

Two Exhibitions that Didn't Change My Life, but Did Change My Week: Even More (as if there weren't enough) Criticism on David Urban and John Kissick.

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Perhaps more so than any other contemporary painter, David Urban elicits a bi-polar response from his audience. Urban's vocal (and rather eloquent) arguments for a return to Modernist values and painting practices as well as the support and acclaim that the artist receives for such arguments seems to firmly divide art audiences into those who either vehemently oppose him or those who "believe" in him. And "believe" is indeed the proper description for the level of support that Urban's poetic longings ask of us. His opening addresses at art talks usually begin with poetry readings and similar lines often accompany his solo exhibitions. (Usually it's Wallace Stevens, although his recent Moore Gallery show was accompanied by a line from Rainer Maria Rilke.) He is also unafraid of pulling out the old Modernist saw that compares Abstract painting to music (usually Jazz). Above all else, Urban trumpets sincerity and authenticity (as the Jed Purdy of Canadian art) by asking us to disregard our Postmodern cynicism and to suspend our disbelief. This is a difficult task and despite my clever quips, I have tremendous respect for David Urban for having the audacity to ask us to do so.

That being said, I was quite concerned about the prospect of viewing his recent exhibition at the Moore Gallery. His 2002 Art Gallery of Ontario show had been, for the most part, tremendously disappointing. The paintings in that show had the sense of being rushed. Their Riopellish palette-knifing and early Modernist inspired, out-of-the-tube colours seemed woefully second rate and even second year. It is however, arguably, a difficult task for an artist of Urban's stature to switch gears. Practical obligations such as exhibition schedules and gallery showings (not to mention such trivial concerns as having to eat) force such awkward periods to be made publicly. The works in the AGO show, I hoped, were transitional and as a traditional David Urbanite, I did my best to maintain my belief. I chose to respect him, regardless of the abysmal results, for having had the courage to embark on such a quest and it seems, with his present Moore Gallery exhibition, that he has at least spotted a worthwhile destination.

Perhaps the most striking feature of his recent exhibition, *Treats for the Nightwalker*, is the works overwhelming sense of confidence and urgency. (These traits are also mentioned by G.M.D in the *Globe* review and they certainly are the works dominant quality.) The main room at Moore Gallery is filled with large scale works. (The twenty-foot-long, *A Toy in The Pond, for L.U.*, seems custom made to decorate an airplane hangar.) In this new body of work, Urban employs sparse but tremendously bold and emphatic lines, sculpted with a combination of thick and smeary blacks, whites, reds, yellows and blues to elicit feelings of a colossal, primordial struggle. Perhaps a minor detail, but a telling one as to the works heroic intent, is the inclusion of the artist's initials that are reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drip-painting signatures. (Doesn't he know that you can't do that anymore, that only high school kids and Robert Bateman sign their work on the front?) David Urban wants you to know that he made these things and he is unashamed of saying so. These works, beyond their poetic titles and musings, are testaments to him as Creator. They are all fire and ice and heaven and hell. They are pure and unapologetic audacity. Unlike most contemporary abstraction which seeks to evoke Abstract Expressionism, these paintings are, in fact, Abstract Expressionism.

As for the display, the works are divided according to hot and cool colour schemes, reinforcing their “Wrath of God” sensibility. The hot (and to my mind more successful) paintings take up three of the gallery’s walls. My one concern with the works installation is the rather off-putting, framed work-on-paper. Although, colour wise, the piece fits in nicely with the other paintings on the cool colour wall, it seems strikingly misplaced in a room dominated by large-scale works on canvas. I can only assume that this was a decision made by the gallery. (The show was apparently “commissioned” by the Moore Gallery, so really they might have made all of the hanging decisions.) Although the monoprint is a nice piece, it really shouldn’t have been included in the front room show and its inclusion, to my mind, signals a very commercial/used-car-salesman/salon-style approach to painting exhibitions which is unfortunate in an otherwise first rate display.

Taken as a whole, the show will certainly serve to reinforce the gap between Urban’s audience and in so doing, stimulate the ongoing debates that such a division creates. For the most part, *Treats for the Nightwalker*, is a collection of what must be unanimously considered really good, if not “great” paintings. The real question, of course, is whether David Urban was born a half-century too late. Can his work be taken seriously as contemporary revitalizations of Modernist paradigms or are they, like almost everything else (especially at Moore Gallery), merely mannerist variations? Can people still make paintings like that, about those kinds of things? David Urban says that you can and whether you agree or disagree, you have to at least admire the conviction of his claim.

In contrast to David Urban’s bravado is a wonderful survey-says exhibition of recent paintings by John Kissick on view at the Stewart Macdonald Art Centre. Perhaps the greatest quality of John Kissick’s work is its sense of reluctance and insecurity. These qualities might seem unfitting to works that are so vibrantly coloured and often built upon six inch thick wooden panels, but Kissick’s paintings are rigorous investigations of abstractions past that sit on the fence between Urban’s unabashed sincerity and Johnathon Lasker style appropriation. In fact, his works seem to embody this struggle. Rather than claiming to have all the answers, John Kissick’s work presents us with questions.

The show at MacDonald Stewart is an impressive collection of Kissick’s work from 2001-2004. As much as I enjoy his work of 2001 and 2002, his work of 2003 and 2004 are just so much fun. Although the works still employ his older nods to Abstract Expressionism and Eighties style Post-Abstraction (quotations of pre-existing quotations?) his newer work throws OP style and Surrealist tropes into the mix. Everything gets swirled together into a whimsical, alphabet soup of abstract modes.

Although his use of appropriation and self-conscious “nodding” might imply that his paintings are academic or cynical, to my mind, Kissick’s playful works present the idea that although it might not be possible to create a “new” abstract painting, it is possible to create abstract paintings that are “different”. In this way, the paintings of John Kissick are every bit as “sincere” as those of David Urban, but unlike David Urban, John Kissick’s work exhibits doubt and to this, his paintings serve as elaborate testimonials. They are dense and vast, painterly landscapes of overlapping and conflicting ideas and sentiments. John Kissick’s work is a beautiful limbo of paintings past that, to my mind, best epitomize paintings present.

Pete Smith