

Intricate beauty surfaces in Smith's artwork

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VISUAL ARTS PREVIEW

Surfaces, by artist Mitchel Smith

Where: Peter Robertson Gallery,
12304 Jasper Ave.
When: Until Sept. 17

The luminous paintings of Mitchel Smith glow with a lonely sort of beauty.

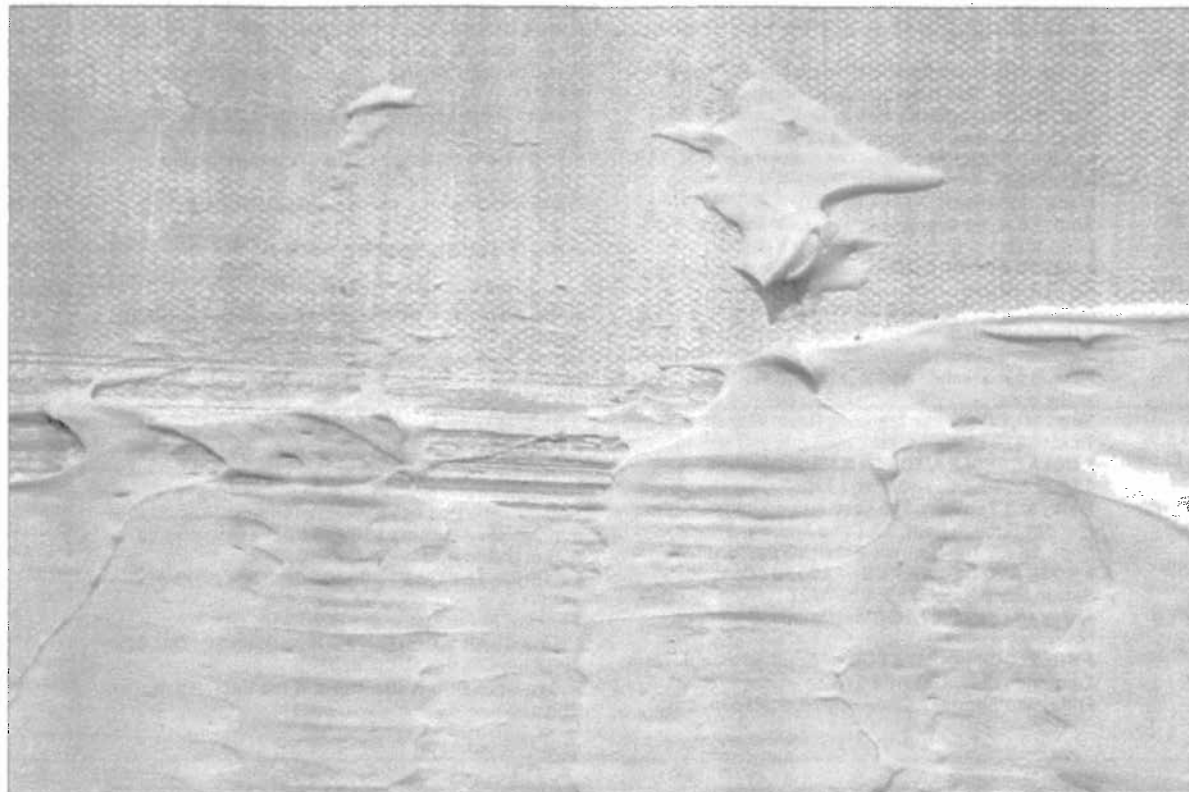
Windows of colour lie crookedly inside one another, smartly coordinating combinations of blues, oranges, pinks and greens. They're colourful, bright and often striking. "The colour, I think it's significant," says the longtime Edmonton painter. "I'm concerned about it, put it that way."

The show is called *Surfaces*, set in the cosy space of Peter Robertson Gallery (12304 Jasper Ave.). Walking around the exhibition, Smith explains its name. "It seems to me that's the most critical element of a successful picture, how the surface reads. That it's alive, that it breathes."

Smith is immediately likable, frank and lacks pretension and preciousness as he talks about his art. "I don't have any program. I just do what I think might be interesting."

