

Painter Michael Smith captures feeling of nature

Nancy Tousley, Calgary Herald, Sunday, May 06, 2007

No matter how many times you look at a painting by Michael Smith, you still have to marvel at how he does it. In less skilful hands, the Montreal artist's lashings and slatherings of paint would turn into painter's mud, and become a grey incoherent sludge. Smith's paintings look wild, but are superbly controlled.

The clear visual clues are to landscapes or seascapes, sometimes it's difficult to tell which, but the images just hang onto the edge of representation. Everything on the surface seems fluid, full of movement, ready to change and stilled for only a moment, recalling the way that a photograph captures an instant from a temporal flow.

Smith does a balancing act, like a tightrope walker: go too far in either direction and he'd be in trouble. The build up of paint, laid down in many colours, the scrapings and layerings, the pulls of the palette knife, the brushed and blended areas, and the daubs of local colour seemed to have arrived on the canvas as the result of a performance. Superimpose a grid over the top of one of Smith's paintings and any section of it would appear to be a bit of pure abstraction. Yet an image comes together in the whole, especially when viewed from a distance.

The sketchy black branches of the tree at the centre of *Woburn* (2007) seem as if they are about to fly apart as the wind fills and swings its volumetric, swaying canopy. Strange light gives it a halo effect, and one is reminded that Britons once worshiped trees. The title reference is to Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, England, which is seated in a 3,000-acre deer park that contains venerable old oak trees. "There is a great quiet, haunting feeling in that area," says Smith.

The British-born artist has visited the park many times, as a child and recently with his father. *Woburn* is very much about the experience of the place rather than a representation of it, which is the way Smith's painting works. And *Woburn* is also filled with references to the subjects and light of English 19th-century landscape painting.

When Smith paints he is thinking of the way we see, a neurological blend of perception and interpretation, and the way that what we see is conditioned by what we are taught or expect to see.

Smith has expended a great deal of effort to get rid of what he was taught to see, all the landscape clichés, to arrive at his way of painting. What he brings a viewer is his experience of a place, remembered, filtered through art and coloured by what he did and felt there.

Excavation (2007), a painting of poplar trees, perhaps, is filled with the atmosphere of a day that feels sharp and wet and misty. The diagonal recession of the trees to the left of the stand at the centre of the painting is especially beautiful as the trees grow smaller and disappear into silvery blue mist. *Streaming* (2007) evokes a deep, dark-green glade with water running through it. *The Work of Water* (2005-06), the dramatic bravura piece in the show, recalls Turner in its racing torrent, coursing under a storm-swept sky, straight toward the viewer.

Landscape, of course, is not nature. It is a genre of painting. Instead of tidy, detailed, in-focus landscapes Smith gives us something so much better: the feeling and memory of what it's like to be out in nature. It's an experiential thing.