



**Patrick Howlett**  
*the possible and the real*  
Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

Hunter and Cook 8, Winter 2011

Don't let the gnomonic dimensions and modest facture of his paintings give you the wrong impression. Even the title of Patrick Howlett's recent exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto (8 September - 16 October 2010) speaks to the big ambitions of this painter. *the possible and the real* refers to an essay of the same name by Henri Bergson (1859-1941) that explores Western society's reluctance to affirm

the radically new, which the French thinker traces to a failure (or refusal) to conceptualize the present (or "real") as, in his words, "the continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty" (91). Instead, our utilitarian values "compose a world in which we can, for the convenience of action, ignore the effects of time" (14)—time, in Bergson's argot, being synonymous with multiplicity and freedom.

At first sight, Bergson's resume of popular misconceptions stemming from this substitution of a predictable space of action for a creative unrolling of "duration" might seem far removed from current debates about contemporary art. Yet, on second reading—and I get the sense from his precise, almost surgical, brushwork that Patrick Howlett is a habitually close reader—Bergson's critique of scientific method boils down to a surprisingly relevant gloss on the politics of fabrication. Bergson traces the root of many a philosophical error to "our habit of transposing into fabrication what is creation" (95). Framed by this recognition, Howlett's investigation of the possibility of recovering radical creativity in the midst of a resolutely technological society (and in an art market dominated by strategies of analytical fabrication), assumes a new urgency. Whereas neo-conceptual peers risk perpetuating (or at least relying on) the very regime of instrumental reason which they critique, Howlett apparently throws his hat in the Bergsonian ring, affirming creativity as a legitimate form of critical engagement.

As a painter, however, Howlett is keenly aware of the double jeopardy associated with this Bergsonian stratagem. Creativity, of course, has a history, too. In a conversation with me, Howlett spoke of his surprise at stumbling on conceptual and thematic affinities between his own tempera-and watercolour-based works and the distilled vocabulary of historical abstraction. Despite adopting chance-based procedures (incorporating Photoshop filters and other mediating operations), precisely in order to distance his working method from historical precedents, in retrospect the artist recognized traces of the ethereal geometry of Lawren Harris in the contours of his own sampled imagery (a likeness explored tongue-in-cheek by the artist in his 2008 show, *the higher you get the higher you get*). Echoing Bergson's reflection that "the possible is [...] the mirage of the present in the past" (101), ironically it was only after exploring electronic filters that Howlett—whose practice does not grow out of a *recherché* interest in art history—recognized the proximity between emerging digital approaches to painting and historical conventions of abstraction as a mutual simplification and transformation of pre-existing forms. Notwithstanding the involuntary abstraction that haunts his work—an illusion of continuity with past practice sustained by the mnemotechnics peculiar to painting—Howlett is firmly oriented toward the reality of the new. It is this historical paradox at the centre of his work which renders his thoughtful engagement with Bergson, and Bergson's notion of misrecognized genealogies, so timely.

Despite Howlett's engaging, and refreshingly philosophical, reply to prevailing strategies of critique, and his inclusion of several works—including *vague and hazy*, *superadded*, and *to know oneself does not seem natural* (all 2010)—whose dazzling (but characteristically restrained) exploration of new media (e.g., watercolour marker) and formal variation (e.g., stamping) would appear to be the consummate realization of Bergson's appeal for novelty. *the possible and the real* would have been a tighter show had it dispensed with works from previous and parallel series (e.g., *and*, *but*, *however*). A more selective curation might have underlined the artist's commitment to novelty and thereby lessened suspicions (nourished by evidence of divergent directions) of an artist hedging his bets, or, to quote Bergson, of making "a choice between possibles" (104).

Adam Lauder

All references: Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965).