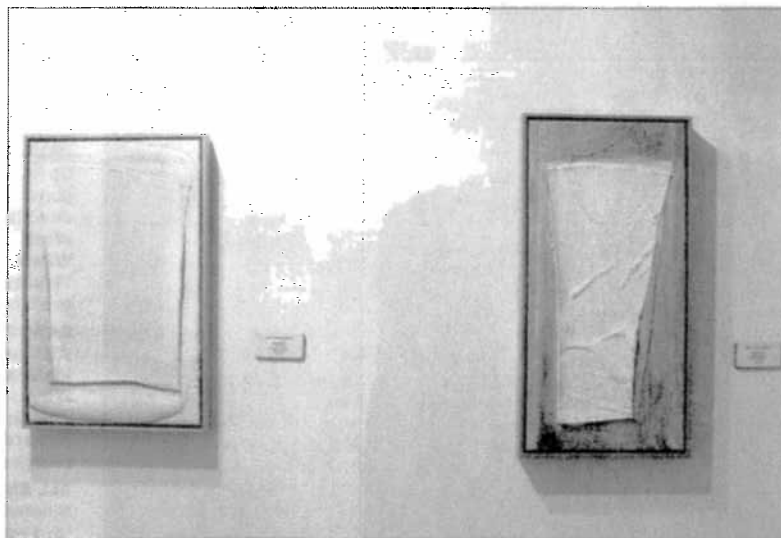
Each frame contains a painted canvas with a large pour of acrylic onto its middle, spread out and scraped with concrete tools. These become shapes full of unplannable intricacy. It's not a case of an artist blueprinting every square millimetre. Instead, the 51-year-old experiments, with certain hopes in mind. When I first noticed the paintings from the sidewalk, they reminded me of the way our glass towers paint the streets with their warm, creeping reflections.

To explain his process, Smith liberates a quote from American essayist Robert Pinsky on poetry. "He was talking about making poems, but I thought it was very applicable to



PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

This work called *Shard* is part of Edmonton artist Mitchel Smith's new show *Surfaces* at Peter Robertson Gallery.



Inspired by elements of cubism, Smith's acrylic abstracts combine collage and chunky paint. The more you move in, the wilder the texture gets.

making paintings."

Aloud, on the second floor with his work around him witnessing silently, the painter reads: "There are no rules. However, principles may be discerned in actual practice: for example, in the way people actually speak, or in the lines poets have written. If a good line contradicts a principle one has formulated, then the principle, by which I mean a kind of working idea, should be discarded

or amended."

Smith explains how this applies to the way he allows his work to essentially make its own decisions. "If you have too particular an idea of how the painting is going to look. ...

"Well, I can't do painting that way. I keep it very general, very intuitive. Each step suggests what the next step's going to be. Sometimes they want to be worked over the surface and sometimes they don't." He



Liverpool-born Smith allows his work to essentially make its own decisions.

smiles. "It's important to pay attention and be sensitive to what's happening in the painting."

Smith brought each one to life on the floor on its back. It's Jackson Pollock's creative perspective, with the artist looking down.

Over the decades, he's learned how to work into a painting that hasn't been moving him. "But occasion-

ally," he laughs again, "they have to be put down."

Within his art, Smith also uses collage. Canvas—sometimes those earlier artworks that didn't feel right—is buried under the background and foreground layers of paint.

"I try to be an economical painter," he says.

With names like *Roma* and *Cliff*, the works seem made to be observed from far away, maybe across a large room with a reflective floor.

But it's up close, on the edges of the dried-up dollops, that the delicious chunkiness leaps out. Along the smooth surface, little air bubbles have popped and hardened in Smith's colourful dough. The more you move in, the wilder the texture gets. Like the secret stories of an old sidewalk seen up close, the frozen movement of the thick paint pays off when inspected.

For example, *Shard*, a pink and orange horizontal, contains a couple of random and accidental animal profiles looking to the right. It's a beautiful painting.

A University of Alberta arts graduate, Liverpool-born Smith talks about his older work, which was more stern, less vibrant.

Twenty-five years ago, fresh out of school, he ended up with a solo exhibition at what we once called the Edmonton Art Gallery. "I just thought that was the way it worked," he chuckles. His style evolved slowly over the years.

Though impressive, his older work is muddier, more worked and overwhelmingly large. These feel freer. "They were grey and tonal. They're about scale and they're sort of about mark-making, about an image, actually.

"These ones are still about all that, but back then I couldn't have done them with brighter, high-key colour. I'm less interested in tonal pictures these days."

The couple of dozen new works range from what Smith notes is an easel scale to big enough to hide behind. He likes what he's been coming up with, if not the actual process.

"It isn't hard, but it's not joyful, either," he laughs. "It's obsessive."

"Don't get me wrong, there's a satisfaction in having them finished. Once they're done, I'm already thinking of the next paintings."

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