

PATERSON
EWEN

Paintings 1971-1987

Phenomena

PHILIP MONK

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Introduction

This exhibition charts Paterson Ewen's movement through landscape imagery, from the early "abstractions" with their rudimentary signs of and material resemblances to landscape, through the semiotic schemata of weather phenomena, to the more painterly evocations of the phenomena of light and space.

The focus in the exhibition is on the plywood landscape paintings. If the landscape works constitute a break in both the image and practice of Ewen's art, it is logical to limit the exhibition to what most fully exemplifies that break, rather than try to lead up to it with earlier works as if to keep the career within the narrative model of the retrospective. Needless to say, the notion of the retrospective is implicitly questioned in this presentation. In accordance with this conviction, the catalogue text avoids the narrative pull of a history and instead concentrates on the materials and methods of Ewen's practice. Insofar as the images of Ewen's work are discussed, they are treated in their sign function, where image and appearance are brought together in the materials of presentation. If phenomena can be recognized as a type of sign, their transcription in art is a further semiotic interpretation.

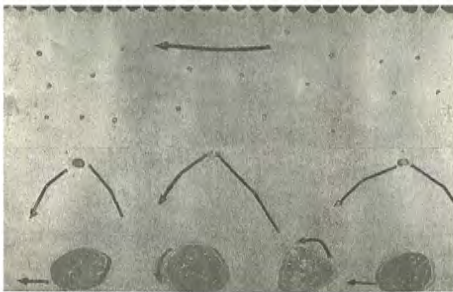
figure 1

Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream 1971

Metal, plywood and engraved linoleum

152.4 x 243.8 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario; Purchase, 1983



PATERSON EWEN

Phenomena

I Signs in the Landscape

In 1971, Paterson Ewen produced a series of works that broke radically with both his former practice of painting and the traditions of that medium. Two works in particular mark that break: *Thunderchain* and *Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream* (fig. 1; pls. 1, 2). In these works, paint played a minor role, and the usual support of canvas was completely lacking. Metal was the medium replacing paint in mimicking certain qualities in the appearance of natural phenomena.

Of these pieces Ewen has reported:

Metal first came in when I did this piece called *How Rocks Move in the Current of a Stream* [*sic*]. I needed something that looked and felt like water but I didn't want to paint it on. I wanted to have something laid on and I thought of galvanized iron. I made the rocks out of plywood and linoleum, again following a bit of amateur research. The larger rocks depending on their shape either skid or roll on the bed of the stream, the medium size rocks pelt through the stream and the small rocks are suspended in the flow of the stream. That was one of the first metal pieces I did, along with a thunder piece, a very crude piece, just a combination of metal and wood and heavy chain that looks like weather. A little yellow square that looks like a piece of weather, and another orange colored square that looks like a piece of earth, and then an expanse of metal that is just space and then a heavy rusty chain and you pick up the chain and drop it and it makes a sound like thunder.¹

"Looks like" is the aspect or function we have to investigate in Ewen's paintings; but we cannot base this investigation on a simple model of mimesis. "Looks like" is not an attempt to duplicate exactly the appearance of

phenomena, to mimic it visually. Ewen turned to materials other than traditional ones as a means to record, describe, evoke or express his investigation of natural phenomena, but to do so in a very material way. The material was support and construction, and also image and appearance in one. Metal, for instance, was not just to be used in the image, it was to appear as the phenomena; but in appearing it was to remain metal, functioning in another way. It embodied a look and a function. Just as Ewen's images are records of "how rain falls and how lightning works," so this function "looks like" is a matter of how these images work. For instance, in *Thunderchain*, what "looks like a piece of weather" and what "looks like a piece of earth" are grounded within the larger field of signifying function of the chain and the metal backdrop. This material function may seem to ground the work too much, to divorce it from its natural affinities with the tradition of the sublime – from Turner and Northern Romanticism to, closer to home, the transcendental realism of Emily Carr, Varley, and Lawren Harris. Nevertheless, it is with the material function that we must begin.

