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The Temperament of Seeing Landscape, Poetry and the Paintings of Michael Smith

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The temperament of seeing Landscape, Poetry and the Paintings of Michael Smith

The Panther

In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His vision, from the constantly passing bars, has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else. It seems to him there are a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over, the movement of his powerful soft strides is like a ritual dance around a centre in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly. An image enters in, rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles, plunges into the heart and is gone.

[Rainer Maria Rilke]

Michael Smith is a painter who will not challenge the traditions of his medium but will challenge us to see what is before our eyes. In line with the best of English landscape painting; Turner in the past, Hoyland and Hodgkin in the present, Smith concerns himself with natural conditions of light. Originally from England and a resident of Quebec since 1978, Smith attended Falmouth College of Art where he first explored the strong theoretical and expressive use of poetry. Both the poet and novelist Peter Redgrove and the poet Ted Hughes greatly influenced his thinking. On landscape Ted Hughes has written, "Landscape becomes valuable to us: not simply the presence of the elements, but the encounter between the elemental things and the living, preferably the human", also "it is only there (in the landscape) that the ancient instincts and feelings in which our body lives can feel at home." These are important statements when one considers them in relation to the subjects and images that Smith conveys through his paintings. One of the more distinct associations that can be drawn between the poetic discourse of Hughes and the work of Smith is temperament revealed through the primacy of experience.

The paintings and drawings of Michael Smith fall into three discernible groups. The first, headed by the title, "The Fiction of Domestication", is a direct quote from a review by Sandra Paikowsky of Smith's exhibition at Art 45 in 1986. The second I would refer to as "Open Landscapes". The third I shall call the "Charismatic Paintings." This grouping does not establish a given hierarchy or chronological pattern but underlines distinct concerns that the artist has addressed since 1983.

As Paikowsky has pointed out, "the fiction of domestication" is one of the most interesting ideas at work in Smith's painting. The tree-like images from the first group emerge with no other form of pictorial distraction; the issue of domestication is contained within the structure of the tree/figure image, while the

fictive element becomes the situation of the painted image and not the subject. Czeslaw Milosz states, "To remember a familiar light through a window or recognize a view anew or the comfort of a chair you have been with for years is to say little yet be assured of your knowledge." One could use the tree as icon, as a natural presence, as a family member or as a symbol of familiarity that Milosz recognizes as a form of knowledge or memory. Smith, however, concocts ambiguity of meaning in order to generate a wealth of association: here lies much of the strength in Smith's work. Certain works exhibited at Art 45 in the fall of 1987 clearly demonstrate this ambiguity, for example *Reservoir-Absence*, *Reservoir II* or *Light/Landfall*. What is missing in these later works, however, is the rawness of treatment that characterized the paintings from the 1984 exhibition of works at Article.

The "Open Landscapes" are the most seductive of all the works to this date. They break into the tradition of landscape with a lush use of colour and a charged sense of light. These paintings, *Enuma*, *Canal*, *Syzygy II*, emerge from the enjoyment of looking. This is no easy task when you realize the number of convention that are assimilated. The paintings cry of passions dulled by edges and formal preoccupations. Although Smith's works can be viewed as essentially abstract, we are aware, in these paintings, of the emotional and physical manipulations that constitute the process by which Smith assembles each work's 'image'. This is most apparent when the confrontational presence of the 'image' evokes a poetic discourse similar to the iconographic frontality of certain paintings by Manet (i.e. *Femme au Perroquet*). We accept the situational aspect of these works as natural, almost comforting; they establish a strong sense of place.

The third group, the "Charismatic Paintings" are the most referential of all the works. These paintings yell the loudest and at the same time they doubt their own pitch. All these works since 1984 disclose the gesture as selfconscious; the breaking of the support edge and the use of collage becomes hesitant. This may be due to the lack of frequency of these works coupled with the fact that each of these relief works takes months and sometimes years to realize. These paintings mark a departure and challenge to the other paintings which seem to come more naturally to Smith. In these collage/relief works there is no consistency of idea other than the use of materials, yet the latest of these works, *Constellation*, shows a great power and a new direction.



Michael Smith, *Learning by water*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas; 122 x 122 cm. Photo: Pierre Charrier