



Counting Crows

cover image: *Three Crows – A Letter*, 1988; serigraph; 36×60 cm



Clarington
Leading the Way



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Counting crows.

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Introduction by **James Campbell**
Executive Director
The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

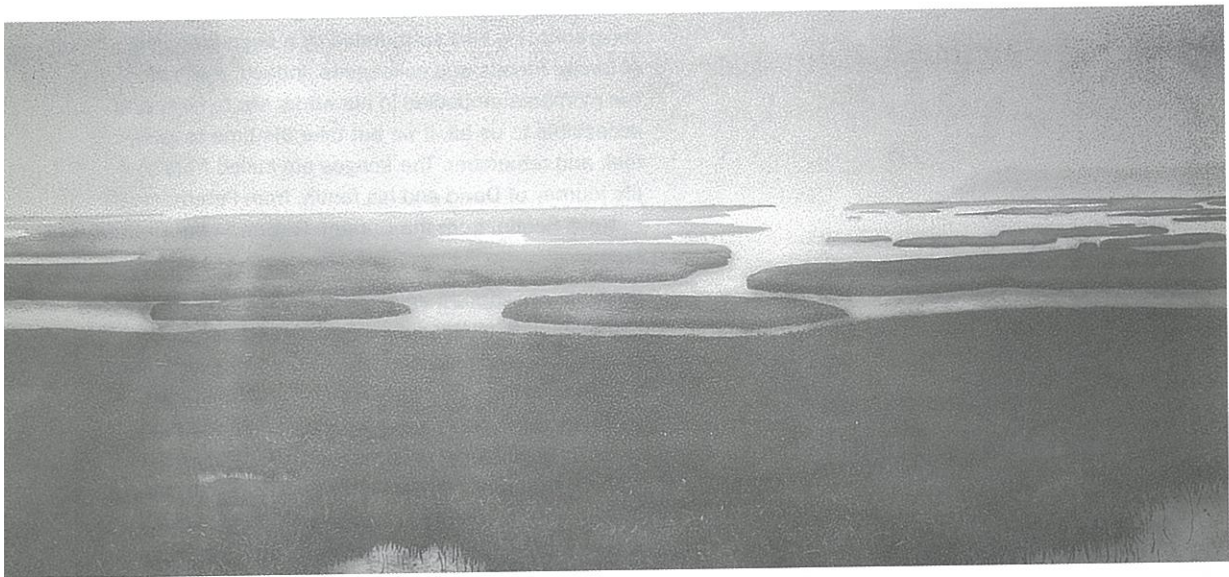
David B. Gillespie
at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington
March 13–April 10, 2011
Curator: Maralynn Cherry

Counting Crows

“It’s not complicated.” Bowmanville artist David Gillespie spoke these words at the opening reception for his exhibition at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington celebrating 30 years of his drawings, paintings and serigraphs. He was surrounded by a large gathering of family, friends and colleagues. Indeed, many of the moments embodied in his works are familiar and accessible to us all, if we but take the time to look, feel, and remember. The images are culled from the life journey of David and his family, from Peterborough to Nova Scotia, from the Durham Region to the Ontario North.

Bold colours capture an expansive sky above the tree line and lakes of Algonquin; we approach a home on a cold winter’s night, where a reassuring glow from a kitchen window promises warmth and family; we experience the noise and random motion of a gathering of crows descending on a farmer’s field: as we stop and absorb these moments, these places, one all but forgets the rigorous attention to detail and requisite concentration demanded by the screen printing process.

David is Installation Technician at the VAC. Over the past several years, he has hung exhibitions that crystallize the creative lives of numerous fellow artists. It was a privilege to watch David and VAC Curator, Maralynn Cherry, install David’s *own* creative journey. The moments along this path are indeed “not complicated”; they are, however, fundamentally true and indelible. My thanks and congratulations to David and Maralynn for this exhibition.



Grand Desert, 1981; acrylic on board; 61×122 cm

Essay by **Maralynn Cherry**
 Curator
 The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

“I want you to see a moment that happens. I want you to feel a space and time of pure reason and atmosphere. It’s not a complicated place to be in but you must understand that this is a place where you have to breathe in the sap of a cold early spring day or the warmth of sitting on a rock, on a lake. Put down your pack and watch the stillness of the far shore. For ever.”¹

The work of artist David B. Gillespie is filled with the very moments gleaned by such thoughtful words. He gives us back something we all long to re-present to ourselves. Such musings speak to the quiet wanderings Gillespie takes through our rural landscapes, landscapes that hold both “a space and time of pure reason and atmosphere”. I recall the walking journeys underscoring all great European, British and Oriental landscape painting. A rich history speaks to that dwelling place where land and homestead meet, a rural terrain that one passes through, between rural and wilderness sites. This artist tempers each image with a visceral sensitivity to environments that become part of his everyday hiking.