In the catalogue for the first major gathering of the plywood landscape paintings in 1977, curator Dorothy Shadbolt wrote: "The successful clash of 'idea' and *matière* is one of the constant characteristics of these works resulting in a tension which one wants to call resonant, or reverberant, or in some way related to sound – perhaps because he deals with forces which are often more audible than visible."² *Thunderchain* can actually produce a sound if one drops the chain against the metal. But in all of Ewen's work natural forces are brought to a sign function in different ways, and it is the material that "looks like" that partakes in that semiosis, transmitting the *effects* it records.³

The materials of Paterson Ewen's paintings from 1971 on are not the sole indicators of that break. In the return to landscape imagery, to imagery itself, subject matter expresses it as well. But, given that this return is to a seemingly traditional subject – landscape – how can we qualify this as a radical break? In departing from one tradition (paint and canvas and its formal conclusion in abstraction), he seemed merely to return to another genre of art.

We have only to look to other returns to landscape of this period to see how Ewen's paintings conform to radical reorderings within art, reorderings that are, in turn, responses to a wider range of dissatisfactions that Ewen shared with others. At home, Michael Snow's contemporaneous experimental film *La région centrale* (1970-71), with its specially built camera scanning 360 degrees in all directions of an empty northern Quebec landscape, displaced space and time, unbinding landscape from traditional representational frameworks (dislocating representation itself), and giving the subject/image

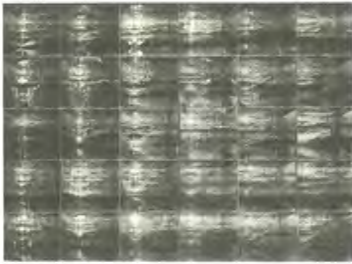


figure 2
 Michael Snow
Atlantic 1967
 Welded metal, wood, photograph
 171.1 x 245.1 x 39.9 cm
 Art Gallery of Ontario;
 Purchase, 1980

figure 3
 Robert Smithson
Spiral Jetty, Rozel Point,
Great Salt Lake, Utah 1970
 Mud, precipitated salt crystals,
 rock, water
 coil 457.2 x 4.57 m

new phenomenal presence through this unique means of recording and structuring in time. Although landscape formed the image, the subject was not necessarily landscape; the image was framed through certain conceptual or mechanical apparatuses that had as their aim the structuring of perception. Landscape was not necessarily a subject that existed out there in its own right; it was often a ready-made, already-represented subject; and it was part of a process that resulted in an end for viewing itself (see, for example, Snow's *Atlantic*, fig. 2).

We can take Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970 (fig. 3), to be emblematic of that remarkable break from the gallery that earthworks represent. In an actual, physical return to landscape, this work dramatically reordered scale and responses to both art and the landscape, overlaying the mythical with the ecological in the process. Other artists similarly used the landscape or earth as raw material, mapping phenomena through the traces left in the conjunction of process and material. Ewen transposed those processes onto a representational plane – to the image of landscape; but his approach to material, the way it was meant to signify, paralleled these other concerns, as did his interest in ecology.

What may not be so apparent in Ewen's turning to landscape painting is how it reflected the general interest in the sign and the semiotic function of art that became more and more evident during the 1970s. The relation between appearance and the sign, phenomena and representation, would be the dialectic that would determine Ewen's work from then on. What Ewen also shared with other artists working in a whole range of media (earthworks, conceptual art, etc.) was not only a dissatisfaction with traditional media, but a motivation away from the commodity status of painting and from the art system represented by the gallery and its cultural products.

In considering Ewen's work, it would seem natural in retrospect to discuss his subject in relation to a national landscape tradition, or even to discuss his images as prefiguring a general return to representation in the late 1970s and early 1980s (in this regard, see also his figure paintings; figs. 20–22). As terms, “landscape” and “image” are precisely what I wish to avoid, insofar as they are traditionally conceived. Rather, inasmuch as Ewen's turn is not a return, we have to reconstitute the break his work made, partly by putting it into relation with other practices that might have nothing to do with landscape or painting. And we have to consider the major shifts in his painting that realign it to other practices in art, namely the move from mimesis to semiosis, whereby material takes on a sign function in a semiotic process. In both cases materials and methods are the means by which we have to analyse Paterson Ewen's works, since they in turn are the means by which the works signify.



figure 6

Thundercloud as Generator I 1971

Acrylic on canvas

213.4 x 152.4 cm

London Regional Art Gallery, Art Fund



figure 7

Thundercloud as Generator II 1971

Acrylic on canvas

218.4 x 190.5 cm

Collection of the Canada Council

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d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil des arts

du Canada

it names a function for the work. When dropped on the sheet of galvanized iron the chain produces the simulated sonic effect. The viewer imagines that sound, which resonates between the “little yellow square that looks like a piece of weather” and the “orange colored square that looks like a piece of earth.” The work’s cheap theatricalism and approximation are exactly what make it succeed.

Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream takes a similar sheet of galvanized iron, but plays upon its visual resemblances rather than its resonant qualities. As Ewen said, “I needed something that looked and felt like water but I didn’t want to paint it on. I wanted to have something laid on and I thought of galvanized iron.” He added shapes cut from plywood and covered with linoleum to stand for the rocks moving in the current, their motion signified by the arrows nailed to the iron background, their location in water indicated by the standardized ripples at the top of the piece.

The third work in this series that explores crude approximations of phenomena was a three-panel piece called *How Lightning Worked in 1925*. The most rudimentary of representations, the three panels of this work record the trace of lightning as it actually functions rather than as we see it. The frame-by-frame depiction replicating a film study of lightning is duplicated in the additive construction of the invisible tracer and actual lightning bolt, which are the heads of bolts painted blue and fastened through the galvanized sheet. Both the frame-by-frame sequencing and the additive construction introduce the element of time into the work. We could say that this notion of development brought about by the materials of construction / depiction is equivalent to the associations generated by the sound in *Thunderchain* and the appearance of a substance (water) in *Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream*. In each of these cases, the detail functions as a sign to make the works resonate as specific phenomena, to turn their material substance into something that signifies the phenomenal. The materials act as a ground, an expanse on which the detail bestows a particular meaning, giving the materials wider associations than they can suggest in isolation.

In turning to a whole range of books on phenomena with their different subjects and modes of depiction, Ewen realized “that what we usually call the more simple things are immensely complicated so I just accepted my limitations and put down the parts of these happenings that were for me fun to do.”⁹ In so doing, Ewen discovered the process that would provide the basis of his art to the present, but only through the negation of what he was intending. “My first idea was to make a great big woodcut print. I got a four by eight piece of plywood and hand gouged out something, an eclipse or some rain, I don’t know which came first. But then as I was doing this and as I was painting in the gouges and as I was rolling it

over with a printer's roller I realized that that was the work, and that's how it happened."¹⁰ The result was the plywood painting *Solar Eclipse*, 1971 (fig. 9), immediately followed more successfully by the second hand-gouged painting, *Eruptive Prominence*, 1971 (pl. 3).

In science this new direction, an initial misdirection, would be called a paradigm shift, a shift necessitated by the insistence of inconsistencies, problems, or accidental findings. Apart from this analogy, which of course applies in all fields, Ewen's method has nothing to do with scientific principles (his scientific interest has the status of "amateur"). But he did turn initially to science for his images rather than to his own experience. He chose subjects given only to view through the data received through scientific instruments. For example, the image in *Solar Eclipse* is taken from time-lapse photography, whereas the eruptive prominence of the work of that name cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Eruptive Prominence certainly is more typical of the work to follow on plywood, as it initiated the features and materials that would evolve in time through Ewen's working process. Metal cut from sheets of galvanized iron now was used as a highlight, defining the image in its reflective surface. The metal established what was the focus of attention in this work: the eruptive prominence. As in *Solar Eclipse*, the wood is only slightly gouged. Colour was applied thinly so the grain of the wood showed. Indeed, the grain is completely visible in places, the accidental features of the wood accepted. And in complete adaptation to new circumstances, Ewen applied the acrylic paint with three sizes of printer's rollers.

Having found the initial techniques and materials that would eventually add up to a vocabulary, Ewen immediately went on to a trio of works that shared similar motifs in form and subject – the theme of lightning in *Storm over the Prairies*, *Forked Lightning* and *City Storm with Chain Lightning* (pls. 4-6). The last named transforms the use of chain in *Thunderchain*, so that it now has a visual function akin to the bolts of *How Lightning Worked in 1925*.

