



SEAL POINT SERIES

By Christopher Riopelle

The decisions John Walker made about the Seal Point series he began to paint in 2006 started long before he ever picked up a brush. They got underway when he discovered an old set of Beano, or Bingo, cards in a studio he was using at Walpole on the Maine seacoast. Maine is a favourite summer retreat of Walker's a few hours' drive from Boston where he lives and teaches. Impregnated with the salt air after years of summer use, the cards inevitably evoke rainy afternoons, or the slow-moving August hours as daylight fades into night, when long-ago vacationers wiled away time over a convivial parlour game. Walker determined to use the cards as the supports for a series of oil sketches instead. He would survey the landscape at Seal Point adjacent to Walpole, its distinctive conjunction of water and rock, eddies and pools, scudding clouds and distant, darting sailboats.

Vertically-oriented, the cards measure only $7^{1/4} \times 5^{1/2}$ inches (18.5 x 14 centimetres), minute in comparison with the large-scale canvasses the artist usually employs. Unlike them, the cards are easily transportable. Each is imprinted with a grid of squares and random numbers five high and five across, one per square. Made of unprimed cardboard, they respond to paint differently from canvas; where the oil-rich medium is absorbed, the grid and numbers continue to show through; where paint is more thickly applied, grid and numbers disappear beneath the surface, as if submerged, but there none the less.

In one sense, the Beano cards are classic 'found objects' of a kind artists have incorporated into their works since the early twentieth century, in order to exploit the rich associations that cling to the detritus of modern life. Think of the newspaper headlines in a Cubist Picasso collage. They pull us back insistently to daily life. Walker was not particularly interested in the chains of allusion such appropriations set in motion, although he would not dispute that they are there. Rather, he exploited the fact that all Beano cards are alike. Their small scale makes them suitable for landscape oil sketches. Their consistent size, vertical orientation, and printing in an unvarying pattern, impose conditions on painting which he simply accepted. When the card is narrower than the span of a hand, brushstrokes must be small, to name only the most obvious factor, and Walker is used to painting big.

Compare it with a poet who accepts the limitations of a given poetic form, the Shakespearean sonnet, say, with its fourteen iambic pentameters in stanzas of eight and six lines. Such limits in no way restrict vision but open up worlds of expressive potential in small compass. Walker was aiming for something like that narrowing of scope; at the same time, landscape has always been a latent presence in even his most exuberant abstractions, and he was returning to roots in nature.

Walker draws attention here to the essential characteristics of the landscape oil sketch. In addition to small scale, a dedication to the truth of visual experience, and quickness of execution, they include multiplicity; artists almost always paint many landscape oil sketches rather than just a few, and the Seal Point series now numbers some 200 jewel-like paintings. Moreover, there is a long-standing connection between the oil sketch and art pedagogy. A distinguished teacher, Walker already uses the Seal Point sketches in lectures¹. More than that, as free-wheeling annotations of a specific landscape at a given time of year but under changing atmospheric conditions, they demonstrate the intimate relationship of the oil sketch to abstraction.

Landscape oil sketches seem to have emerged on the artistic scene suddenly, in and around Rome in the 1770s. The principal protagonists were a Frenchman, Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819), and a Welshman, Thomas Jones (1742-1803), both studying in Italy at the time. Intriguingly, they seem never to have met or known what the other was up to. It is as if Pollock and de Kooning never ran into one another in downtown Manhattan, and eighteenth-century Rome was a much smaller place than that. More-or-less simultaneously, however, both men began to paint oil studies on stiff paper out of doors in nature. Neither had any intention of producing 'finished' works of art but wanted to train the eye to capture the fleeting effects of light and atmosphere as they played over the landscape.



Valenciennes recommended that the artist work fast and spend no more than an hour or so per study. He also advised students that certain motifs – fallen tree trunks, rushing water, drifting clouds – offered the most demanding challenges; master them and the landscape painter would secure himself a repertoire of skills to last a career. Jones, for his part, radically limited the scope of his motifs to old and utterly unassuming plaster walls as seen from adjacent rooftops. Here were paintings that seemed to eschew composition. What order there was reflected the random sequence of forms in space. Valenciennes, drawn to theory, was the first to write about the landscape oil sketch, and he used them as pedagogic tools when he returned to an influential academic career in Paris. Jones, on the other hand, stored his sketches in a Welsh attic. When they suddenly emerged

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Soon, the landscape oil sketch played a central role in the training of landscape painters across Europe, and eventually in America as well. John Constable (1776-1837) was the leading exponent in England. His sketches of clouds dancing across Hampstead Heath were seen to embody a freshness of perception which characterises the English landscape tradition as a whole. (It is this pragmatic tradition in which Walker was formed.) The Frenchman Camille Corot (1796-1875) made oil sketches on trips to Italy and back in France as well and, as they were widely distributed among students and admirers, they came to exert a powerful influence on the ways generations of French landscape painters went about their work. For both artists, they were private notations, for reference and discussion in the studio among peers. The Impressionists in particular were admirers, however, and it was they who reconciled the aesthetic of rapid, improvisatory painting with ‘finished’ works meant for public consumption.

By the late nineteenth century it became difficult to think of the abbreviated landscape sketch as a separate category of painting, so fully had it been assimilated into Impressionism. Its central role in teaching faded too. And then with the rise of abstraction the necessity for the painter to make reference to the natural world faded as well. The oil sketch survived in our times primarily as the province of Sunday painters, many of whom Walker might well have observed optimistically setting up their easels along the Maine coast. Such amateurs remained wedded to the natural world and for the most part harboured no pretensions to public recognition. But they kept a tradition alive.

