



THE TUMULT OF LANDSCAPE

MICHAEL SMITH'S PAINTED WORLD

by James D Campbell

I am standing on the threshold of a vast aqueous space. The horizon line between sea and sky is smudged with off-white and mauve wisps of smoke. That fluid line also stands for the ground plane of representation itself, the line that holds me taut between seeing and seen. In other words, it's a sort of spirit level for my presence here on the precipice. Below that line, there is a furious roiling in the depths, a sense of some seismic event happening deep beneath the thick crust of the waters. Further up, an indeterminate shape, an object in the midst of ongoing disintegration, seems to heave slowly in and out of focus on the line. Shifting back and forth between abstraction and representation, that shape is hard to identify at first. It might be a warship foundering there: torpedoed, top-heavy, taking on water all the while, ready to plunge. One thing is sure. The dark waters have a powerful undertow. That hazy object is on its way into the deeps. From my position, I feel as though I am poised uneasily on a ridge above the ocean, experiencing a sort of existential vertigo. But I am not standing on a cliff at ocean's edge. I'm in Michael Smith's studio, in front of a painting appropriately titled *Undertow*, measuring 80 inches high by 108 inches wide. Smith's work has been regularly shown across Canada; a number of large sea and fire canvases were exhibited to critical acclaim at Nicholas Metivier Gallery in Toronto in 2008. Smith will also show new works at Trépanier Baer in Calgary later this year.

Michael Smith came to Canada from the UK in 1978 and has become this country's painter of tumult, of figural and often violent extremity: chaos in the air, spontaneous combustion on the ground. The artist sees landscape painting not as a paradigm for place but as a metaphor for the impossible claim of a sense of belonging to any particular place. He draws on personal memories of the English landscape, quotations from history painting and photographs of war from documentary

sources. For example, he based several recent paintings on Timothy O'Sullivan's Civil War photographs of the killing grounds at Gettysburg.

In contrast with other painters who mine the landscape, Smith's painting can be interpreted as enactment; the performative aspect of his work is traceable to his beginnings. This helps explain the magnetic pull the paintings exert on his viewers, enfolding them and encouraging them to step inside the work. For Michael Smith, painting is not a way of finding himself—but of progressively losing his own way. He may risk enchantment, but it pays off. He has often said to me that landscape is, for him, a subject riddled with shadows.

His lineage is noteworthy. Influenced by the School of London, he was weaned on the work of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. The latter, lionized for his thick-bodied expressive landscapes, was obsessed by the work of Nicholas Poussin and made extensive series of drawings and etchings inspired by his figural compositions. It could be suggested that Michael Smith works from the corpus of Kossoff—and Turner before him—in a similar way but without preserving any stylistic trappings. He takes a cue from painters like Eugene Leroy, megalopsychic savant of the thick coat, and has credited Joan Snyder and Joan Mitchell as formative influences. Smith has spoken eloquently of early moments handling Constable sketchbooks in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

It's a mistake for viewers to try to subsume his work under the rubric of history; the artist is all about tomorrow. His paint is an extrusive surrogate for physical matter the way Lucian Freud's is



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a palpable surrogate for human flesh. No one is painting landscape this way today, from the inside out. His work relates to conventional landscape painters the way John Currin's figure painting does to that of William-Adolphe Bouguereau. In Canada, if Smith has a fellow traveller it is no doubt Harold Klunder, another painter intoxicated by the physicality of pigment and one whose hectic innerstates are in one sense the flipside of Smith's archeology of the natural world.

I've known Smith for over 30 years, and if there was ever a painter who refused any complacent notion of assembly line art making or comforting spectre of stasis, it is he. This is specifically interesting because he is a landscape painter, but there is a subversive intention and twist in his work. He takes landscape painting and reinvents its verities from the inside out. His is no romantic idyll, but a vision of the landscape as both sacred and profane. Furthermore, every painting he executes seems to be ripped from his body by main force, infused with lifeblood, made palpably flesh. Here the compass of a painter's gestural outreach can draw a radius across all there is to say in the sensuous matter of pigment.

I remember visiting his Saint-Remi street studio in the Saint-Henri district of Montréal in 1980 and being welcomed by the rapturous aroma of paint while still on the sidewalk outside. Inside, a three-inch crust of pigment on the floor signalled the painter's reckless presence. The "Tree Figure" paintings of those years prefigured his later landscapes, and looking backwards, we can see just how cohesive the body of work as a whole is. The paintings were as thick and extrusive then as they are now, yet his work has never been plugged or opaque. Instead, for all that wealth of pigment, they seem overwhelmingly porous, full of light, almost breathing on their own. I have never successfully wrestled one of his paintings into a fixed state, a frozen view, and I've come to recognize that this evasiveness, this resistance, is their great strength.

