

GALLERY GOING: VISUAL ARTS: REVIEW

## In Wiens' world, you can't see the forest for the trees



by GARY MICHAEL DAULT

The Globe and Mail, Saturday April 19, 2008

**Robert Wiens at Susan Hobbs Gallery**  
**\$8,500-\$45,000. Until May 3,**  
**137 Tecumseth St., Toronto; 416-504-3699**

Artist Robert Wiens has been painting watercolours of trees since 1980 (should read 1996). If this sounds a tad unadventurous, it should be noted that Wiens is no ordinary landscape painter, setting up his easel *en plain air* and painting for the Sunday afternoon joy of it.

Rather, Wiens's ongoing project necessitates regular forays into the old-growth forests near Temagami in northern Ontario, equipped not with pigments and paintbrushes, but with a 35-mm camera. It isn't until he gets home to his studio, in the bucolic town of Picton, Ont., that he projects his photos onto huge sheets of watercolour paper and begins careful pencil drawings of each of his chosen trees. Once a giant drawing is finished (Wiens works on a one-to-one scale), he begins to develop it into the one of his exacting, complex paintings.

For his latest exhibition, at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery, Wiens is showing two bodies of work: a six-part piece called *Butternut* in the main gallery, and four large watercolours that comprise *White Pine* (one of them of a tree burned to a mysterious darkness) in the upstairs gallery.

Viewers unfamiliar with Wiens's work may well be surprised by the artist's relentlessly close-up, almost claustrophobic examinations of the surface of each of his tree subjects. There is never a context in Wiens's paintings. No specimen tree is ever shown in its habitat. Rather, Wiens moves in tight, cropping his paintings so closely that in his scrutiny of each tree's bark, a single shard of trunk or branch turns, in itself, into terrain.

"When I first began to paint the way I do," Wiens once told me, "it interested me to think about what a painting would be like if there were no vista in it ... more like the way you'd see a tree when you're on the trail."

To look at a Wiens painting, therefore, is to see a tree the way you'd see it if you were standing about a foot from it. At this range, the wondrous accuracy with which Wiens has depicted tree bark gives way to another kind of wonder, at the way ordinary watercolour can somehow be pooled and puddled and sluiced into this verisimilitude of which Wiens is continually capable.

You can see Wiens's trees as ecological memorials, as saved remnants culled from the ongoing destruction of our forests. There is clearly a sense that Wiens's work is fervently about reverence and conservation. But it is also about a nearly mystical beauty inherent in these ancient trees, and, in the hands of an artist of Wiens's magisterial skill, that beauty is transposable from the innocence of the wilderness to the artifice of the gallery. It is this journey, from innocence to experience (or even to ennui), that makes his achievement so unforgettable.