In this context Walker’s return to the landscape oil sketch achieves its resonance. Looking from card to card we soon recognise the elements of the artist’s landscape vision. Quick strokes of paint evoke foreground rocks here. Curving swirls of pigment suggest pools of water caught among sea-smoothed boulders there. Clouds meander along the horizon, while pointillist flicks of pure colour dancing across the sheet call to mind the erratic paths of flitting birds.

Some images are relatively spare while others teem with incident. Many sketches are dominated by horizontal brushstrokes while in others lines meander crazily across the picture surface. Some sketches are dominated by colour harmonies in green or pink or blue, suggestive of specific times of day and the constant alternations of sun and cloud across the coastal landscape. Darker tonalities evoke the long, slow waning of light at end of day. There are no dramatic sunset effects here, as far as I can tell, as on the Maine seashore, you’re looking to the east and the sun goes down behind you. Rather, the more diffuse effects of that diminishing light spill back over you from behind.

Despite the small size, we are often looking at vast expanses of land and sea here. It is also evident – and much of the invigorating energy of the paintings comes from the fact – that Walker has worked fast, not letting a second escape him as he rushed with improvisatory glee to take down the endlessly transitory minutiae that nature spread out for his delectation.

But now the implications of Walker’s use of Beano cards come clear. By the mid-nineteenth century artists were able to buy pre-stretched canvasses in various sizes and three standard formats. The French referred to them as *paysage* (horizontal, suitable for landscape painting); *marine* (more emphatically horizontal, good for the sea); and *figure* (vertical, adapted to portraits)³.



ALL PLATES ACTUAL SIZE

Seal Point Series

2005-2009

Oil on Bingo/Beano card

7¹/₄ x 5¹/₂ inches (18.5 x 14 cm)

The Beano card is a *figure* format. Walker has chosen to paint landscapes on supports whose shape traditionally was not seen as conducive to these genres. (He is certainly not the first one to do so.) As landscape artists have long known, however, a vertical format means that the elements of the landscape are stacked up abruptly one atop another, like Donald Judd *Boxes*. Rather than suggesting a slow, steady sweep from foreground to horizon, as a horizontal canvas can, here near and far collapse together and transitions in space become staccato and oddly insistent. The German Romantic master Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), the majority of whose landscapes are horizontally disposed, consistently used vertical-format canvasses, however, for his cliff-top scenes when he wanted to suggest the rapid, all but instantaneous transition from foreground to the sea below. The eye, used to the relaxed flow of space of conventional landscape painting, has to work that much harder to interpret a landscape rendered vertically.

The squared-off grid of the cards also plays its role. An old artist's trick instructs painters to set up a wooden frame gridded with string in front of a motif. The device instantly reduces perspectival recession to a two-dimensional pattern which the hand and eye of the artist can transpose, almost mechanically, onto a sheet of paper or canvas. Not that Walker was performing any such sleight of hand, but the presence of the grid and numbers, more or less submerged from card to card, but never entirely absent, necessarily recalls the strategy. At the same time it reinforces the sense of the painting as simultaneously a landscape and a flat pattern of colours. In short, it accentuates the integrity of the picture plane, long a central concern of abstract painting. Similarly, the varying thickness of the paint in any given picture, sometimes soaked into the card, otherwise standing proud of the surface, sets the abstract qualities of paint handling into dynamic tension with the demands of representation. Walker's ability to sustain that tension in any given painting and across the series as a whole are among the signal pleasures of this series.

The Beano cards, finally, are similar in shape to the large-scale, vertically aligned canvasses on which Walker often paints his abstractions. A recent studio photograph shows grids of Seal Point sketches arrayed along a wall of Walker's Boston studio along with other works perhaps six times larger; further along the wall a painting of the same shape but sixty or seventy times larger also leans. The image reinforces the sense of continuity in Walker's painting practice and a strong and immediate reciprocity between the landscape sketches, hand-held objects of the greatest intimacy and directness, and the pulsating, large-scale paintings, sweeping in their intensity, which punctuate Walker's long career.

Preparing for his 1932 retrospective exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zurich, which he installed himself, Picasso was asked how he intended to hang the show. "Badly," he replied, as indeed in conventional terms he did, ignoring any semblance of chronology or thematic consistency. Picasso had something more complicated in mind for, as he explained, "What counts is the consistency in ideas."⁴ Walker's Seal Point series reminds us of the magisterial consistency in his own production. Whether working on a large scale or small, whether as an abstractionist or an observer of nature, his twin allegiances to observed reality and formal invention never waver.

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¹In an on-line blog of 20 July 2007 Chris Jagers, a student, described how Walker illustrated a talk at Brookhaven College, Dallas, TX " ... with 40 or so small paintings from his on-going Seal Point series that he brought with him and pinned on the wall!" Jagers said of the experience: "I ... felt a deep urge to go out and start painting."

²On the early history of the landscape oil sketch, see P. Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*. New York, 1981; C. Riopelle and X. Bray, *A Brush with Nature: The Gere Collection of Landscape Oil Sketches*. London, 1999; and *Paysages d'Italie: Les peintres du plein air (1780-1830)*, sous la direction de A. Ottani Cavina. (Exh. cat.) Paris, 2001.

³On canvas formats in the nineteenth century and the general availability of manufactured art supplies, see D. Bomford, et al, *Art in the Making: Impressionism*. London, 1990, especially pp.32-50.

⁴Quoted in J. Elderfield, "Picasso's Extreme Cézanne" in J. Rishel and K. Sachs, ed., *Cézanne and Beyond* (Exh. cat.) Philadelphia, 2009, p. 223.