More than 30 years of attentive practice is witnessed in this exhibition, beginning with two early horizontal paintings made while Gillespie lived in Nova Scotia. The pastoral scene *Chebogue Point 1* and the open

sun-lit *Grand Desert* position the viewer in a twofold space. One feels as though one is standing exactly where the artist stood while simultaneously being pulled towards the edge of the world. The power of the view contains both our sense for orientation to a particular place and our ability to be awed by the immensity of its atmosphere. A lone cow rests by a wind-swept gathering of trees bare of foliage as a mist veils over parts of the picture plane. Positioning each work in close proximity allows both horizon lines to meld. The journey begins here, panoramic and still. You feel as though this “stillness...could last for ever”.

Now he has captured our bodies and our sight. We are ready to wander, realizing all the while, that Gillespie is very carefully orchestrating the process of vision itself. Sensitivity of craft recalls the wonder in understanding the placement of colours, whether captured inside a delineated form or carrying the prismatic force of air charged by light. We are carried through space and time. If we leave the expanse of the sky, plush green grasses and water, we come ever closer to the scale of beach stones in *Strand Line*. All eyes are to the ground and up close, and yet, that little edge of sky remains in the upper distance, reminding one of micro-macroscopic levels of pure observation. I want to pick up a stone and throw it to

the horizon. In Gillespie's wit one can find that precariously balanced miniscule stone, fragilely wavering, on the brink. I feel like that tiny stone in the expanse of such geographies. *Gathering* transforms beach rocks into homing grounds. Gulls converge with rock as a light mist covers everything.

Animals and birds are important in all David Gillespie's works, just as important as the human presence that weaves poetic visions through the silence. At times I think birds and animals stand in for him. Perhaps he envies their silent watch that misses nothing. They linger in that invisible place, private yet all-seeing. In their flight, the birds defy gravity. Gillespie's animals (cows, geese, seagulls, fish, butterflies) and a gathering of crows are indeed profound and whimsical, always reigning in the background. Initially their presence is tempered, but a momentum builds to a crescendo.

We are introduced to Gillespie's 85 year old neighbour in Nova Scotia as he takes "his wheelbarrow down the lane to the parish convent to put the trash out for Tuesday's pick up". Both *Tuesday Morning* and *Tuesday Return* picture Walter, his red wheelbarrow coming and going from his red roofed white board house, in winter and spring. "The wheelbarrow's design has been a part of this Nova Scotia village for longer than living

memory. Upon his return he will tend his woodstove and fill his pipe. A perfect morning. Cold and silent. Bright colours. A moment that could be shrugged off and forgotten."² Remembering such traditions, these serigraph prints are everlasting in their scale. In a new work, *Four Crows a Boy*, Gillespie depicts an elderly man coming home while four crows fly overhead. Here a double-edged story emerges. Just as one is caught in a time warp, thinking the old man feels he is still a boy, the title itself draws attention to a line from an old folk tale.

"One Crow Sorrow
Two Crows Joy
Three Crows a Letter
Four Crows a Boy
Five Crows Silver
Six Crows Gold
Seven Crows a Story Never to be Told."

The crows stir, land or perch in carefully crafted pictures. They lurk like winged sentinels. The tale continues. *Seven Crows – A Story Never to be Told* is a dramatically lit landscape seen from a crow's eye view. High above ground one feels "all crow", flying over islands, mountainous surrounded by a circular body of water.



Tuesday's Return, 1986; serigraph; 18×26 cm



Chebogue Point 1, 1981; acrylic on board; 61×122 cm

From such heights the shoreline and horizon transform into a spherically distorted globe. It is as though this image holds the key to some legendary mystery “never to be told”. Somehow Gillespie manages to transform our ability to survey familiar terrain and simply turns “ordinary seeing” into layers of relationships.

Three Crows a Letter is an amazingly complex and sublime serigraph. One is drawn inwards by the play of light, mist and shadow that penetrate a farm field. Three crows fly towards the light as two sheets of a letter are lost to the wind. We lose our words. Our thoughts disappear. We are present for what is beyond the telling. It exists in the being, in the breath of such places.