The first work completed in this series, *Storm over the Prairies*, plays out a whole repertoire of motifs and materials, using different, common materials to stand for various phenomena and land forms:

Coco-matting is the stuff at the bottom of *Storm over the Prairies*. It is very thick and has a nice rubbery back to it and I bought it off the roll but I've never seen it since for sale like this. That was very much my approach, and still is, to sometimes buy the materials before I know what I'm going to do with them. I wander around hardware stores. I saw that matting and said well I have to have some of that so I bought some and it hung around the studio until I of course realized that it was brown

grass, prairie for this painting. That cloud up there is a piece of plywood and over the piece of plywood is glued a piece of battleship linoleum and into that I grooved the marks. This cloud is bolted onto the base plywood and the black dots you see, some are put there by my gouging and some of the dots are actually black bolts. The lightning is galvanized iron.¹¹

In this work, substances were pulled together from preceding works and would appear in successive ones. But in general, although diverse materials would be added to subsequent paintings, they would not disrupt the surface with their different materiality – as did the textural difference between the coconut matting and the gouged surface, for instance. Rather, they would contribute an effect within that overall surface. In some cases, gouging and painting would be the sole means to carry the subject, and in time they would take the upper hand in the development of imagery.

III “Phenomascapes”

I call my work “Phenomascapes” because they are images of what is happening around us as individuals, rain, lightning, hail, wind. They are also images of what is happening in and around our Universe, Galaxies, Solar Eruptions. They are sometimes inner phenomena. I observe, contemplate and then attack.¹²

The works discussed in the section above were exhibited in 1972 at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto – the results of experiments motivated by disillusionment and a resulting search for “fun.” The exhibition thus marks a chain of decisions for the artist in working towards a new method of making art and images. The work in the 1973 exhibition, on the other hand, shows themes fully formed not as *landscapes* but as *phenomascapes*, or “phenomascapes,” as Ewen calls them.

“I’ve had an ongoing interest in geology, that which is under the earth, various surface phenomena, mostly surface phenomena that connect with the sky, and then beyond that an interest in space.”¹³ Ewen could be describing the trajectory of the works in the 1973 exhibition as an arc from phenomena close to us (*Lollipop Rainfall; Precipitation; Night Storm; Fog and Rain Lifting from the Mountain*, pls. 14, 15, 13, 12), to the higher altitudes of the atmosphere (*The Flight of the R-100*, pl. 11), to a view of the earth from space (*Northern Lights; Earth, Space, Weather Compendium*, pls. 8, 7), to the depths of the galaxies (*Star Traces around Polaris; Galaxy NGC-253*, pls. 10, 9). This

catalogue of phenomena would repeat itself with different emphases, variable scales, and emotional resonances to the present, although the presentation would result in diverse effects as Ewen worked in wood differently, adapting his sense of form, colour, space, and light over time to the conditions and moods he wished to evoke.

All or most of these types of phenomena share something in common: they are not immediately given in experience. According to Paterson Ewen only one of his paintings comes from a direct experience – that of seeing the aurora borealis while snowshoeing in Algonquin Park. And yet that painting, *Northern Lights*, with the earth seen from space and the land mass of Canada occupying a disproportionate area of the globe, can hardly be said to be a painting of direct experience.

We have seen Ewen use the record of time-lapse photography in *Solar Eclipse* and the frame-by-frame dissection of *How Lightning Worked* in 1925. The configuration of *Star Traces around Polaris* is a result of the same procedure; its source is another time-lapse image. The string grid of *Galaxy NGC-253* could only be the duplication of the measuring grids from astronomical photographs. (Ewen indicates in reference to this painting that he uses photographs, but does not copy any particular one.) Indeed, as is apparent in a work like Michael Snow's *Plus Tard*, 1977 (in which a camera sweeps a room of the National Gallery of Canada housing the paintings of the Group of Seven), and as much art-historical research corroborates, the subject behind a good deal of landscape painting is not nature but the conventions of past art and other paintings. What Ewen adds to landscape painting rests on the level of representation. His works remain paintings, but not paintings about paintings. Rather they operate in the interstices between painting and phenomena, where appearance is transcribed onto a surface, but not in any direct correspondence to actuality. The actuality is the phenomenal appearance of the painting itself, which is, to different degrees, engaged in a semiotic process, though less so, admittedly, as the semiotic seems to veer towards the symbolic in his later work.

