

Alex Livingston

Inhabiting Studio 21

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Catherine MacLean

In the early 19th century, the diorama was the first cinematic foray into new geographies. In *Alex Livingston: Inhabiting Landscapes*, the artist and **NSCAD University** professor continues to explore how the digital medium plays with our perceptions of the natural world, much in the way that the diorama did.~



Alex Livingston's Alert To The Moment
(Contributed)

All of the six digital paintings in *Inhabiting Landscapes* are large (approximately four by six feet) and are rendered in rich black marks with the deer in earthy colours. The intense blue of **Nova Scotia's** skies, with billowing white clouds captured on Livingston's smart phone between **Halifax** and his cottage on the **Eastern Shore**, light up the backgrounds.

Livingston is no stranger to using nature as his subject. His first solo show after graduating from NSCAD in the '80s was about birds and trees. In the '90s, an allergy to solvents led him to making paintings using the computer, putting him on the forefront of that technology and the resulting expansion of the definition of what a painting is.

The images of deer in his 2019 show, *Deer* (see 2019-04-26) were actively doing things, or contemplating doing things, with humorous titles like *Buck Imagining Doe*. In *Inhabiting Landscapes*, we are asked to consider the environment around the deer, most specifically, the trees.

In a meeting at Studio 21 with **allNovaScotia**, Livingston explained how the trees in both shows were rendered in marks which look and feel like the inky black brush or pen strokes of the illustrations that predated photography in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Sometimes the marks are sparse, appearing to fade into the light of the sky in dioramic fashion. These feel arbitrary. At other times, they are central to the landscape, the deer serving to emphasize the scale. Those trees; massive, ancient, and gnarled, fill the approximately four-by-five-foot images.

A visitor asks Livingston why he has invented "imaginative" trees in an otherwise "natural" setting.

As Livingston explained, the trees in question are the ones he copied from tiny 18th-century illustrations of real trees and that what the visitor had intuited as natural trees are, in fact, Livingston's inventions.



Catherine MacLean and Alex Livingston.
(Contributed)

In fact, as Livingston explained, one of the old trees depicted in the show is the **The Fairlop Oak**, an oak tree in **England** that was said to have had a trunk 66 feet in circumference. (A similarly-sized Yew tree today is thought to be 2,000 to 5,000 years old.)

Livingston went on to tell the story of the Fairlop Oak. In the 18th century, a precision wood carver, **Daniel Day**, involved in the shipbuilding trade near **London**, held an annual fair for his employees using the oak as their rendezvous point.

The event grew to become one of London's most popular annual entertainments, with as many as 100,000 people attending, so popular that the area became known simply as "Fair."

The name was extended to "Fairlop" after a branch of the oak was "lopped off" to make Day's coffin in 1767. The tree was ever after referred to as "The Fairlop Oak."

As London grew around it, The Fairlop Oak managed to survive the heavy traffic of passers-by, souvenir takers, fires started by persons seeking shelter in its hollowed trunk, and the like, for another 100 years, and ever since in our imaginations.

Alex Livingston: Inhabited Landscapes continues at Studio 21 Fine Art on **Doyle Street** until May 3.

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