

Connor Buchanan interviews Mitchel Smith

I first met Mitchel Smith last year while working as the Gallery Services Coordinator at Harcourt House. I think my first impression is one shared by most who have met Mitch – he's a inquisitive, straight shooter who speaks his mind and with a quick witted delivery that will make you smirk or straight up laugh. For this interview I met Mitch at his studio downtown Edmonton. Always the gentleman, he took my jacket and offered me a comfy paint-laden chair. He then walks over to a new work, begins removing its plastic cover and states 'I'm just going to start talking – interrupt me anytime' and we were off! It's not rare, but it's definite refreshing to speak with an artist as candid and unguarded as Mitch. I hope this interview portrays his curious nature and dedication to his practice.

Connor Buchanan: Like so many artists, you have a 'day job' - in fact you have a whole other career parallel to your creative practice. Can you talk a little bit about the balance between both vocations and if/how they bleed into one another?

Mitchel Smith: I think having a regular job has been good for me aside from the money it brings in (which is obviously critical). I like the routine and I think it keeps me grounded, having to deal with problems and people outside the esoteric world of picture making. I've known a few artists who pretend to be self-supporting (their wives actually support them) and I think it's made some of them a bit crazy and indulgent; solipsistic. I used to worry that if I worked full time (I haven't always) it would somehow get in the way of the painting, but I was wrong. John Griefen said to me many years ago (after asking what I did to get money) 'You don't need a lot of time to make a painting'. My only quibble with your question is I only consider the painting a 'vocation'; the other is a job. I don't know why I feel the need to make this distinction; I think because I consider a vocation is the kind of work Freud meant when he said 'love and work' (are what people needed to be happy/content). Of course, this distinction only applies to myself; anything can be a 'vocation'.

CB: You've lived in Edmonton for many years, can you talk a little about what its like to create here - do you find it a supportive/creative environment?

MS: It's not what it was – the serious sort of commitment **across the board** seems to have dropped a bit (I mean there is a less serious effort made in some instances) – but I still find it a fecund place. And I feel I need less input **from other artists** than I did when I was in my twenties and thirties. So yes, I do still find it a supportive and creative environment.

CB: Professionally, what's your goal as an artist?

MS: Hard question to answer. This may sound evasive, or rather, **arrogant**, but I'm trying to compete with the best painting of the last 500 years. I'm hopeful that time will have its usual corrective effect and that the best art will eventually come to the forefront. This may not happen **or** I may not be

good enough, but that's what I'm aiming for. I'm not sure if that's what you meant by a professional goal. A slightly more robust career would be nice as well.

CB: Which people or movements have most strongly influenced your work over the years?

MS: This too seems to change with time, but Peter Hide and Terry Fenton have had big influences on me, particularly Peter. And I think it's been good that Peter is a sculptor instead of a painter because I've been influenced positively as an artist without being influenced stylistically (which really isn't that bad anyway, eventually). The Analytical Cubist period of Picasso and Braque has been influential, as well as (more obviously) the colour field painters. Recently I've been very interested in Clyfford Still. The most remarkable paintings I've ever seen though have been the Velazquez pictures in the Prado. Troublingly wonderful.

CB: We talked about your peers (both artists and critics) people you had been inspired and challenged by in the past, but could you elaborate on who you currently consider your creative mentors.

MS: I might have inadvertently answered this in the previous question but I'll add Jim Walsh, Darby Bannard and John Griefen as peers that have been both inspiring and challenging. And Tony Caro's example has been important to me over the years, as has Jack Bush's though he had died before I became involved in this business. I should also mention that Doug Haynes is a vastly underrated painter and has been critically important to the development of painting in Edmonton.

CB: Name three artists you'd like to be compared to?

MS: Lately I've been thinking I'd like to see a painting of mine next to a good Rothko or a good Barnett Newman. Or a Still. It's not so much a matter of being compared to; it's a matter of qualitative comparison – not a popular notion these days. I'd like to see how some of my recent pictures stack up against these guys. I was at the Met recently and saw a Noland target from the early 60's and it was very good, but one wonders. And the only way I know of to test yourself is to hang a picture of yours next to something you think is really good. I expect this isn't what you meant with your question.

CB: If you had to be described by others in one word, which word would you hope they used and why?

MS: Persistent. Because I think it takes persistence and discipline to make art seriously. I'm not sure what motivates people to make art but I suspect it has to do with that notion of vocation I discussed in an earlier answer. I'll go off on a bit of a tangent: people who have little interest in art (often it's people who I work with in my job) are intrigued when they find out that you're an artist but have really no conception of what being an artist means (nor should they by the way; I'm not being critical of them). It's curious to me that they invariably equate making paintings with having a hobby – like golfing or bird watching or something. I suppose it shouldn't be curious, as painting is a hobby to many people. That it isn't with me; that it's consuming and necessary and kind of obsessive is hard to explain to people. They just think you're a jerk or delusional or both, so I tend not to talk about it.

CB: The majority of works included in this show are much larger than that of your last exhibition, can you talk a little about the decision to move to a larger scale?

MS: Your previous pictures suggest things you can do in future pictures. In this case the pictures in the show I had last year (at Common Sense) suggested to me that a larger scale might be something to try.

CB: It's also apparent that you've shifted away from the soft pastel pallet in exchange for bright in this body of work. Can you talk a little bit about the inspiration behind this shift to this high-chroma colour choice.

MS: Similarly to my last answer, after the Common Sense show (which was more muted in hue) I felt I wanted to try some deeply chromatic pictures, hence this show's title. Also, there's an Andy French sculpture in front of the Shaw Conference Centre that has a green finish that I drive by often on the way to the studio and one day I decided that I wanted to make something with that sort of greenness. So I tried to.

CB: What do you like about this work?

MS: Well, I like the larger size of some of the pictures. It's been a few years since I've painted pictures this size so I think that stretched me a bit.

CB: What do you dislike about this work?

MS: I'll tell you in a year or so. Hopefully nothing.

CB: What part of creating work of this scale and colour intensity do you most enjoy?

MS: I enjoy painting pictures generally, though it's a strangely particular sort of 'enjoy'. It's a kind of focus on a task that, at the time, leaves mostly everything else in one's life irrelevant. I suppose that's called being in the moment. As to these pictures specifically, I do like the fluttered spreads of deep colour. Like heavy sheets of coloured rain on a window. I like the visceralness of the coloured surfaces.

CB: What do you hope your images make people feel?

MS: A strong desire to purchase them. Honestly, I never really think about that. There are five or six people I know whose opinion I'm interested in and I would hope that these people would like the pictures. That they would think them good. I realize this begs the question, but I can't explain what I mean by 'good'. You know it when you see it.

CB: What is your dream project?

MS: Recently I've thought that a large scale commission would be interesting as I think the spreads of colour could get even bigger. I'd like to see how large they can get before they collapse.

CB: What is a talent or skill most people would be surprised to learn you possess?

MS: I'm fun to play golf with. I'm an exceptionally creative curser.

CB: Is there anything that could convince you to stop creating?

MS: Presently I can only see stopping painting if it was forced upon me by illness or some other catastrophe, but life is odd and one never knows what might happen in the future. I get a lot psychologically from making pictures so I don't anticipate stopping soon.