

# NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

## MICHAEL SMITH – MEMORY CURRENT

Essay by Robert Enright

A landscape for Michael Smith is a world and a whirled. He recognizes that all his references are to landscape and he is obsessed with those possibilities. There is no single way for his landscapes to be viewed or rendered and, as a result, the process of their realization is neither stable nor predictable. In Smith's hands, a landscape is a repository for memory (the past) and a site for making (the present). At their core, they hold emotion, psychology and aesthetics in an inexplicable balance.

The memory that informs the paintings is both personal and professional. On one side, they express his childhood experience in post-war England in walking through the heavily bombed streets of London; on the other they recognize the imprint of the paintings of artists like John Constable and JMW Turner who were inescapable influences for a young British art student. Since moving to Canada he has looked carefully at artists like Paterson Ewen and Jean-Paul Riopelle. This omnivorous looking is an engagement with what he calls a "dialogue with the history of painting".

Smith's paintings make visible an extremely subtle negotiation with presence and dissolution. As a result, the relationship he has to his sources evidence a dialogue between inspiration and abandonment. To use his own phrase, what "gears him up" to start a painting is a separation from the numerous references (they could be a video grab from an historical battle scene in a picture book or a photograph of a contemporary conflict) but what ends up being visible on the surface or in the structure of the painting is some trace of those early references. Call it a visual echo. While the painting needs to establish its own energy, at any point he may re-engage his sources. A painting by Michael Smith is a virtuoso display of the way in which energy embodies form, either through memory or event.

The titles he picks for his paintings contain the complications of his picture-making process; in *Room of Contours* the building's second floor windows and lower level entranceways are in danger of being consumed by an infernal red sky; *Labyrinth Sky* could as easily be named *Kaleidoscope Sky*, and the weight of marks in *Under Sargasso* is an embodiment of the collection of oddments that gather in the mysterious sea after which the painting is named. You're never sure whether these paintings are exploding or coming together into a coherent image. This deliberate and intelligent lack of stability is what provides their irrepressible energy. It is a condition he cultivates in his colour choice as well. "The first thing I do is ruminate over what colours will not go with certain colours. I wonder how can I establish a palette that is a little uncertain". Smith's own formulation of this productively ambiguous

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relationship is that he is dealing with “elemental forces and architectural forms”. That is the precise tension that makes *Room of Contours* such an engaging painting.

*Near Horizon #5* is what would happen to *Room of Contours* when that all-consuming infernal red sky finally settles in. Because a painting contains the memory of the transformation of life and death, it can be both celebration and mourning. In this sense, painting is a mechanism for activating his “memory current” and Smith can work on either side of that contrasting condition. In *Under Sargasso* a fleshly pink and peachy colour moves in an upward trajectory, hits a form at the surface, and then bursts into a lightening sky. It is a reclamation of the drowned, absent body funneled through the upper reaches of a transcendent sky. Mourning has become morning.

Smith is aware that something being painted becomes a painting as much as it remains a subject. His way of talking about this generative process is that he is concerned to “weld the subject with the materiality of its making.” There is ample evidence of that awareness in everything from the range of his mark-making to his approach to composition. The foregrounds in his sea paintings get amplified, so that they carry not just a traditional perspective but also a sense of abstract space. In *Sea Line*, sixty percent of the painting is foreground and only at the top do we perceive an intense and explosive event, probably an aerial view of a destroyer being hit by a torpedo. You can never know with any certainty in a Smith seascape whether the damage being done is natural or human-caused. All you see is the turbulent mark-making that records the event. But Smith will also activate his way of seeing, as he does in the *Break-Off* trilogy, where his eye acts as it were a zoom lens. It’s a way of mobilizing perception and its function is to transport us progressively closer to the drama. He likes the pictorial theatre generated by the cinematic gaze.

The energy and beauty of these recent paintings is an example of the celebratory overpowering any sense of loss that might be residual in the originating image. In one way, Smith is enacting a kind of Neo-sublime, a compelling admixture of awe and anxiety, where the former convincingly paints the latter out of the picture.

— ROBERT ENRIGHT