

EAG Exhibition

Mitch Smith

New Paintings

January 11 - February 23

by Russell Bingham

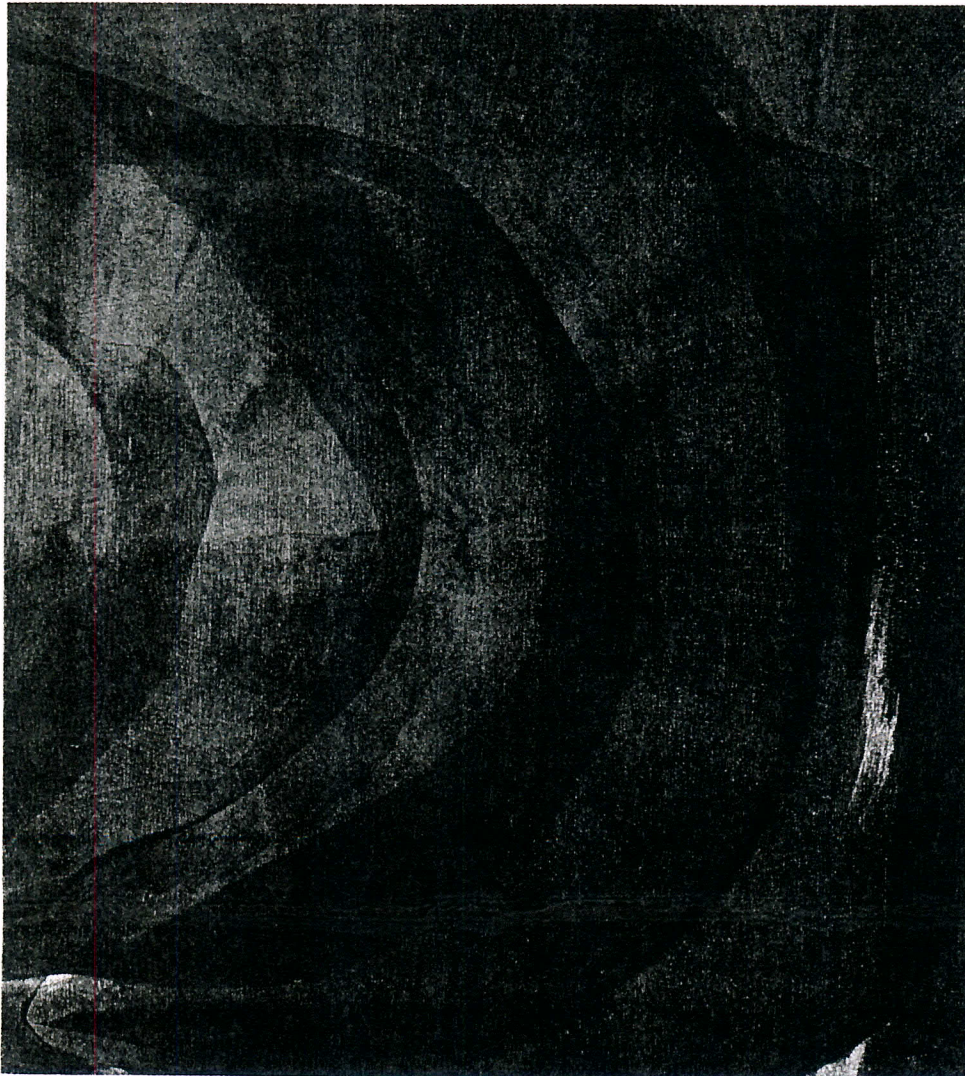
Mitch Smith makes more out of less. Going against the tide (which in contemporary painting is heavy texture and loose, painterly paint application), Smith puts his paint on thinly. He spreads it with a flat-edged tool — a window-washer's squeegee, or sometimes just a piece of stiff cardboard — scraping it in broad sweeps that overlay like layers of

tissue paper. The pictures are pared down and simple and they have a kind of cool restraint that's a little surprising from an artist so young (at 26, Mitch Smith is just three years out of art school). Restraint and youth don't usually go together. And in Smith's case, restraint doesn't mean caution or timidity either. Anything but. Mitch Smith's paintings are expressive in a way that's genuinely original, and they have a special kind

of audacity too.

