

# Six-Grid Paintings

## Robert Fones November 2023

### Mill Paintings

As is often the case, it was an unexpected request that got me back into working on more bevelled paintings. A colleague from Sheridan College, where I taught for many years, asked if I would contribute something to a book he was putting together for Jay Wilson, a mutual friend who was retiring from teaching. The theme of the book was how a pineapple grows, the same idea that Jay had given as an assignment to his first-year students. I chose the classic pineapple pattern that had been used on furniture for centuries, and painted it a golden-yellow colour.

After the pineapple painting, I made another version, slightly larger and pale green in colour. The pattern of both paintings was a change for me because I had never used a diagonal orientation or single-square elements. I found these paintings too uniform in colour however, and decided to go back to my previous format of more highly coloured bevelled rectangles.

For the paintings that I worked on next, I decided to stick with the 20-inch square canvas of the original pineapple painting, but this time I divided the square into a six-by-six grid, the first time I have used this particular grid. I have almost always used the same size of grid—in which the smallest square of the grid is 3.33 x 3.33 inches—ever since I painted the first *G, S, and Y Types* in 1998. The six-square grid generates an interesting structure because it has no central element so repeating patterns have to be radial rather than symmetrical.

Inspired by a visit I had made in 2022 to the Arva Flour Mill in Ontario, I painted a geometrically simplified version of a millstone in red and



Plewes grist mill, near Meadowlily Bridge, London, Ontario, c. 1896. Photo courtesy LPL, London Room.

blue. These two paintings are mirror images of each other. Millstones come in pairs with a stationary bedstone at the bottom and a rotating runnerstone above it. I used the radial structure of the grooves in a millstone to formulate my own radial structure in my paintings.

I continued with a lime-green painting, its colour derived from a ginkgo tree I had seen at Spadina and Harbord as it was turning from green to yellow in the autumn of 2022. I continued with a grey painting with spiral shapes that broke with the symmetry of the previous works. This grey painting was based on the spirals of the Kyrgyzstan seal I had used in another artwork.

### Yellow, Black and White; Composition with Blue

I wanted to move away from the constraints of a symmetrical pattern, so, using a kind of De Stijl logic, I laid out a painting with black elements, white elements, and yellow shapes. I made the black elements vertical, the white elements horizontal, and placed the yellow shapes around the periphery. This painting retains a radial symmetry. Keeping with the De Stijl theme, I decided to do my own version of *Composition No. 12*

with *Blue*, 1936–1942, a Mondrian painting in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. It consists of a small blue rectangle, almost a square, surrounded by black lines, most of which go from one side of the canvas to the other. I stuck with my rule of making the vertical elements black and the horizontal elements white. Sometimes I make rules to maintain consistency but also to challenge myself into playing a compositional game. This painting broke from the constraints of symmetry, and gave me a flexible structure I felt I could use in other paintings.

### Liquitex

One day while I was painting, I looked at the bottle of gesso sitting on the table beside me. I noticed the white vertical strokes of the word *Liquitex* and the even black spaces between the verticals. I probably wouldn't have been alert to these features had I not used the vertical black element in previous paintings. I was intrigued by the long arm of the *L* that extended under all the letters, and another line that extended the crossbar of the lowercase *t*. This line extended through the dots of the *i*'s. This extension of

some letter strokes was a common strategy in brand identity in the 1930's and earlier—not so often used today—to give a wordmark a distinctive graphic form.

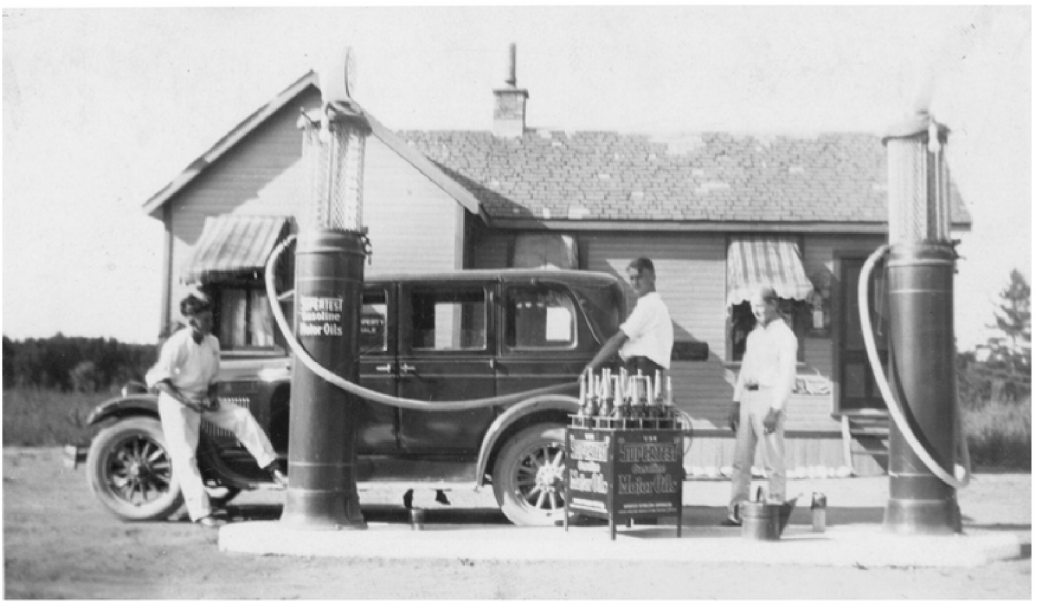
I began trying to lay out the word *Liquitex* on multiple canvases, creating a configuration for each letter that would theoretically make it recognizable. I was reminded of Albrecht Dürer's instructions for creating a geometrically perfect alphabet, using repeating squares and diamonds. I retained the extended arm of the *L*, but other letters were cut off at the top. I was intrigued by the way the resulting word hovered between legibility and abstraction. Four square canvases were needed to spell out the entire word. This painting was a breakthrough for me because I had never used a multi-panel format before. The letters became quite abstract as they had to conform to the rectilinear grid, and single letters were occasionally split between two adjacent canvases. The *x* in *Liquitex* was challenging because I couldn't make a diagonal line; instead, I used the first line of the cursive form of the *x*, before it gets crossed by the added stroke.