Ewen's search may take place through various forms of pre-existent imagery and even different reproductions of the same image. Discussing *The Great Wave: Homage to Hokusai*, which has its basis in the famous Hokusai print, Ewen relates: "I did the same thing here as with the Galaxy...looked at many versions, all reproductions of the print, all differing in colour, paper, ink quality and none that close. I just wanted a big wave and was quite ready to let Hokusai influence me in the making of a great wave."¹⁴

As with the tools and material at hand, it is a question of what can serve in the making of the image. Most telling in this respect is the source of the coastlines that first appeared in *Hail on Coastline*, 1974 (pl. 16). Far from

being a coast familiar to Ewen, one of the coasts of Canada, for instance, these have been generalized from depictions in an out-of-date Japanese maritime handbook, *Views in Naikai* (Tokyo: Maritime Safety Agency, pub. no. 353, n.d.), which shows coasts in narrow horizontal bands in photographs that are also duplicated in drawings, the proportions of which are similar to the shapes of the panels of *Coastal Trip*, 1974 (pl. 18). Ewen says that these drawings “fitted in with my approach to drawing and also with my Japanese feeling if you like . . .”¹⁵ While originally these depictions were to serve a navigational purpose, for Ewen they were a ready-made armature on which to hang his paintings, so to speak. But if the landscape is ready made, our experience of the painting is palpable. For, while the clouds in *Coastal Trip*, for instance, have a certain generality for us that may come from Ewen’s own observations in nature and experiments in paint, that generality does not just abstractly signify “cloudiness.” The clouds have a compelling specificity that returns the image to the phenomenal world.

Ewen notes this freedom of approach in Japanese art itself: “you know the Japanese artist’s method was to go out into the rain or to observe a tree or a bird or a flower or a wave but he would never try to depict it then. He would simply observe it and when he had captured enough of it in all levels of his being, then he would go back and do it.”¹⁶ However, what the artist then approaches is the material itself, which in Ewen’s case is engaged on the scale of the body, a physical experience equivalent to standing in the landscape. And from that physical approach Ewen has to draw out an image from the materials. The concept and image of the landscape, then, are dictated as much by the confrontation of material and method as by a landscape scene itself. “In terms of materials I think you can write it down mostly to that large sheet of plywood worked upon with the router. Kneeling in the middle of the painting with that gouging machine. It was like an exercise, a physical exercise in almost an oriental position. This being in the center of the work instead of standing up opposite it is so much a part of the process. Although this only struck me after I found myself doing it.”¹⁷

IV Method

*The physical beginning involves gathering materials and tools in advance of the struggle, wood, machine tools, hand tools, paint, and a myriad of things. A length of wire becomes rain, a piece of link fence becomes fog and so on, obviously a physical activity running parallel with the fermenting images in my head.*¹⁸

The image is the consequence of a method; and that method is a confrontation of tools and materials. Ewen's method entails gouging a prepared plywood surface (the standard plywood sheets are scarfed, accounting for the non-standard dimensions on one side), painting it, and applying bits of metal or other commonplace hardware material. The basic method has changed little to the present; the changes appear elsewhere. The use of a tool determines what form an image will take and how we read and interpret it. A change of tools will be consequential for the working method and the appearance of the image. The major change in Ewen's art of this period, determining the rest of his work to the present, is the result of a change of tools, the substitution of an electric router for hand gouging. Further to that change and as a result of the tool's use, Ewen started working on the plywood in a horizontal position, rather than upright in quasi-easel style. (*Precipitation* was the last work prepared in the upright fashion with the electric router.) The electric router's effects can easily be read in these works from 1973 on, distinguishing them from the prerouted works in the distinctive way it works the surface, taking down the layers of the wood, etching vigorous lines, or creating knot-hole-like effects.

This way of working establishes the character of that great series of paintings, from 1973 and 1974, dealing with rain, hail and water. Perhaps it was the new technique and the graphic character it so freely and immediately offered to the artist that gave such a unified appearance to this group of works: *Hail on Coastline*, *Rain over Water*, *Coastal Trip*, *Flag Effect*, *Full Circle Flag Effect*, *Iceberg* and *The Great Wave: Homage to Hokusai* (pls. 16-20, 22, 21). In discussing one of these works, *Rain over Water*, Ewen describes the nature of his working process:

You have to remember that up on two saw-horses about four feet high it is a platform. So first I stood by this eight by eleven foot platform of plywood and I made the horizon and I put in the islands and a few of the waves. I may or may not have left them final. This very elemental magic marker drawing included almost none of the sky. This much I could do while standing beside it. Then I got up, and up on all fours in the middle of this platform, I went to work. All over the whole thing I grooved into the wood with the electrical router, changing the bit as I felt the grooves should be larger or smaller. And keeping in mind at this point now what it is I want in terms of direction and velocity and proportion I have to put myself in the center of the whole thing that's going on and hold it together. When I move to one side and feel it tipping I must be careful to shift my weight back and stretch out my arm as far as I can. And in this very exciting and very physically demanding

process, the machine is very noisy and dangerous at 25 thousand revolutions a minute, I have to be quite careful not to get my clothes caught or gouge the side of my knee. Then towards the end I probably jumped off, shut the machine off, turned the machine on and standing up put in those last few streaks that are there to one side.¹⁹