Smith is one of a group of several fine young painters who have recently graduated from the University of Alberta Department of Art and Design. Like the others, Smith has profited from the existence in Edmonton of a closely knit community of abstract painters. It's a supportive community, and a rigorously critical one too. Smith has made the most of it. Even as an art student he was making studio visits, and he's always been eager to look at work of other artists in order to make his own better.

He was impressed by the John Griefen exhibition that The EAG mounted in 1984, and it's easy to see why. Their approach is similar in a lot of ways. Both Smith and Griefen tend to use subtle non-colours, although this isn't a hard and fast rule with either artist. And they both incline toward monochromatic colour layouts in which subtle contrasts of dark and light create the picture design. But there's generally something more *deliberate* about the way Smith organizes his pictures. He repeats designs — usually uncomplicated formats composed, for example, of flattened-out loops, or rows of radiating, irregular arcs — and he tends to relate them in a more direct way to the picture rectangles than Griefen does. They often seem more like distinct images. In a way Smith's pictures resemble Morris Louis's large veils in which the looming, simple shape of the veil imparts a kind of monumentality to the painting. Like Louis, Smith is inclined to lay out his pictures in a simple way that draws a special kind of expression out of a relatively uncomplicated design. This type of picture is unusual these days. A lot of artists use simple, repeatable picture designs, but usually they pick a format because it suits their way of putting on paint. In a way this is true of Smith too, but in his paintings, the design itself, almost like an image, takes on some of the expressive load. *Narrowing* is an extremely tall picture, and it has that simple unified kind



Mitch Smith, *untitled*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 143.5 x 133 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Mitch Smith — New Paintings



Mitch Smith, *Emma and Meema*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 142.5 x 221 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

of layout that I've been talking about. Like a gauzy dirigible standing on end, the picture seems to swell out from the middle, but the long rectangular shape confines it. The colour, an anonymous cool grey, doesn't call much attention to itself at first, but somehow, after a while it starts to assert itself. With its flat, straightforward paint application and laid-back colour the picture should look inert, dead — but it doesn't. It has a very affecting kind of tension that springs partly from the scale, partly from the way the long rectangular shape seems to pull the painted configuration out to the edges and hold it tight as a drum.

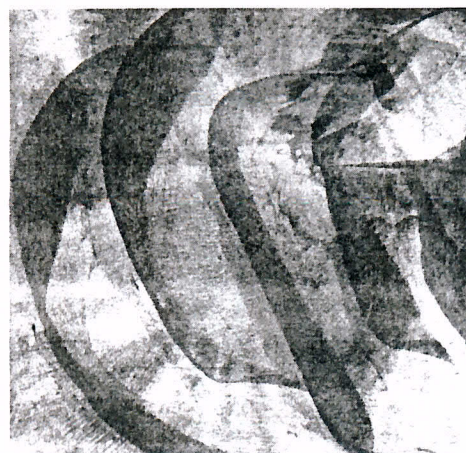
This kind of tension seems to be an important part of Smith's art. The way he scapes the paint across the surface gives his pictures a taut quality. When he paints more opaquely, they lose this tension, start to look soft, and the colours begin to look lifeless. This doesn't happen when he keeps the paint application thin. It's partly to do with the way the light tone of the canvas illuminates the colour of the

paint from underneath when the paint is put on like a transparent tissue. The transparency affects the colour, it enlivens it, but the "taut" quality really comes from the actual paint application — from the way the squeegee seems to have stretched the paint across the picture, emphasizing the weave of the canvas as it scraped over the hard surface.

In *Emma and Meema*, the paint is swept in a broad gesture back and forth across the canvas. The painted configuration seems to fold over itself in the centre, and there's a curious sensation of billowing fullness contradicted by the very apparent flat paint application. This is a very frank painting — everything seems to be laid out in order to be seen easily. Even the placement inside the rectangle couldn't appear more straightforward. It's deceiving in its simplicity, and it's one of Smith's best paintings.

At a relatively young age, Mitch Smith has already produced a pretty solid body of work. It illustrates a very distinct and personal conception, and it's difficult to

see where he will take his pictures from here. His pictures are so pared down, it's hard to imagine them leading to anything else. But so far, Smith has shown a lot of good sense, especially about what to keep and what to discard in his work. Chances are this good sense will carry him a long way. □



Mitch Smith, *untitled*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 123.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.