

Feeling Good, Feeling Bad: The Self-Help Vibrations of Patrick Howlett

By Heather White • Reviews • January 19, 2017

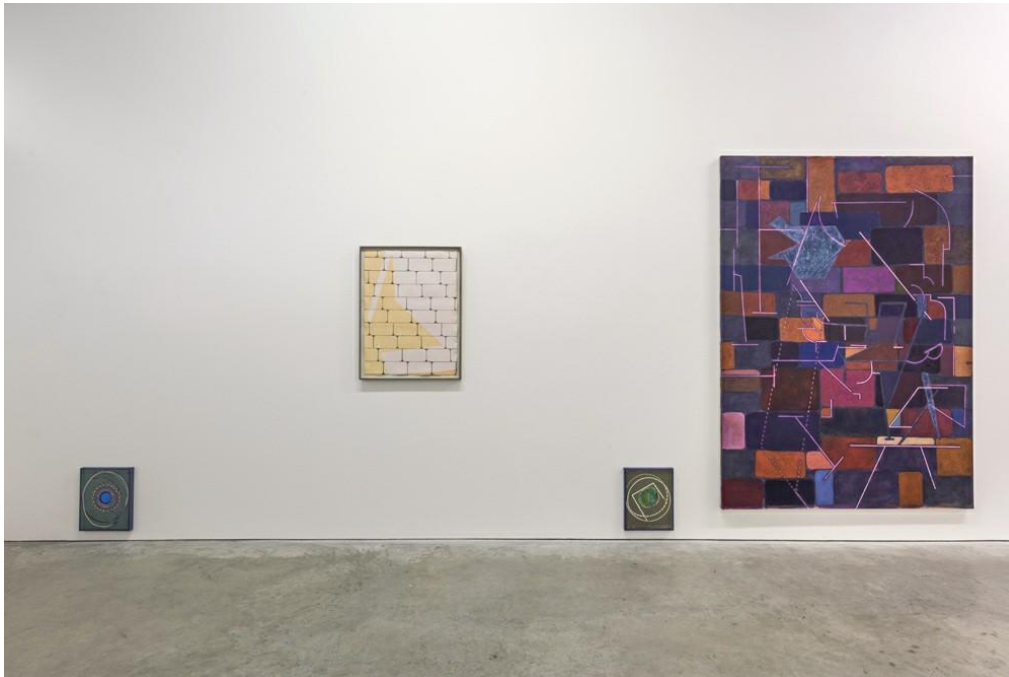


Patrick Howlett, "New Thoughts: Feeling Lethargy," 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery.

After Trump was elected, the first photo I posted to Instagram was a view of glass baubles foregrounding yellow leaves and blue sky between black wires crisscrossing. The pyramid of a nearby roof anchored the image at one corner and showed which way was up. Before the election I would have trimmed the roof out: it interrupted the image's kaleidoscopic feel, snapped the scene back to reality. But in mid-November a renewed sense of responsibility dictated I leave the roof in. It was a disavowal of escapism posted in an escapist haven. An appeal made in private language, a promise pledged in gibberish. That I was feeling stunned and sobered is impossible to derive from the composition. As *Art of Fiction* author John Gardner said of sentiment too subtly expressed: "no one, not even the angels aflutter in the rafters, can hear the resonance." I shared the picture, but left the meaning of its cropping unexplained.

Since then, Patrick Howlett's *The Personal Atmosphere* has opened with its own elusive pictorial logic at Susan Hobbs Gallery, in Toronto. The show is named for a 1908 book of suspect self-help by Frank Channing Haddock, which peddles the life-changing benefits of controlling one's electro-magnetic vibrations. The Facebook invite introduced this curiosity as the exhibition's pretense, and Howlett vaguely gestured to a personal context for the project: he'd bought the book "feeling good," but only turned to it while "feeling bad." He also included a few of his own instructions, but less to guide our personal transformations than our aesthetic interpretations. "Consider a diagram fragment as wireless router, or bricks so thin they look like paint chips," he advised,

setting the tone for an atmosphere that would be, counterintuitively – and jarringly, given the intense emotion of the political moment – quite impersonal.



Patrick Howlett, "The Personal Atmosphere," 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery.

The show leaves much to decipher. For starters, it's cryptically hung: in the first room, small paintings of uniform size are placed at regular intervals, almost flush with the floor, and larger works hang between them. I chose to trust that this rhythm meant something; trust, I believe, is as essential to aesthetic interpretation as to personal transformation. Context validated this choice. Via the artist statement, Haddack (who wrote decades before the internet) highlighted the "wireless movements" of our psychic emanations, and described how these register on "the pane of glass in the window, the brick in the wall, and the paving-stone in the street." This explained the room: the low works were routers, each titled *Outlet*; they radiated "wireless" signals that then layered and intersected on the surface of the larger paintings.

With their fragments and tangles, these works owe much to painters like Paul Klee and the Cubists. But conceptually, another painter haunts the space: Mark Rothko, whose works were also, explicitly, experiments with energy. Howlett titles one work after a Haddack quote that might have compelled the Abstract Expressionist, too: "an idea is only a vibration." And while both were interested in how projections of self encounter the world, the formal gulf between the artists is instructive. Where Rothko's paintings rise from the ground like portals to other, vibrating dimensions, Howlett's rise like closed doors. Or they're windows, with marks on them that keep us from flying into the glass. We're not here to enter, but to observe. The paintings aren't immersive, but illustrative. Forces encounter one another, and we witness their contact. But we're bystanders.

Howlett is less an expressionist here than a cartographer. And what's more, the maps aren't really tools to help us navigate, but objects for consideration. They're formal experimentations, where line is paramount. While Rothko's edges bleed like mad, these colors don't run; they're often conspicuously contained. Bricks are outlined like objects in Fauve paintings (around the same time Haddack published *The Personal Atmosphere*). Then, critics thought it garish to communicate a shape by drawing a line around it. Outlines render everything cartoonish, flattening the things they surround. They also come in handy if you want

to demarcate positive and negative space (as Howlett explores in a series near the *Outlets*), or if you prefer the world flat.



Patrick Howlett, "Emerging Artist," 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery.

There's hidden depth to thinness, here. Formally, this world appears flimsy and even superficial, but its meanings aren't at all obvious. While the show may prize its whimsy, it flaunts its secrets too. Howlett terms Haddack's text "jauntily esoteric," and his own work fits that bill: the exhibit ends on a caricature of illegibility. Over chip-thin bricks, layers of cloud-like forms mimic scrubbed-out graffiti. We're explicitly shut out from reading the message. The shutting out *is* the message.

At another moment, I might have felt more at peace with Howlett's willful opacity, but I'm desperate for clarity these days. I'm craving community, and more wary than ever about the glorified status we, with our self-help books and other institutions, confer on the Individual. I'm witnessing the isolated way we each live our piece of a collective grief. I'm confused that mine came out, in part, as a roof. I'm curious about the advisability, but also the inevitability, of our esotericisms. How fervently should we defend them? Can they still be jaunty, now? This exhibition is an artefact from just before a major shift. While many are now urging us to transcend our social media bubbles and political echo chambers, Howlett presents the even smaller sphere of *The Personal Atmosphere* – at, perhaps, the perfect moment.



Patrick Howlett, "an idea is only a vibration," 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery



Patrick Howlett, "Fake Graffiti via Quote Addict," 2016. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery.