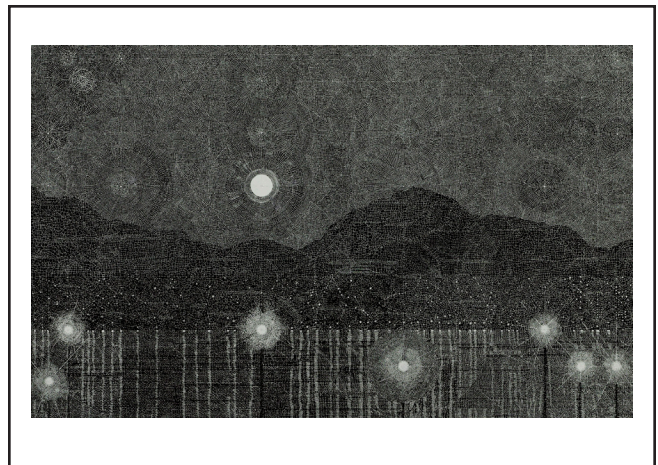


Catharine MacTavish
NIGHT VISION

Night Vision: a drawing
by Catharine MacTavish
BY BRIAN GRISON

Artist's Statement (2004)
CATHARINE MACTAVISH



***Night Vision*: A drawing by Catharine MacTavish**

By Brian Grison, 2008

Night Vision is a small drawing, one of about three associated with Catharine MacTavish's on-going *Night Vision* series of paintings. The twenty *Night Vision* paintings were begun in 1977, after eight years of experimentation and research resulting from a particular kind of visual experience that originated in 1969.

Specifically, the drawing titled *Night Vision*, which this essay discusses, is a diagram for the fourteenth of the *Night Vision* paintings, titled *Both Sides*, produced in 1983. The drawing was made in two

Catharine MacTavish
Night Vision, 1981

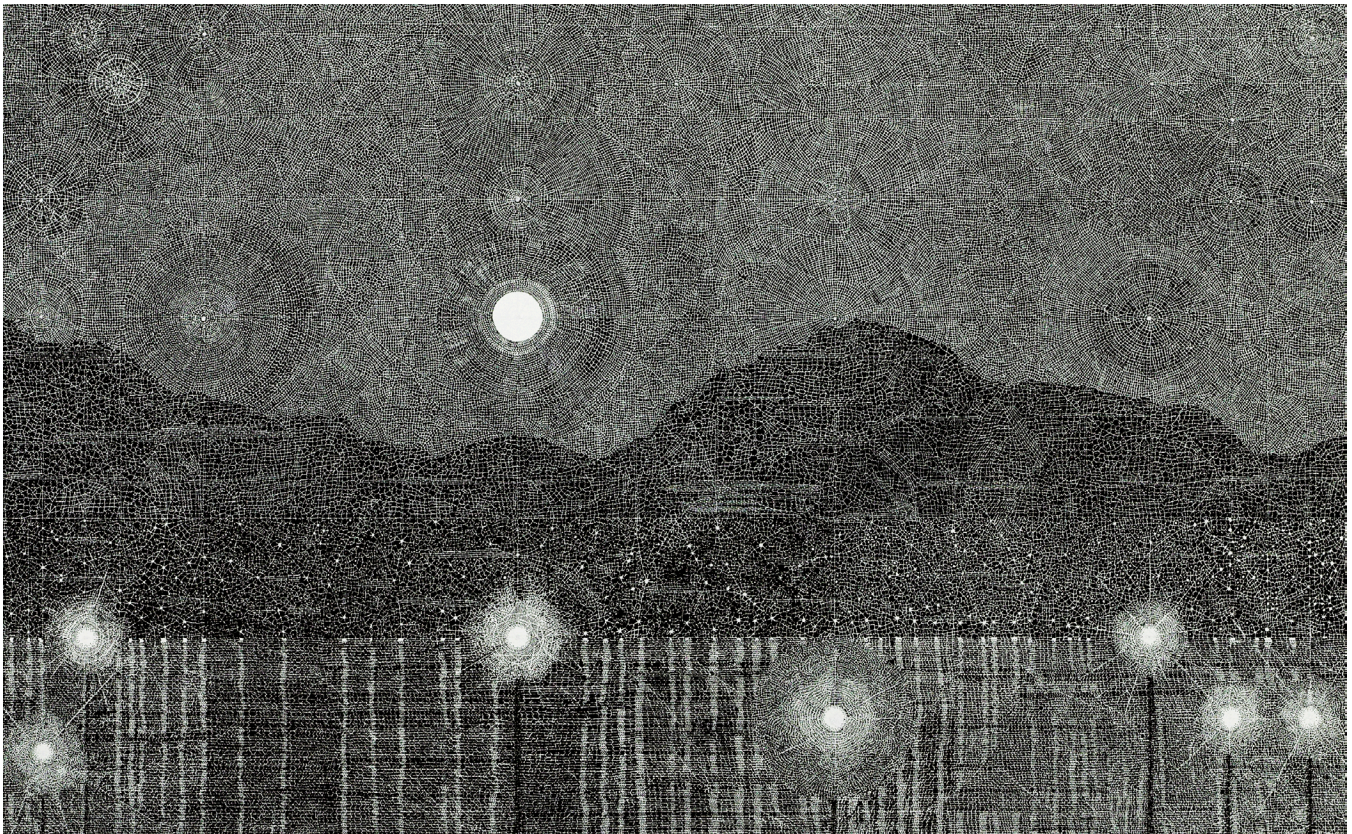
india ink with graphite and
white paint on ragpaper
(48.6 x 77 cm)
SAG 1981.01.01

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

stages. In the first, MacTavish delineates the content of the whole drawing with fine graphite pencil line. This process encompasses conventional issues and solutions regarding composition, scale, design, detail and illusion. In the second part of the drawing process, MacTavish uses a fine dip pen and black ink to fill in the tiny spaces between the lines, a process that is akin to meditation rather than conscious thought. This simple, repetitive and ritualistic work reflects two broadly different techniques, processes and attitudes toward the creative process.

Compositionally and metaphorically, *Night Vision* is simple. It is essentially flat, with little indication of perspective. The picture plane is divided into three

evenly spaced, almost equal, horizontal zones. These are water, landscape and sky, or, metaphysically, matter-energy in flux below, matter above and energy beyond. The mechanically precise line about one-third of the height of the drawing, which defines the edge between the water below and the land above, strings together many shore lights reflected in the water. The contrasting ragged-edged silhouette of the mountains against the night sky suggests another edge between matter and energy, as well as the permeable edge between the finite and infinity. In the sky a large bright white full moon hovers above the mountains but below the highest peak. Smaller points of light pinpoint the intersections of an intricate



Catharine MacTavish, *Night Vision*, 1981, graphite and black india ink with brush and pen on paper 48.6 x 77 cm
SAG 1981.01.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

grid system laid across the picture plane. A few large and apparently scattered star-bursts of light along the shore or floating across the water represent anything from boat lights to close-by street lights. These brilliant disks largely drown out the patina of tiny sparkling city lights at and above the shore, just as the full moon and more brilliant stars out-glow the millions of points of light in the sky. The dots of light swirling in the sky are repeated, though not mirrored, in the water. The horizontal movement of the water interlocks with the vertical reflections of the shore-lights and what might be darker vertical areas that could be lampposts in the foreground.

The physics and metaphysics of *Night Vision* parallels Simon Schama analysis of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night Over the Rhone* his book and television docudrama, *The Power of Art*, published in 2006. MacTavish's notes about the relationship between her series of night drawings and paintings, *Both Sides* and the van Gogh painting, provide a possible path to an explanation. She also refers to curator Glenn Allison's suggestion that "the best response to a work of art is another work of art," and one could claim that her *Night Vision* is a response to the van Gogh painting.

Though the similarity between the two works is uncanny, MacTavish's near-occult re-invention of the van Gogh goes well beyond Glenn Allison's suggestion of a more prosaic and conscious response. In an e-mail dated December 21, 2007, she states, "I don't recall seeing the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* before I did the drawing. I noticed a print of it hanging in a waiting room in recent years, and ... was startled at the resemblance to [my] drawing - the lights reflected in the water. There are no reflections like that in the more familiar van Gogh *Starry Night*." However, the similarities between *Night Vision* and *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, strongly suggest that MacTavish

might have seen the van Gogh painting. In her e-mail to me, MacTavish argues against this assertion:

The similarities are explained by the fact that when I did the drawing, my studio was on Alexander Street, at the foot of Main Street [Vancouver], with a view over the water to North Vancouver.... I spent a lot of time studying the reflections in the water from life.... I would observe the light bouncing off the various degrees of calm and choppy water. I was amazed at how working with coherent light when I experimented with holography conditioned my perception, so that I could see so much more in the world. Instead of a smear of light reflected on the water, I could see how the crests and dents ... on the water surface functioned as concave and convex mirrors, and that within or projected above were myriads of perfect replicas of the individual lights, which [are] amassed into a smear.¹

However, the formal similarity between *Night Vision* and the van Gogh painting is less important than what MacTavish accomplishes through her response to van Gogh's intention. A possible explanation of this can be found in Simon Schama's discussion of van Gogh's painting. Schama refers to van Gogh's claim of bringing "heaven down to earth." Quoting Tolstoy whom van Gogh was reading in 1889, he refers to the creation of a

new kind of religion, 'something ... which will be nameless but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible as the Christian religion used to.' It would be an art religion to render political revolution beside the point.... In *Starry Night over the Rhone*, the sky is hung with stars, and the town gas lamps burn with fairy sweetness, reflecting in the river. [Van Gogh] translates this nocturnal epiphany into an affirmation of what he had known all along:

the dissolution of the boundary between the terrestrial and the celestial worlds. Arles is reduced to a slender strip barely separating the mildly lapping water from the starry sky.²

After a brief discussion of the couple in the lower foreground of van Gogh's painting, Schama concludes that with this couple, with this sky, "van Gogh has arrived at his own startling vision: that what we see should be what they [the two strollers] feel. What we see is the vision of their rapture, caught ... in the unutterable, immeasurable intoxication of the senses."³

Night Vision could be an example of MacTavish's 'absorption' of another painting, *Night Ferry*, a view of Vancouver from the ferryboat to Victoria, by Frederick Varley. The skyline in MacTavish's drawing is closer to Varley's view of the mountain peaks immediately north of Vancouver than it is to the countryside surrounding Arles. More relevant to MacTavish's drawing is the fact that, like van Gogh, Varley places a viewer of this night scene in the lower foreground. By, perhaps, echoing the meditative approach that Schama describes in the van Gogh painting, Varley is metaphorically representing himself in the physically and emotionally swaying masculine figure standing with spread feet wide in rhythm with the roll of the boat and the cosmos. MacTavish's drawing does not include a figure watching the night sky. Such a figure is not necessary because she, herself, as the thinking eye, is present in the physical and psychologically intensity of the drawing and visualizing process. In her email MacTavish explains:

The patterns in the halos around the lights, the reflections in the water, the scintillating evanescent resolution within the darkness

of the sky, and even darker masses of mountain, are intrinsic to the optical system of the perceiver. The picture plane is several inches behind the eyes of the viewer - the figure. The boundary between outer and inner is collapsed. landscape and figure, seen and seer are inseparable.⁴

Therefore, as well as resembling a conventional night view of a landscape beyond a large body of water, *Night Vision* is a contradiction of conventional perspective and ordinary vision. MacTavish extends and updates van Gogh's ambition of bringing the cosmos down to Earth. The bright star-like shapes and the delicate circular webs of circular white lines floating through the sky, flow down across the face of the mountain and out across the smooth night water toward the viewer. Like both van Gogh's and Varley's paintings perspective-as-reality dissolves into a shimmering field of swirling multi-dimensional and multi-meaning body/mind consciousness. However, MacTavish goes even further in contradicting conventional physical and psychic perspective. Close study of the web-like pattern across the picture plane of her drawing reveals that all the points of light and all the vortexes of linear patterns are interlocked in a geometry of straight vertical and horizontal grid lines as well a pattern of concentric circles. The material of water, earth and air is comprised of a delicate mesh of seemingly spontaneous glowing lines within the geometric and spontaneous matrix of the universe.

The effect is optically, intellectually and spiritually mesmerizing. The optical dissolving of the material world in *Night Vision* is reminiscent of the experience of viewing the city at night through glasses coated with of tiny drops of water (a natural and common phenomenon in west coast cities).