Throughout this exhibition, the artist has taken time to place certain works that show the progressive stages of serigraph printing in contrast to a few monoprints. Such revelatory displays only add to the wonder of Gillespie’s process and ability to manipulate layers of singular colours and shapes to create splendid works. The technical rigour of this process is apparent when as many as 30 screen pulls can make up the final image. Through this process Gillespie mimics a multi-dimensional physics of atmosphere. Always

experimenting, Gillespie plays with the demands of the medium, incorporating ink blending, using fish glue and an airbrush as a block-out on the screen to print soft impressions. Sometimes light coloured inks are printed on top of dark, building layers of colour and veils to achieve the final image. Most important is this artist’s wonder at never quite knowing the outcome of each stage. It is here that one feels Gillespie the painter is very attentive, as can also be felt in the work of David Milne, Alex Colville and Christopher Pratt. What is compelling in all these artists, including Gillespie, is their parallel worlds of painting and printmaking. In Milne’s case, one can sense in his diary entries, the dialogue between his printing, painting and drawing. It is in “the looking” that one discerns the aesthetic play between mediums. In the following passage one becomes aware of how the very nature of his perceptions enter into the process of making the work.

“That flesh colored sky soon turned to full sunlight. Now there is a blazing landscape of black, white and blue. It looks like the thing to try the larger patches of colour on, so I have made a pencil sketch of the white jump and as soon as I get a plate ready I will scratch it...”³



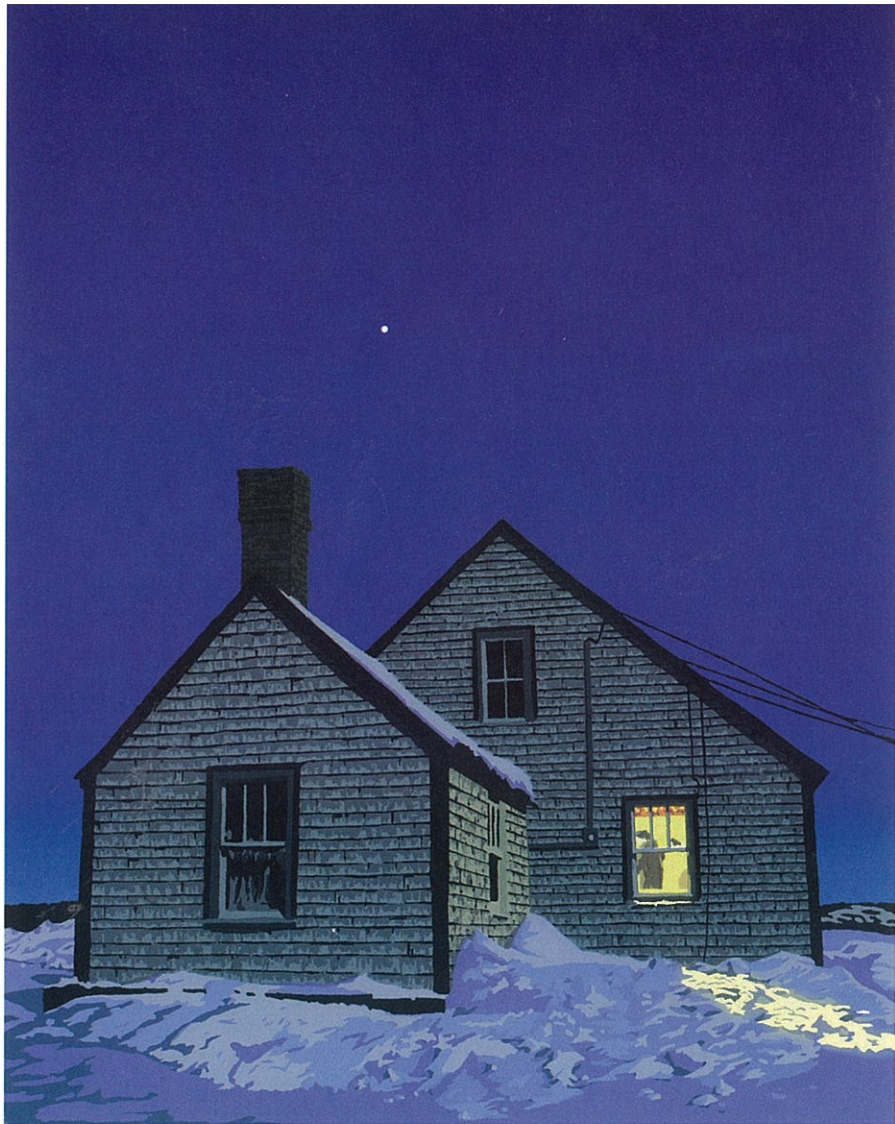
Murder II, 2011; manipulated photograph on vinyl; 74×333 cm



