected marks, such as along the far-right edge, indicates a stop. The relationship between these two works is so clear to me. If it were scaled to the same size, *Midnight Rainbow* could be placed on top of *Islet* and Thomas' quick gestures would tuck in nicely to support Evans' deliberate forms. As a pair, one is a beautiful compliment to the other – a completely unintentional outcome that emerges again and again with these two bodies of work.

The title of this exhibition is inspired by Joni Mitchell's song *Both Sides, Now* (1967)<sup>i</sup>. Although I admire the work of Mitchell, I am not a connoisseur of her music. However I do enjoy a good Joni Mitchell playlist and this song is almost always on rotation. When thinking about the paintings of Evans & Thomas, I am especially drawn to this stanza from Mitchell's song:

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now  
From up and down and still somehow  
It's cloud illusions I recall  
I really don't know clouds at all*



Frances Thomas, *Midnight Rainbow*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 16".  
Image courtesy of the artist.



Gary Evans, *Islet*, 2020, oil on canvas, 24" x 36". Image courtesy of the artist.

These words offer an entry point into understanding what Evans and Thomas are doing with their paintings. They're each on a mission to define and communicate their vision on canvas or paper. The outcome of the search is unique to each artist; the starting points are different, but characteristics of the journey are shared. They meet in the middle and that connection speaks volumes to me.

### **About the Artists and Curator**

**Gary Evans** was born in Weston-super-Mare, England and resides in Alliston, Ontario. He has been exhibiting work professionally since 1995. Evans' work in contemporary painting challenges traditional notions of perception and experience of the Canadian landscape. Of his more than twenty solo exhibitions highlights include a touring exhibition of his work, *Seeing Things: The Paintings of Gary Evans*, curated by Stuart Reid, which toured across Canada between 2000-2002, as well as several survey exhibitions of paintings including *Station* at The Art Gallery of Windsor in 2008, and *Farther Afield* at the MacLaren Art Centre, 2016. Evans is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design and is an instructor at the School of Design and Visual Art, Georgian College, Barrie, Ontario. He is represented by Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.

i Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides, Now*, Joni Mitchell, 1967, Gandalf Publishing Co.

Quotations from Gary Evans and Frances Thomas were taken from artist statements, notes, and reflections gathered by the curator in preparation for this exhibition.

**Frances Thomas**, a Canadian painter and printmaker, was born in Parry Sound, Ontario. She received both her BFA and MFA from York University, Toronto, Ontario, and is the recipient of the Samuel Sarick Purchase Award for excellence in thesis work. She has participated in residencies in Pouch Cove, Newfoundland and Triangle Arts in Brooklyn, New York and in 2016 spent three months in Berlin on a self-directed residency. Her paintings were featured in a solo exhibition, *but wait*, with an accompanying catalogue, at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie. Thomas currently lives and works from her loft and studio space in Barrie. She has exhibited in Barrie, Montreal, Edmonton, Toronto and New York, and her work is in the permanent collections of the MacLaren Art Centre, Bank of Montreal and York University. Frances Thomas would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Ontario Arts Council (OAC).

**Carol-Ann Ryan** is a visual arts professional based in Barrie, Ontario. She has held positions at public art galleries including the Art Gallery of Ontario, MOCA Toronto, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the MacLaren Art Centre. Her work in the private sector includes corporate art collections management and consulting. Carol-Ann currently serves as Public Art Coordinator for the City of Barrie. She holds an MA in Art History and an Honours BA in Art & Art History.

**Latcham Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville and the Ontario Arts Council for their generous support of this exhibition.**

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