

Gary Michael Dault, "The poetry in hot licks and rapturous scumblings." *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Sept. 14, 2002

## **THE POETRY IN HOT LICKS AND RAPTUROUS SCUMBLINGS.**

By Gary Michael Dault

I love abstract painting, but I don't much like writing about it.

When you write about abstract painting -- that is to say about nonrepresentational painting -- you inevitably end up spending a lot of time describing it. Which means that whatever you write is likely to become thick and viscous with adjectives. This is probably fine in poetry, but it tends to make prose a little glutinous.

The new gallery season is in full swing and there is a raft of important exhibitions out there all dealing with abstraction.

For sheer hedonism, you probably can't do better than John Kissick's exhibition of new paintings at Toronto's Leo Kamen Gallery. When he's not churning out these gloriously lush abstractions, Kissick is dean of the Faculty of Art at the Ontario College of Art and Design. He has been painting in more or less the same manner for the last half dozen years -- a manner derived, in an informed way (Kissick's desire is to be "ironic and authentic"), from the golden age of American abstract expressionism (the 1940s and 1950s). But, whereas Kissick's paintings have always been small, now they have blossomed into huge, six-by-six-foot miasmas of colour and shape.

Invariably eschewing the springiness of canvas for the hard resistance of a wooden surface, Kissick has presented his paintings on what are essentially wall-mounted wooden boxes -- thus contributing to their being more painted objects than paintings per se. Now, at this vast new scale, the wooden edges to these painted boxes are eight inches deep. A new Kissick painting, therefore, is not just hung on the wall; it is a wall.

What else is new in these current Kissicks is the degree to which his normal roster of hot licks and rapturous scumblings of acrylic pigment have been interrupted, alleviated and aerated by the frequent presence of beautifully chosen, flatly painted shapes. There are kidney or mushroom shapes (derived, I'd venture, from Willem De Kooning), like the yellow one parked in the foreground of *No. 5*. There are hard, oxbow-like meanders of paint, like the trackings of pale CreamSicle orange tangling down through *No. 6*. There are attractive, pinball- and barbell-like, matte shapes clustered in corners (as in *No. 3*). And strange elements, such as pipes and upsurging geysers, again in *No. 6*.

These usually monotonal and textureless shapes seem almost cut out from the canvas. This makes boldly manifest the illusion of depth that Kissick's looping brushwork always implied, making that depth and substantiveness seem refreshingly deliberate, rather than some cubistic, space-making habit he couldn't drop. One word about Kissick's colour: glorious. \$9,500 each. Until Oct. 12, 80 Spadina Ave., Suite 406, Toronto; 416-504-9515.

Jordan Broadworth at Pari Nadimi

Whereas John Kissick's abstractions are rhapsodic and chromatically sonorous, the paintings of the brilliant, young, Toronto painter Jordan Broadworth, though no less sensuous than Kissick's, are cunning, fiercely analytical and exhilaratingly deliberate. Like Kissick, Broadworth wishes to "pay homage to painting's past." His method, as he notes in his gallery statement, is to proceed "through the linking and reinterpretation of established codes." What you see at first glance is two-toned painting (dark indigos in *dart* and *point*, shrill yellows in *swarm* and *scam*, rusty reds in *pine*, *fold* and *grill*) made up of discontinuous horizontal planes of colour, apparently overlaid with vagrant loops and drips.

Broadworth's loops and drips, however, rather than performing as incarnations of runaway expressionist fervour, are factors of what he calls a "time sensitive, archeological-like process that results in a figure/ground reversal" whereby "arching brush strokes that descend into complex entanglements" are added and then, by the artist's use of squeegees, are removed. "This process," Broadworth writes, "enables the gestures to exist within, rather than on top of the surface." It's fun to read his charged, crystalline explanations for what he does.

Here's the artist on the subject of the drips in his paintings: "The drip has come to represent spontaneity and excess: excessive force, material and emotion. In my work, the drips are methodically placed and controlled (using syringes) and made visible through a lack, rather than an excess, of material."

Broadworth's achievement lies in his fervent and dispassionate understanding of precisely what he is doing and why. Unlike the carnal abstractionists who are his forebears, Broadworth has worked away from an immersion in painting's corporeality to what might be termed a position of deep lucidity. It is in his distancing reversals of conventional expressionist procedures that his newness lies. \$650-\$4,000. *Until Oct. 5, 80 Spadina Ave., Suite 403, Toronto; 416-591-6464.*

Y. M. Whelan at Fran Hill Gallery

Yvonne Whelan is one of what must be thousands of young painters employing the grid -- the central tool of modernist abstraction -- as the support for her paintings. So what lends Whelan's their distinction (for distinction they clearly have)? It's her colour, and a new sense of freedom in the way she brushes her pigments onto her canvases. Whelan's palette has always run to earth tones, moody creams and greys, dusky, fruited hues like peach and down-at-the-heels colours like hospital-corridor green. It has bloomed out into burnt oranges, maroons (her abutting of orange and maroon in *Canadian Sunset* is the best I've seen since the paintings of Mark Rothko), and, most tellingly in this exhibition, a wild, amiably off-putting Pepto-Bismol mauve and a searing rich raspberry. There are a lot of open white areas too, with the paint brushed on so thinly the colour underneath shows through -- the new phase of her paint handling. The transparency that a good house painter might regard as the result of a paint that simply didn't cover very well, Whelan has used as a way of chording two or more colours at once, squeezing the chromatic benefit from the upper layer, from the layer lying beneath, and, as a new bonus, from the colour that becomes the synthesis of both. Interestingly, her tiny paintings (20-by-18 inches) are so colouristically rich, they do not suffer from their diminished scale. \$550-\$2,600. *Until Sept. 28, 230 Queen St. E., Toronto; 416-363-1333.*