

Heir to modernist Newman does the old man proud

Abstract painter baffled by outcry over piece of art



Elizabeth
Beauchamp

Visual Arts

"A true understanding of the Theory of Relativity is well out of my realm, but I don't look at $E=MC$ squared and say its stupid."

That's the personal theory of local abstract painter, Mitch Smith, who continues with his own punch line, "I don't make up an equation like $P=CR$ squared, and say that's just as good."

Silly? For sure, but no more than a travel agent or cartoonist

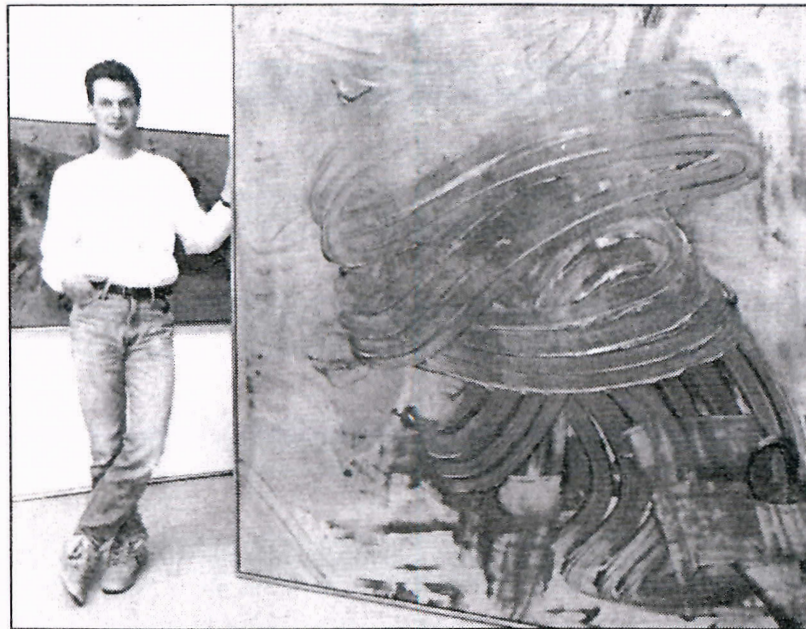
knocking off fake Barnett Newmans in a few hours.

The language of science can surely be as baffling as that of art. But for some reason, no one mocks the great scientists with quite the same spirit as is currently being using to ridicule the work of a great modernist painter.

While previewing Smith's latest canvases, set to go on display at the Gallery on Whyte May 4 through 17, the conversation just naturally turns to Canada's most famous painting, Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire*.

That hot topic is specifically *propos* in connection with Smith's work because, artistically speaking, he could be considered an heir — a great grandson of sorts — to Newman's modernist legacy.

And he does the old man proud. Smith's work has a visceral power. With great economy of means, he ranges from gentle and spare subtleties to boldly dramatic vari-



Brian Gavriloff The Journal

Local abstract painter Mitch Smith with Blake's Knee Grip

ations on a theme. At 30, he has gained an assured control of his medium, and paints with a mature vision.

The whole Newman "scandal" is

especially relevant, too, because Edmonton's long been considered a formalist town on the art scene, and Smith is a member in good standing of that set. While there's

change in the air, at this point, the currents are still shifting, and no other style or school has moved in to fill the void. Of course, that just adds to the excitement for us art voyeurs.

The local formalist painters are especially prickly about the popular denunciation of Newman, and one supposes by extension, of all modernism, because in the past they've committed the sin of hubris. They've even, on occasion, acted more like an exclusive, high school clique than a group of mature artists. And it would be an understatement to say that they've made a few enemies along the way.

So what about the charge that anyone can do it? Smith, good naturedly, explains that at least for him, formalist art is the antithesis of the simple exercise of rolling paint onto a canvas.

"It's about experience, emotion and humanness. Like music or poetry, it should be evocative and stimulate feelings. My goal is to be 100-per-cent intuitive when I paint, but that's informed by intellect and a knowledge of technique."

As far as the criticism that our tax money shouldn't be frittered

away on American art, but should instead be invested in, say, Western Canadian paintings, Smith is unequivocal in his reply. "I'm completely opposed to the National Gallery buying Canadian over quality."

Smith also asserts that modernism or formalist painting isn't a style, but a "belief that one can make qualitative decisions about art."

Given that, one more voice heaped on the fire is fair game. Especially, since there's a common suspicion that those doing the loudest quacking have only viewed the piece in reproduction.

However, it's a painting I remember very well from the one time I did see it in the flesh. In fact, it literally took my breath away when I turned a corner and came on it unexpectedly — not a common gallery experience.

Maybe its self-confidence does border on arrogance, but it's an unforgettable painting. And keeping in mind the explosive nature of the art market, where Van Gogh's *Irises* fetched \$53.9 million, *Voice of Fire* at \$1.8 million sounds like a steal.