In *Undertow*, 2008, as in so many of his paintings over the years, Smith successfully blurs the distinction between the abstracted and represented. He is at his best when polysemousness is in play. In *Undertow* and related paintings, the waters seem as volatile and ever changing as the ocean itself. The destroyer or battleship or whatever it is in the upper quadrant never lends itself readily to any one interpretation. It is left open, and its spaces, its places, its meanings, slip into a mist of uncertainty.

Smith's painting is an ongoing experiment in flux, a resolute attempt to elude fixity, taxonomy, vitrification. Outside the tyranny of signs, he works hard to preserve a governing ambiguity that secures our continuing engagement with his expansive fields of acrylic paint. Each painting is its own struggle, and each its own triumph over remembered geographies while at the same time an ongoing homage to everywhere he has been and everything he has seen. Smith once told me that one of the reasons he left Britain and came to Canada was because the very ground there seemed to cough up ghosts underfoot that clogged the air and could not easily be exorcised. Perhaps painting has become his own best means of exorcism.

Immersing himself at will in the Sargasso sea of thick-bodied acrylic paint, he seems to be performing his own memory work, his own spadework in the geographies of place, and it is often his

Preceding. *At Heart*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 108". Photographs: Daniel Roussel. Courtesy the artist, Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary and Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

1. *Undertow*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 108". Private collection.

2. *The Burial*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 50". Courtesy Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary.

3. *Undertow #2*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 108". Courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery. Detail below.



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shadow we sense hovering just under the surface, a painter at work, at the threshold, on his mark, receptive to incident and accident but always en route towards something like an emotional truth.

Edward Casey's luminous book *The Fate of Place*, 1998, performed an excavation of place thematically close to Smith's own triage. If the history of place is largely a "hidden history" in Casey's phenomenological archeology, so is it in Smith's painting world. Smith's own body-centric activation of imagined place yields spatial configurations that often seem preternaturally accurate in terms of the sources that inspired them, whether experienced viscerally in person or vicariously from archival images. Casey argued that if there is no place without depth, so too, there is no place that does not connect the sometimes polar disparities of experience and being. The novelist EM Forster further instructed: "Only Connect!" And this is what Michael Smith, arms outstretched, strives to do in each painting he executes. This is his mantra. For him, painting is about depth and connectivity and the magnetic emotional magnitude of place.

His paintings are the furthest things we can imagine from bucolic landscapes. In fact his subversiveness lies in conflating an early English vision of the verdant landscape with media representations of conflict in contemporary "hot zones" like Iraq and Afghanistan. Smith works from such images to secure a sense of disconsolation and rupture in the landscape. He cherishes the scars, rather than the cosmetic effects. It makes sense, for it is the very act of painting—the scraping, pushing, excavationary frenzy—that drives the work to its final state of coalescence. So Smith's paintings are tumultuous even when most unprepossessing in their mien, and they are seldom, if ever, that. They often come with severe atmospheric conditions attached and vigorously agitated fields—an inferno when a comet falls earthwards, sea swells and tidal waves, electricity in the atmosphere and human bodies returned to dust. What a painter has to say about fire and water, earth and air can build on sightlines while obliterating all comforting ideas of nature's fundamental and presupposed "goodness" or even "neutrality." Instead, Smith wants the viewer to experience confusion, even disorientation, with the landscape space of painting.

If the poet's endless task is to seek out analogies between unlikely subjects, painters have the wherewithal to make us believe in them. Smith wills metaphor into a state of supplest complicity with his brush stroking, dense microstructures and wealth of tasty surface details, infusing the stuff of paint with unfettered luminosity. He often integrates a poetic textuality into the work, building up the palimpsest, making his textural fragments seem

like organic outgrowths of his painterly fields, and so a transparent mantle dappled or daubed with language finds its way in the cradle of painting. It will be no surprise to many readers to learn that British poet Peter Redgrove was Smith's teacher and mentor at the Falmouth College of Art. You can sense the poet's subversive teachings in him to this day.

Smith reminds us that painting, like nature, is always in a cyclic state of growth, disintegration and rebirth. Whether it is his evocation of the bone yards at Gettysburg or a Maritime disaster, the flaming descent of a meteor and ensuing conflagration in a forest, or all the spirits of the air in restless flight, he never seeks to harness or rein in the wild semiosis of his several wildernesses. Instead, he invokes with terrifying specificity the power of place. Michael Smith's vocation is multiple but finally selfsame: alchemist, magician, auratic geographer of place, painter. ■

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Vertical Fire #2, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 80".