Milne's passage alludes to the wonder of translating the graphic feel for his vision and how this sensitivity to atmosphere, colour, form and texture will translate to print or, for that matter, to paint. David Gillespie's *Falling* serigraph and *Falling* graphite sketch convey the same wonder. We witness the transformation of one medium into another. The sensitivity of the drawing becomes a powerful graphic image. The colours are spare, allowing, like Milne, for that almost oriental sense of pattern and form to shape space itself. Once again, Gillespie tenders an image to convey the nature of being there, in the dense woods on a crisp fall day. You can almost smell the drying leaves; hear their sound beneath your feet. One is held in suspended animation. Other images gather force in telling the story of walking quietly and almost blending into the topography of a place. *Appreciation*, a print of Gillespie's father hiking in the bush, carries the power of transference towards a kind of eternity of place, shared, remembered and relived, through generations of wandering. The beauty of texture and detail in the foliage and branches almost covers his father as he emerges from, yet is absorbed within the rich yellows, greens and dark shadows of evergreens. A slight halo of light delineates the figure. Now, taking his own son on canoe trips to Algonquin Park such appreciations convey the recurring passages of time.

"out of the night, into the water
we push the boat from shore
breaking the air and the stillness
of the bay
intensity of stars reflected
in the water
silently ignite
the oar dips in to oil like water
and we
are away"⁴

In all seasons, this artist bridges the silent beauty of the elements with the quiet stillness of our dwellings, our homes. In a series of prints, one senses just how durable the hut and the hearth have become. Gillespie manages to orchestrate the wonders of the universe over an historical home on Liberty Street in Bowmanville. In *Good Night My Dear*, the house turns into a chorus of eventful surfaces under a night sky. A simple good night holds the splendour of stars and the captured instant of the aurora borealis (Northern Lights) on a cold winter's eve. I feel as though I am standing in the silent frost witnessing what is always there for the taking but could be easily missed. The snow on the roof top holds the lacy shadows cast by tall spruce or maple. Power of light in the darkness presents itself. *Home* is a small Nova Scotia dwelling





Appreciation, 1989; serigraph; 40×62 cm

sitting quietly on a winter's night with one lone light in the downstairs window. Isolated and in the dead of winter frost, this image conveys the comfort of the hearth and a kind welcoming to a stranger. I think of Joey Smallwood's winter journey through the rugged outback of Newfoundland and Labrador to visit the homes of remote fishermen. How comforted he would be to see that lit room in the dead of night.

In a new series of works, Gillespie not only returns to painting but also explores the techniques of photography. In the painting *Frozen*, he revisits a previous monoprint, as a resource, to recreate this powerful image. Using acrylic paint on frosted mylar, this return to painting allows the skill of the printmaker to fuse with the poetic editing of the brush, expressing the force of graphic form. The sense of cloisonné or stained glass comes through in the stark webbed branches in the left foreground. This image conveys the history of the Canadian landscape and the memory of the Group of Seven, yet, stands alone, a new painterly surface, luminous, as the mylar conducts light from behind.

For two final pieces, *Murder I* and *Murder II*, a swarm of crows becomes the subject. In *Murder I* a row of printed black crows, beautifully gestural in their winged choreography, are animated against a flat blue

