

SPOTLIGHT | MICHAEL SMITH: FONT DE GAUME

MARCH 3, 2021



Michael Smith, *Font de Gaume*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 192 in.

The Font de Gaume cave in Southwest France contains exceptional examples of prehistoric paintings and engravings. Michael Smith first visited this cave in the 1970s and was only permitted to take photos of the exterior. He recently returned to revisit these ancient sites, where he created watercolour studies and began his current series shortly thereafter.

In his exhibition, *Underland*, Smith recreates the experience of exploring these caves through the use of memory, materiality, personal history and the influence of other artists.

At 16 feet, *Font de Gaume* envelops the viewer and transports them into a world of Smith's creation.

INFLUENCES

Though not directly referenced in *Font de Gaume*, works by Giovanni Bellini and Lee Krasner were in Michael Smith's 'mind's eye' while completing the triptych.



Giovanni Bellini, *St. Francis in the Desert*, around 1480, oil and tempera on panel, 55.8 x 49 in.

"[Bellini] has portrayed St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226) alone in a stony wilderness, stepping forward from his simple shelter into a golden light that seems to transfigure him spiritually."

- The Frick Collection

Throughout history, caves have had a symbolic connotation referencing dichotomies such as interior and exterior, and darkness and light. Smith's *Font de Gaume* explores these themes with colour, texture and depth.



Lee Krasner, *Imperative*, 1976, oil, charcoal and paper on canvas, 50 x 50 in.

Lee Krasner is best known for her abstractions on canvas and paper. Krasner's very physical, visceral gesture can be felt in her collage work *Imperative* from 1976.

This same movement can be sensed in Smith's work.

Smith uses his entire body to paint works like *Font de Gaume*, utilizing many tools and techniques to achieve a similar layered effect.

PROCESS



Exterior photograph of caves in the Font de Gaume region of France and inspiration for Smith's painting



Watercolour study for Smith's *Font de Gaume* painting

As I was working on this painting I was focused on the experience of moving physically through the winding and twisting space of the cave revealing concave and convex contours of stone. These stone 'walls' offering glimpses

of drawings and paintings made thousands of years earlier. All this set in the complete darkness of the underland suggesting an eternity of time - time splintered and broken by our presence and the guide's flashlight tracing animal forms and casting shadows of stalagmites and stalactites.

- MICHAEL SMITH



Installation view of *Font de Gaume* in Smith's current exhibition, *Underland*

To watch a short film on Michael Smith's studio practice, [click here](#).

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190 Richmond Street East Toronto, Ontario, M5A 1P1 CANADA

T. 416-205-9000 E. info@metiviergallery.com

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