

Mitchel Smith: *Faktura*

I first met Mitchel Smith in 1982, shortly after he had graduated from the fine arts program at the University of Alberta. He was making abstract paintings which were quite good at that early stage, but what I remember most from that meeting was being impressed by his seriousness, his awareness and appreciation of the Modernist tradition and his determination to find a place for his art within that tradition. At the time, I was a curator at the Edmonton Art Gallery, and a few years later I had the opportunity to organize an exhibition of Smith's work. The show featured a group of largish paintings in which mostly dark shades of paint had been thinly scraped over raw canvas grounds. The drawing comprised simple, looping sweeps of paint, pulled over the whole surface, that brought to mind the all-over paintings of Jules Olitski and John Griefen, but also had a bit of the sombre evocativeness of some of Morris Louis' darker veil paintings. They were direct and uncomplicated, but also ambitious, and they suggested that Smith likely had much to offer.

One thing to note is that, for an artist beginning to show his art in the mid-eighties, choosing to make abstract painting was not really the best way to launch a career. Art criticism in the second half of the 20th Century had become solidly dominated by discussion of ideas and issues, and there was little place for that kind of cultural analysis when it came to painting that resided within the pure tradition of Modernist abstraction. What is remarkable, looking back from a quarter century later, is how single-mindedly Smith has kept faith with his commitment to that Modernist tradition – and also how determined he has been to do so without adding accretions or twists to his art that would stamp it as “original” in that bad way that characterizes the work of so many artists hoping to draw attention to their art as something different and new. Of course, Smith has tweaked things from time to time, small changes that might open the way to fuller expression, but for the most part his art has focused on the same strategies and obsessions, relying on empirical experimentation – plain old trial and error – to bring things to fruition. The title that he has chosen for this show, *Faktura*, pretty well expresses this: painting that is about surface, nuanced – usually close-valued – colour, and the deft manipulation of the physical materials of paint.

Such “close-to-the essence” painting is difficult to write about. You can comment on the colour in Smith's paintings, which is usually subtle, slow to register and resonate, or the drawing, which is generally expressed in the simple contours of the collaged shapes that he attaches more or less centrally onto his painted grounds. Or you can talk about the scale, for the most part modest and intimate in a

way that enhances and amplifies (much like analytic cubist painting) the quiet, tactility of his surfaces. Or the simple, centred layout, which, combined with the smaller scale, imbues his paintings with a powerful and unexpected presence. This is an itemized list of ingredients and, without talent and a rare kind of visual intelligence – the most important and elusive ingredients – it wouldn't amount to much.

Mitchel Smith's paintings do amount to much and, in the context of everything else that going on in the art world at large, that "much" is something that is quietly impressive. As I've suggested, they don't attract a lot of attention to themselves. But they deserve attention, and they reward it, in the same way that all good painting rewards attention.

Russell Bingham

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