Liquitex gesso bottle, November 2022.

### Supertest

Many of the paintings in this series have a connection to London, Ontario, where I was born and lived until 1975. My father was a carpenter, and I worked with him on many job sites in this city. In 1974 we worked together building a storage shed for a boat on a property north of Arva. On our way to work each day we passed the Arva Flour Mill. In the summer of 2022, I drove to London frequently to help my brother repair the windows of the garage my father had built at our home in 1957. I visited a number of locations that had been important to me, including the Arva Flour Mill, Meadowlily Bridge, and Sir Adam Beck Secondary School, where the London artist, teacher and pioneering art therapist Selwyn Dewdney had painted a series of murals.



Supertest gas station operated by John T. Fones, at 1098 Hamilton Road, London, Ontario, Left to right: Ian Martin, Tom Fones, Harry Fones. 1928 Oldsmobile owned by Harry Stevens, Harry Fones' uncle. c. 1931.

Supertest was a gasoline company started in London, Ontario. When I was a child there was always news about the Supertest racing boat, piloted by Bob Hayward. I liked the way the *S* and the *T* had extended upper parts that enclosed the company name and gave it a distinct identity. In the original wordmark, these extensions became thinner as they approached the centre of the word, allowing the other letters to gradually increase in height toward the centre. All the letters are uppercase. In adapting this wordmark to my square canvases, I had to abandon these attenuated forms and make the stroke width of all the letters conform to the structural grid. In order to preserve the extended parts of the *S* and *T*, the bottoms of all the letters got cut off, making the word more abstract and harder to read. Although I never planned to break up a multi-panel composition, I think of each canvas as its own abstract entity.

I had a vague memory that my grandfather had operated a gas station on Hamilton Road in London, Ontario. I emailed my sister—my source of much family history—and asked her if

this was true. She replied that it was and said she had a photograph of my grandfather in front of the station. She sent me a cell phone shot of the photo, and to my surprise, the gas station was a Supertest one. In the second photo she sent me, my uncle Tom is holding the gas pump handle and is filling up a Dort touring car. Standing behind the car is my dad, a fifteen-year-old kid!

I was listening to CBC Radio around this time, and Thomas Herzog was on talking about his relationship with the theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking and their discussions around the Big Bang theory on the origin of the universe. He said that asking what came before the Big Bang was meaningless—it would be like asking what is south of the South Pole. He said there was no time before the Big Bang. I'd heard of the Big Bang theory before, but this time it really struck me. The reality of my father standing on a section of Hamilton Road long before I was born seemed like another universe. I could never get to that time and place.

### **Krispy Kreme**

I was looking for other wordmarks that had ex-

tended strokes on some letters. While riding my bicycle down Spadina Avenue on my way to my studio at 401 Richmond Street West, I noticed the Krispy Kreme doughnut outlet with its logo's capital K's extending over the other letters and emphasizing the dot of the *i* in Krispy. The use of K rather than C was also curious, as well as the spelling of Kreme. The K's made me think of the ancient Greek alphabet as if Krispy Kreme was an ancient Greek device, like the Antikythera mechanism, a model of the Solar System that I had read about. The Krispy Kreme logo dates from 1937 when the business was founded in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The logo of Kit Kat chocolate bars, another using the double K, was introduced the same year. Perhaps both were inspired by the Kit Kat Club in London, England, an eighteenth-century political and literary club.

The curious spelling of the Krispy Kreme brand name appealed to me. Like the extended letter strokes, this odd spelling gives the name a unique identity. Crispy Cream would make it ordinary. Krispy Kreme is unique, mythical, and memorable.

