

THE EKPHRASTIC REVIEW

Diptych, by James Sutherland-Smith

3/13/2025



Underland, by Michael Smith (Canada) 2020. Click image for artist site.

Underland

i

On the steep bank opposite my cabin
is a cave, perhaps just a hole opened
after a tall beech tree toppled to lie
as a host for moss or chanterelles.
In winter light it's visible, a darkness
with roots like tentacles around it
as if about to whisper hoarsely, "Enter."
There could be adders nesting. I am afraid.



ii

To step with care under an arch of limestone
recalling Romanesque becoming Gothic
when the verge escapement was invented
and memory began to click with precision,
not flow or flicker like water or a flame
on a monastery candle burning down,
to step with care stooping into narrowness,
into the dark that comes before revelation.

iii

Deep within a nave that twists to labyrinth,
navis then ship, becoming the voyage itself,
an ark, a covenant with the spectrum,
a heart beats unlike a clock, quickening
as it designs vaults, overpaints, splashes,
squirts, slaps on vanishing points with a straight edge
as beyond all this a bison licks its flank
and a hand's outline persists on rock.

iv

Warned not experiment with manganese
dioxide, one of the pigments Upper
Palaeolithic artists used, Lorblanchet
recorded, "I put the charcoal powder
in my mouth, chewed and diluted it
with saliva and water. The mixture
of charcoal and saliva extended with water

forms a paint that adheres quite well to a cave wall.”

v

How does a painting smell? How does it feel to the touch?

“If you were allowed to touch the painting
you might get a really good idea
nevertheless of how they got there.”

Does the painting sing like Sonny Boy Williamson,
his old man’s husky voice, his harmonica
stuck upright in his mouth like a fat cigar
vibrating the smoky blue notes of vision?

vi

A dry broad brush scrapes the canvas, blurring colour
to depth, sfumato. “ ... never be able
to suspect underneath is a black painting
and on top a blue painting.” In the cave
of making I grope my way downwards
in the darkness until my eyes open
into the blue light where sky gods are present.
I see I see I see I see I see.



Outside Lines, by Michael Smith (Canada) 2020. Click image for artist site.

Outside Lines

i

The broad-leafed ivy has shed its last burgundy hand span.
So only brown dreadlock plaits of creeper remain
into which clusters of berries have been woven.
Beside them I clip begonias to their roots
and disturb a black spider to scuttle over my fingers
as afternoon sunlight disintegrates on quartz pebbles
under dogwood and a cypress that must be cut back in spring.

ii

On the ridge behind us before the snow comes down
the woods are a mediocre varnished Dutch landscape,
Dirk van Hoogpratel's last work before he was whitewashed
into religion and a hatred of the image
as the snow begins to displace those coarse lines
of bigotry with lethal gentle gusts and drifts
like dustsheets laid over a chapel's furniture.

iii

At the onset of spring the artist sketches outside
with liquid graphite black verticals of maple trunks
and unnames the lines of winter. Inside on canvas
black and grey, then burnt ochre, Prussian blue, lime,
chartreuse, canary, moss, magenta, cobalt
applied with brush, blade, drip, until titanium white,
the sun's dazzle through the trees or on melting water.

iv

In May after blossom as the various greens arrive
I'll climb the ridge to look for the first Crane's-Bill,
Odin's Grace, the colour of Victorian silk,
nature imitating craft and hear the artist,
"I feel there's something going on now,"
but no more than that as if what his work means
can be walked up to, visited, seen, but never named.

James Sutherland-Smith

Author's note: In "Underland," stanza iv is taken almost verbatim from *The Mind in the Cave* by David Lewis Williams (Thames and Hudson, reprinted 2020 pp 218-9). The quotations in stanzas v and vi are from the artist in the video *Underland* as is the quotation in stanza iv in *Outside Lines*.

James Sutherland-Smith was born in Scotland in 1948, but has lived in Slovakia since 1989. He has published eight collections, the latest being *Small Scale Observations* from Shearsman. He has translated a number of Slovak and Serbian poets, a selection from Eva Luka's poetry being due from Seagull Books in 2025.

Outside Lines : diptych and studies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLOO-mvd3AQ&t=8s>