This is the first stage, establishing the ground for painting; but it also determines the graphic nature of the image, so that part of the image is in place before the application of paint or other materials. Grounding the image thus firmly in the material is hardly a traditional manner of creating an image of the landscape. Nor through Ewen's description of his working method do we picture the traditional landscape artist. Rather we might think of other contemporary practices and recall photographs of Jackson Pollock at work or Richard Serra flinging molten lead into the corner of a wall, both interacting directly with material in creating an "image" or product.

In this early work Ewen was not so much searching for an image – although that was important – as he was attempting to find a satisfactory way of working. That ethic of work, the chances the artist took with materials, and the introduction of new tools put him in relation to a whole host of processes of post-minimal art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, even though the landscape image may disguise that fact for us.

The analogy to Pollock's activity is not far-fetched considering these statements by the American sculptor Robert Morris in his influential 1970 article, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making":

Until Pollock, art making oriented toward two-dimensional surfaces had been a fairly limited act so far as the body was concerned. At most it involved the hand, wrist and arm. Pollock's work directly involved the use of the entire body. Coupled to this was his direct investigation of the properties and of the materials in terms of how paint behaves under the conditions of gravity. In seeing such work as "human behavior" several coordinates are involved: the nature of materials, the restraints of gravity, the limited mobility of the body interacting with both. The work turned back to the natural world through accident and gravity and moved the activity of making into a direct engagement with certain natural conditions. Of any artist working in two dimensions it could be said that he, more than any others, acknowledged the conditions of both accident and necessity open to that interaction of body and materials as they exist in a three-dimensional world. And all this and more is visible in the work.²⁰

This statement could be applied word for word to Ewen's activity. Ewen's engagement takes place not in nature but in the studio, where he confronts

his materials as an “interaction of body and materials.”

If alienation from the natural world was something Ewen was trying to overcome and, as Robert Morris emphasizes, it is the turn to the natural world that is concomitant to working in material, then it is the material form of working that overcomes that alienation, rather than the fact of depicting or representing nature itself: “Ends and means have come progressively closer together in a variety of different types of work in the 20th century. This resolution re-establishes a bond between the artist and the environment.”²¹

Morris gave behavioural emphasis to the body’s activity in manipulating materials in various ways, especially as extended by technological means.²² In turning to this form of behaviour, this way of working material, Ewen realized an empathy between his own process and what he was depicting, as when he was discussing making the painting *Iceberg*: “a strange thing happens sometimes when I do my paintings: the actual physical movement I make sometimes actually feels analogous to the way things really happen.”²³

Working this way with material to make the image come out is a challenge. It is a struggle, but also an attack, as Ewen repeatedly has stated. But what was an empathetic relation between process and material and the phenomena depicted for himself during that process has also to be evident to the spectator; it has to be sympathetic, so to speak. Discussing *Rain over Water* as analogous to *Iceberg*, Ewen says:

What I wanted here was the feeling of momentum and once again...I approached this in a very attack-like manner, using a medium sized bit.... There is the same principle here, heavy drops falling more vertically, smaller ones being blown farther away. For some of the smaller ones I used streaks instead of dots.... I wanted to get the feeling that these were falling fairly quickly. As you come to the right of the painting the smaller drops are being blown with a lot of momentum and my gesture – my physical gesture in doing the painting was *just that*.... I kind of attacked it...at one point I was going zip zip as the router went through the wood.²⁴

The gouging is part of the process; it lays in the structure of the image, the ground for all the painterly atmospheric effects. Paint comes next. What follows is a process that complements, adding the means by which those painterly effects are read as atmospheric, namely the means by which “a length of wire becomes rain, a piece of link fence becomes fog and so on,” which Ewen maintains is “obviously a physical activity running parallel with the fermenting images in my head.”