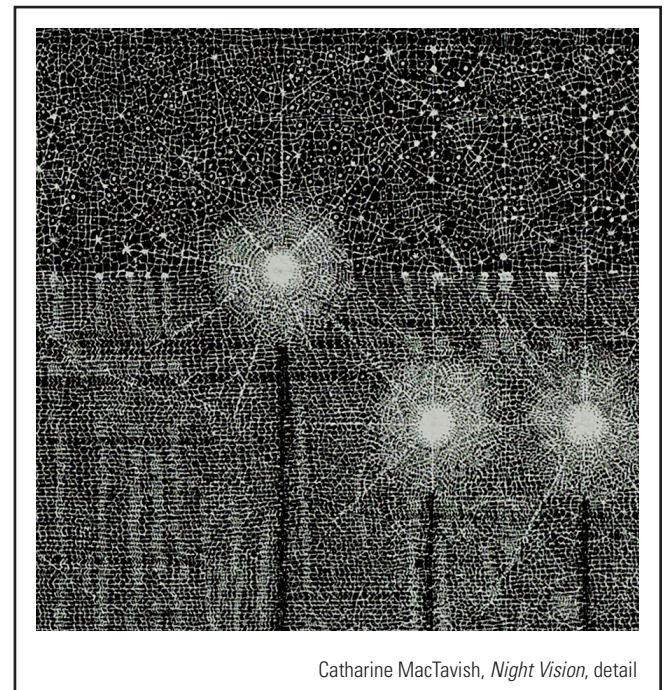
The intellectual dissolution of the material world represented by this drawing is more difficult to explain. It has much to do with MacTavish's interest in the view of the universe that Albert Einstein developed, this being, essentially, that matter and energy are indistinguishable, and that what allows us to visualize this constant flux is mathematics. In this respect, there is much in common between MacTavish's interests and the mathematical project that backgrounds the work of Kazuo Nakamura, the Canadian artist who spent his life figuring out how to draw and paint landscapes in which matter and perspective have been supplanted by number structure.⁵ However, a major distinction between the insights of MacTavish and Nakamura is their attitudes toward the meaning of the breakdown between matter and energy. While Nakamura's presumed objective and scientific analysis of reality necessitated a rejection of spiritual content and spiritual interpretation of his art, MacTavish embraces a spiritual relationship between matter and spirit, as did van Gogh and Varley.

This discussion of Catharine MacTavish's *Night Vision* suggests that her drawing is part of a long history of Western art's pursuit of a relationship between the world of matter and the world of spirit that reaches back to at least Plato. Non-Western cultures have had less difficulty with representations of this duality, because, as Arthur Erickson claims in his essay, "Ideation as a Source of Creativity," their creative process is more akin to contemplation as meditation than to Western culture's notion of ideation as essential to creativity.⁶ It might be only since the rise of a post-Newtonian physics and mathematics, coupled with a greater appreciation of art as ritual practice, that artists such as MacTavish have been able to represent both mundane and spiritual equations of matter-consciousness-reality in

a quantifiable manner that, with a bit of optical and cerebral patience, the rest of us can appreciate as a kind of unutterable and immeasurable rapture of being.

Notes

- 1 E-mail to Brian Grison. Archives of the Surrey Art Gallery.
- 2 Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2006) 329.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 329.
- 4 E-mail to Brian Grison. Archives of the Surrey Art Gallery.
- 5 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuo_Nakamura (accessed 2011 July 7)
- 6 Arthur Erickson, "Ideation as a Source of Creativity." W. H. New, Ed. *A Political Art: Essays and Images in Honour of George Woodcock*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978)



Catharine MacTavish, *Night Vision*, detail

Artist's Statement (2004)

As you can tell from the drawing you have, I work very slowly and don't produce a lot. I was never good at the marketing and promotional aspects, and the private art dealers need much more output than I can produce. I was never able to just knock off paintings. Sometimes I have to dance around a canvas for a long time, before I see what to do next. It's a slow, alchemical percolation and distillation. I did very well with public galleries and curators because they did not have to market the work. The exhibitions had coherence; but because the works were produced over a long period of time, there was a lot of variety that public gallery visitors seemed to enjoy. They don't always understand the point of ten paintings that are all alike. The exhibitions at Surrey, Stratford, University of B.C, Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Victoria, Sarnia etc. received very positive feedback from people who are not art world "insiders". I try to make work that people can enjoy without having to read up.

(extract from a email letter of September 17, 2004)

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