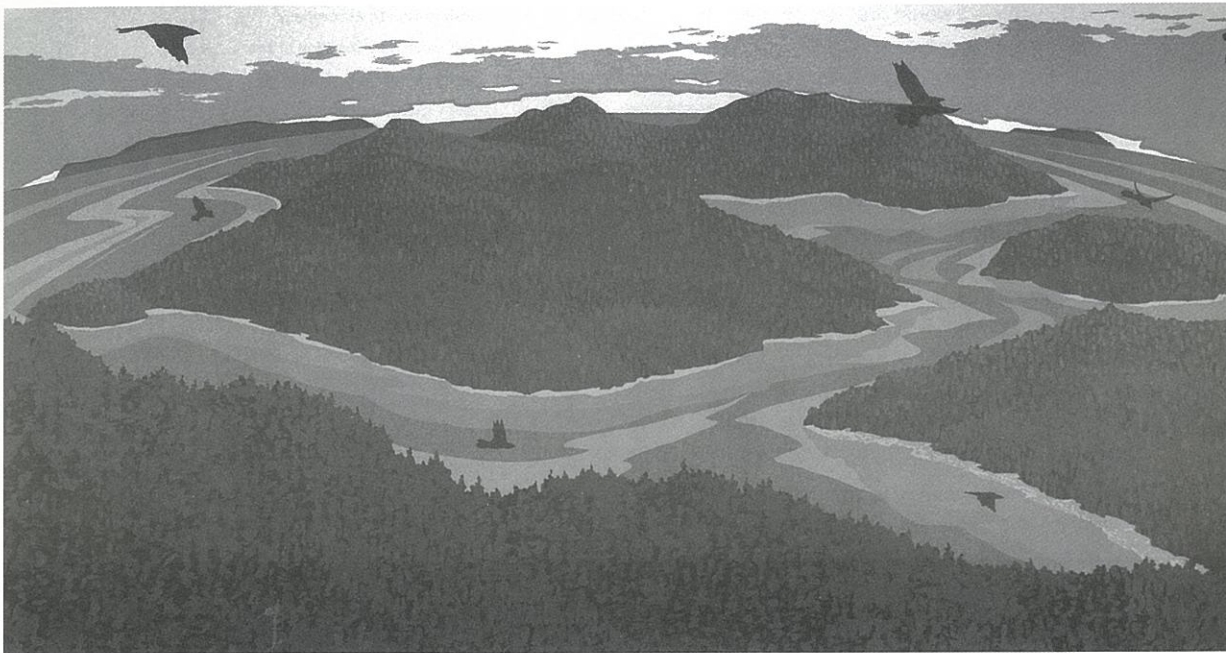
background of paint on board. Below are positioned smaller panels of singular crows, individuated from the pack. On the opposite wall Gillespie has placed a large horizontal, black and white photograph of the field across from his home. A gathering of crows is carefully placed, moving in the sky. One realizes that the same attentive skill living in the prints is working here. This is not a set photograph. Gillespie is constructing a very thoughtful cinematography. The camera lens captures the expanse of the landscape while the use of computer technology allows the artist to set each crow in place. The gathering can feel spontaneous just as each montage of film footage feels instantaneous. A great film maker plans and draws, carefully orchestrating each scene. The aesthetic acumen of Gillespie's practice aligns his sense of space and wit with a profound awareness: an awareness of the power hidden in a seemingly ordinary moment of time. Each cluster of crows shape shift. Their size registers foreground and distance. One crow almost fades into the silhouette of trees while a central gathering circles in the middle of the picture. In a murder of crows there underlies a kind of humour that runs deep. Carefully constructing images, Gillespie's craft triggers the poetic shape of the world in the depths of living.

"I discerned, as I thought,
Beyond the picture, through the picture,
A something, white uncertain,
Something more in the depths..."⁵

David Gillespie explores in detail the boundaries from abstraction to realism, all the while being challenged "to achieve new ways to reflect simply, the things I find important."⁶ Memory, time and their stories come alive in the work as imagery lingers in an all too fleeting culture of rapid change. The artist gives our territory back to us. We can even reflect on the faded beauty of *March Break*, a pastoral apple orchard that once existed on a lone rural route, now a subdivision. Within sameness there is a timelessness, however, the comfort of those same views may fade without such visual narratives. It is the simple edges of these realities that David Gillespie manages to place before us.

Endnotes

- 1 From the artist David B. Gillespie.
- 2 From the artist David B. Gillespie.
- 3 Rosemarie L. Tovell, *Reflections in a Quiet Pool, The Prints of David Milne* (National Gallery of Canada, 1980) 85.
- 4 Sarah Harmer, *Lodestar*, lyrics from a song.
- 5 Robert Frost, *For Once, Then, Something* (1923).
- 6 From the artist David B. Gillespie.



Seven Crows - A Story Never to be Told, 1985; serigraph; 17×34 cm

David Gillespie – I would first like to thank my family for their enduring patience and encouragement and for carrying me through the good times and bad while producing this body of work. My heartfelt thank you and respect to Maralynn Cherry for her vision of this show and her belief in me and my work. She has revealed to me with her craft as a curator, interpreter and artist, many things about my work that encourages me to go forth. I am truly grateful for her insight. I would also like to thank the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, James Campbell, the board of directors, Linda Ward, Jean-Michel Komarnicki, the Municipality of Clarington, Kathy Mills and the Ontario Arts Council for their wonderful support. Great appreciation also to Eugene Jordan for helping to make this show possible!

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