

WILD PAINTERLY JOY, FRAMED WITH IRONY.

by Gary Michael Dault

John Kissick at Leo Kamen Gallery

\$6,500-\$15,000. Closes today,

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The visual wallop delivered by these chromatically raucous new paintings by John Kissick, now at Toronto's Leo Kamen Gallery, is enough to knock you off your feet. It is only in the restabilizing moment directly after the initial blow, that you come (perhaps) to your senses and try to get a grip on what Kissick seems to be doing.

Kissick, who is director and professor of art at the University of Guelph's School of Fine Art and Music, is obviously a highly informed maker of abstract paintings. He knows at first hand, for example, about wild painterly joy - about the rapture that comes from juxtaposing, say, a tangle of red, wormy things in the upper middle of a painting (see *No.4 2007*, reproduced here) to a creamy, green-edged shape with knobs (just below the red). And he knows the wicked fun, for example, of dangling depictions of beads and chains down the left side of the same painting - thereby providing a sort of clanky, rattling soundtrack for the rest of the work.

Most importantly, he knows that this sort of form-making rapture can generate both ecstasy and, at the same time, a cut-rate ticket to emptiness. Too much purely sensuous pleasure, and you feel the undertow: You start to hear promptings from the rational, well-adjusted side of your brain that warn you about self-indulgence, decorativeness, and that accuse you of a certain troubling naiveté about the history of advanced painting.

Kissick turns himself inside out trying to ward off all the ingenuous impulses in him that would scuttle his pictures. He walks a fine line, after all, between wanting to paint like a crazed angel (gorgeous colour, exuberant shapes, creamy, cake-icing textures) and wanting to behave like an artist with a self-conscious, sophisticated, historically informed sense of critique. And so he stays in the game by making sure you understand how deeply ironic his work is. This is important, because we live so totally in irony, as a culture, that we swim in it - like fish in a tank.

Kissick links the look of his paintings, for example, to "the very contemporary culture of cut and paste." You can see from *No.4 2007* (if you blur your eyes a bit) how Photoshopped the painting's patterning feels. But he doesn't entirely throw his lot in with painters who employ "the flat screen and mediated aesthetic of the computer," as he puts it in his gallery statement. Rather, he writes, "the work references the Modernist practice of finding the painting through the process of making it." Action painting, in other words. Abstract Expressionism. This is having your cake and eating it too. And Kissick gets away with it.

So the show is gorgeous. And perhaps, because of our runaway sense of irony (which is perilously close to suspiciousness), way too gorgeous. Kissick makes sure you totally "get" it in his notes: The paintings, he writes, "rest uneasily between established conventions of abstraction and the postmodern critique of originality, autonomy and aesthetics." And the operative word here is "uneasily."

Gary Michael Dault: "Wild painterly joy, framed with irony." *Globe and Mail*, Toronto. May 12, 2007. pg. R16.