V Image

The material is a means to producing the image that initiated the activity. We come to the most difficult topic in any discussion of Ewen's work: the image and its content. How does one talk about the sun and moon? Ewen paints them, and he paints them again and again. Painting is only part of the construction; there is something functionally significant and signifying about the material that makes it more than painting in what it communicates. But there are the images – traditional images, images rich in symbolic histories. Do we not question whether *Rightangle Tree*, 1977 (pl. 26) is perhaps symbolic in the same way that *Bandaged Man* (fig. 20) may be a self-portrait? Certainly *Ship Wreck*, 1987 (pl. 46) has a completely different emotional character from *Oil Tanker at Resolute Bay*, 1984 (fig. 19), and fits the palette and sense of form, heavy and expressionistic, of the other works from 1987 that are of an entirely different nature from anything that precedes them.

One could wax lyrical on the mythical potential of these works, but as I have limited myself solely to a discussion of materials and methods, any discussion of the development of Ewen's art in terms of the "repetition" of its imagery would assume the form of a symbolics or fall into a detailed description of the development of form, colour, and atmosphere, of the changing function of the surface in the routing of the wood, etc., all of which would depart, following various narrative models, from what is essential in Ewen's art.

What seems important to me is to establish the break in Ewen's work, and the means and paths by which he arrived at making his images signify. These are material practices; and one cannot be too emphatic that this is the case when a piece of chain-link fence characterizes fog lifting from a mountain. When Ewen says, "a length of wire becomes rain, a piece of link fence becomes fog and so on," everything significant in his work is in that "becoming." What has a material function in the work takes on a signifying activity for the spectator/interpreter. The development of all his work proceeds from these achievements.

Ewen talks about the constant play between image and material, material and image:

I get an image in my head somehow or other, from someplace or other, and I live with that image for a while. This "living with the image" can go on for days or months or years. Work on the plywood is begun as the image emerges, that is to say the images living in my head for years



figure 8
Full Moon 1984
Acrylic on gouged plywood
121.9 x 152.4 cm
Collection of Robert Lorrigan

do not impede the images which come out more quickly, thank god! There is no strain involved here nor do I lose any of the really good images.... The image wants out, my hands and eyes are ready for the attack on the plywood, my intelligence exerts an automatic restraint, the adrenalin flows and the struggle begins.

The physical beginning involves gathering materials and tools in advance of the struggle, wood, machine tools, hand tools, paint, and a myriad of things. A length of wire becomes rain, a piece of link fence becomes fog and so on, obviously a physical activity running parallel with the fermenting images in my head.

Once I place the plywood on the sawhorses and touch a magic marker to the surface to begin a vague drawing of the image, the activity begins to accelerate. Drawing is followed by routing and thoughts of colours, textures, materials rotate in my mind. It may be interesting to note that my usual large sizes of wood force me into the middle of the work on my hands and knees so that I have to deal with the centre without seeing much of the rest. Some hand gouging may follow. Other things that may happen are, metal may be snipped to make a cloud or to be part of some other phenomenon. In any case things get nailed on, glued on, inlaid, or stamped on by a homemade stamp – suns and grid lines are sometimes done this way....

Perhaps I can risk saying something that only the artist would know or dare to proclaim, and that is that once begun, the work cannot fail. This is so because I *make* it come out. Some works of comparable size have taken six weeks to finish, some have “come out” in three days, but they will emerge from my rotating head at some point and they will be manifested on the plywood.²⁵

In this description the image is balanced with material and tools, or the image making is understood as what makes the image come out of the material. If Ewen makes the image come out, it is primarily because the act is one of making.

VI Conclusion

Generally, one can say that in Ewen's turn to landscape in 1971 the images retain the rudimentary character of signs in a material resemblance to natural phenomena. Then having found a method of working, the artist passes

into that great cycle of paintings from 1973-74 that represents the semiotic schemata of weather systems. Having absorbed himself in the phenomena of nature, the artist, like so many painters before him, becomes involved in a more painterly evocation of the phenomena of light and space. Recently, with the latest cycle of paintings, we wonder whether some of the paintings take on a more obvious symbolic charge, an interpretation that would resonate perhaps through all his earlier work.