### **Meadowlily**

Meadowlily is an exception because it isn't a company name; it is an area in London, Ontario. In the 1960s, my friend George Appleton lived on what was then called Power Street near Meadowlily Bridge and close to the south branch of the Thames River. George and I used to practise playing our guitars together. There was a two-storey building behind his house where his grandfather had made wooden toys, including a jointed dancing puppet. We found many wooden puppet parts on the second floor of this building as well as a rubber stamp with the words "Victory Line." Perhaps his company had operated during World War II. I remember crossing Meadowlily Bridge to go tobogganing with George at Park Farm, just south of

Meadowlily Woods. One day we walked back through a light snowfall with the flakes of snow illuminated by the lights near the bridge.

George and I also used to hike along the path that wound its way through Meadowlily Woods on the south side of the Thames River. I decided to create a kind of installation using coloured Popsicle sticks that I nailed to a tree. I wouldn't do anything so stupid now, but at the time I thought I was being creative. George buried a blue-painted rock he called Sky Block. We left markers of three coloured Popsicle sticks to guide someone to this tree. George and I developed an extensive correspondence based on our activities in Meadowlily Woods and what we had discovered in his grandfather's shop.

My father must have driven me and my guitar to George's house occasionally. Did he ever mention anything to me about his own love of this area? If he did, I had forgotten all about it until my sister gave me an envelope with some writing, a map and a photograph inside. My dad had written a three-page text about Meadowlily Woods. The photograph was of the house where his aunt and uncle, Martha and Harry Stevens, lived. I never even knew he had an aunt! He described their house and shed, and that they used to store milk and butter in a stream that flowed through their property. He said his uncle owned a grey *Dort* touring car, which he identified as the car in the Supertest gas station photograph.

Typical of my father, he was also aware of the history of the area and mentioned a grist mill that once stood just east of the bridge on the north bank of the Thames River. The channel of its sluiceway was still visible, he said, although much overgrown. He mentioned a swimming hole and a spot where Italian families used to have picnics and play concertinas. The map showed the location of his aunt's house. I found

it so strange that my father and I had both frequented and loved this area forty years apart, but had never once come to it together. What a self-contained person he was!

I have visited this bridge many times over the years. In 2023 I parked near it and walked across; it is now exclusively a pedestrian crossing. The colour I used for the word Meadowlily is loosely based on the flower of the chicory plants I found growing at both ends of the bridge.

### Rexall

Alan Clairman ran an antique store on the north side of Carlton Street in Toronto, just west of Parliament. He had an eye for interesting things and was well-respected by other antique dealers. One day, while driving by his store, I noticed a beautiful hand-painted Rexall sign hanging in his window along with another sign with the words Soda Fountain. I went back several days later to ask him the price of the Rexall sign. Most people like the Soda Fountain sign, he told me, because of what it says, but I said its lettering wasn't as skilful as the lettering on the Rexall sign. He agreed.

The paint on the Rexall sign was cracked and falling off in flakes. The white lettering on a

behind the blue. Perhaps this is why the more recent paint was flaking. This palimpsest appealed to me, and I asked him if it was possible to somehow stabilize the paint. He said it could be sprayed with an acrylic varnish but that, in time, the varnish would darken the sign. I said I would rather have the sign darken than lose the cracked paint that delineated the words. I paid him for the sign and the spraying and came back to pick it up several days later.

I hung this Rexall sign in the room in our Have-lock Street house I used as my studio. I have always installed it in each successive studio that I have occupied, as if it is my shingle for my art business. The sign now hangs above the door of my studio at 401 Richmond Street West. It has darkened over the years, just as Alan had said it would. When I was looking for brand names that had one letter with an extended stroke, I looked up and noticed the Rexall sign and realized that I could use that brand name in a painting. I was curious to find out if the reversed colours—white letters on blue— would make any difference in how readily the name would be recognized.

The word Rexall was apparently chosen by the founders of the company because of the Latin reference to *rex* or king, so their brand name



The Rexall sign purchased from Alan Clairman c. 1995.

blue background had been painted on top of an even older sign that had been done in gold. Parts of some of these older letters were visible

indicated "king of all" because their brand represented a wide variety of products. I had always been intrigued by the  $R_x$  that appeared



Robert Fones working in his studio at 401 Richmond Street, 31 October 2023.

on some drug store signs and prescription pads. The  $R_x$  is not related to the Rexall brand but does have a link to Latin because it is derived from the Latin word for recipe. Pharmacists had traditionally compounded formulas for prescriptions. In any case, the word Rexall with its extended leg of the  $R$ , always reminded me of this association with  $R_x$ .

### Afterthought

There is a lot of history, both personal and objective, in the names I chose to work with. I was intrigued by how these brand names would appear once they were subjected to the grid I was using and the multi-panel format. Furthermore, the *trompe-l'œil* bevelled shapes always took me back to the First Style painting in Pompeii that had been an early influence on this work. I remember standing in the House of Sallust in Pompeii where there is a whole wall of bevelled shapes, and being entranced by the beauty of coloured rectangles assembled on

one large surface.

Then of course, there is my love of typography and my fascination with the essential forms of letters. How much of a letterform can be altered or removed while still retaining a recognizable letter shape? What is the history of each letter and how have they transformed in their long evolution through the millennia? How did they get combined into words that we recognize today? These kinds of questions have always intrigued me in my work as an artist.