In Ewen's work there is a gravitational attraction, an inexorable pull towards the image. We should not, however, think of the artist as a creative demiurge creating "worlds" from the cosmos of his mind. When Ewen says "it may be interesting to note that my usual large sizes of wood force me into the middle of the work on my hands and knees so that I have to deal with the centre without seeing much of the rest," something else of significance is taking place that rests within the direct act of making and the decisions of that process. And when he simply states: "The physical beginning involves gathering materials and tools in advance of the struggle, wood, machine tools, hand tools, paint, and a myriad of things. A length of wire becomes rain, a piece of link fence becomes fog and so on, obviously a physical activity running parallel with the fermenting images in my head," another understanding materially grounds these images in their own making and gives them their essential character: as paintings with the power to signify by profoundly material means.

Notes

1. In an interview with Nick Johnson: "Paterson Ewen: Rain," *artscanada* 32:1, 196 / 197 (Mar. 1975), 43-44.

2. Dorothy Shadbolt, *Paterson Ewen: Recent Work* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1977), n.p.

3. Semiotics is the science of the system of signs. While it has many applications and analyses in diverse fields, here it is understood as the signifying function of visual representations. One of the founders of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, has discussed weather phenomena as types of signs, in particular as indices: "Logic as Semiotic," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 108-09.

4. Geoffrey James, *Contemporary Canadian Painters* (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs and Canada Council Art Bank, 1978), n.p.

5. For background biography, see Matthew Teitelbaum, *Paterson Ewen: The Montreal Years*. For the change in Ewen's direction, see Janice Andreae, "Paterson Ewen: Painting Image and Allegory," *Parachute* 28 (Sept., Oct., Nov. 1982), 22-28.

6. Johnson, "Paterson Ewen," 41.

7. *Artesian Well* would be the only painting in which Ewen would try to combine the geological with the meteorological, above ground with below ground, although *Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream* depicts an underground scene. While the forces he depicts are often invisible to us or to the naked eye, they are in the realm of water and sky.

8. A couple of works would still maintain that abstract representation of movement: the arrows that give the rotation of direction to the different-sized stones or rocks in a stream in *Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream* (they enliven what would be inert objects on the surface of the metal: they make the “rocks” function as rocks), and the directional arrows in *Full Circle Flag Effect*.

9. Johnson, “Paterson Ewen,” 41.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 43. The cloud in relief is made like the boulders of *Rocks Moving in the Current of a Stream*, but also like *Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle*, 1971, a work with no particular motif except its title, and that could be hung on the wall or placed on the floor. Coconut matting is also used in the small *Midnight over the Prairie*, 1972 (fig. 10) and *Rain and Fog Lifting from the Mountain*.

12. *Chinook* 1:3 (Spring 1979); a publication of Weather Enterprises.

13. Interview by Dorothy Shadbolt for the Vancouver Art Gallery catalogue. Also see the Johnson interview for Ewen’s interest in geology.

14. Shadbolt, *Paterson Ewen*. One can also point to *Halley’s Comet as Seen by Giotto* as a work that has its “source” in another painting.

15. Shadbolt interview.

16. Johnson, “Paterson Ewen,” 45. But also compare Ewen’s comments on *Fog and Rain Lifting from the Mountain* in the Shadbolt interview: “The full title of this piece is *Fog and Rain Lifting from the Mountain, Chinese Style*. Chinese painting, at the same time [as] it is quite realistic, can also be hazy and amorphous and I wanted that... a mixture of strength – real clouds, heavy rain – and those almost contradictory paradoxical qualities – vagueness.” Materials were selected to achieve these effects: “Then when I decided to do a piece about rain and fog over a mountain I looked over at this coil of wire which I’d had for almost a year and I said that will be rain because I want the rain to be very fast and very heavy. I looked at the fiber matting and said I want something really rough for the earth... and a piece of link fencing had been hanging around that I knew I was going to get my ‘fog effect’ from. And so I just made it work.”

17. Johnson, *Ibid.*, 45.

18. In Roald Nasgaard, *Ten Canadian Artists in the 1970s* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1980), 42.

19. Johnson, “Paterson Ewen,” 41.

20. Robert Morris, “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making,” *Artforum* 8:8 (Apr. 1970), 63.

21. *Ibid.*

22. “The body’s activity as it engages in manipulating various materials according

to different processes has open to it different possibilities of behavior... Such differences of engagement (and their extensions with technological means) amount to different forms of behaviour." *Ibid.*, 62.

23. Shadbolt, *Paterson Ewen*.

24. *Ibid.*

25. In Nasgaard, *Ten Canadian Artists*, 42.