

The Archaeology of Landscape

by Nancy Tousley

Michael Smith's paintings are always about two things: the experience of landscape and the process of painting. In their wedding is a vision that lies beyond representation, one that awakens sensations of landscapes that already have been seen, in life and in art. It's a vision, too, that arouses expectations, or the memory of how being in certain places felt, or, indeed, how it feels as you re-experience them through their echoes in a new environment, or through painting itself. An expatriate Englishman raised in the European landscape and an heir to its traditions, Smith made Canada his home in adulthood. It is no wonder then that the Montreal-based artist looks to the past, present and future when he considers his time-honoured subject. He works from memory—of places, paintings and



drags of the brush, knife-scrapes, drifts and matted patches of thick pigments, skins of paint-pulled-over-paint that tear open to reveal the undergrowth—points to development over time, to an archaeological topography. Simultaneously, it gives birth to the image and to the experiential being-there or having-been-there sensations produced by Smith's work. It is the paradox of painting, isn't it, that the elusive, optical aura of an image is as inseparable from

Michael Smith,
Landscape, Untitled #3,
2000, oil on canvas,
14 x 18". Courtesy
Trépanier Baer Gallery,
Calgary.

the materiality of the painter's means as is the seeing of it.

Smith's show of recent work at the Calgary gallery Trépanier Baer, all done in 2000, put these issues in the spotlight and demonstrated how far into abstraction Smith can venture and still bring back a landscape. At one end of the spectrum was *Broken Ground: Snake-Bank (After Poussin)*, a large painting in which Smith revisits Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* of 1648 and rephrases the 17th-century French painter's work in a contemporary idiom. He retains only the structure of the classical composition—sans figures and architecture. Poussin designed his painting to draw the eye onto a zig-zag path, back and back into space, to a far-away mountain at the centre of the picture. Smith does not allow the eye to travel into illusionistic deep space. He stops it on the surface and engages it with the rough field of paint. Smith's more subdued colour and brooding atmosphere also are different from Poussin's: turbulent, blurred and melancholic instead of serene, crystalline and idyllic. In the Poussin, it's the figures who communicate their terror or apprehension to each other and to the viewer, whereas unease permeates Smith's *mise en scène*. It's as if the memory of that fateful incident has been woven into the heavily textured fabric of Smith's landscape. But the painting also recalls Cézanne and, for that matter, any other landscape painter who has ever made a painting of a mountain framed by trees. The elegiac tone might be for the Arcadian view of landscape itself, for the "broken" ground.

The 19th-century grand tradition of landscape painting, which had roots in Poussin and Claude Lorraine, began with the era of industrialization and romanticized nature even as it was being radically altered by technology and colonialism. For Smith, like many other contemporary artists who choose to paint landscape today, the discrepancies between the ideal and the real now can't be ignored. The painting "after Poussin" is a touchstone of Smith's position. He addresses the experience of landscape as it is affected by landscape painting, a cultural construction with a history, pictorial conventions and symbolic codes, and by the precarious state of the beleaguered natural world. It's a dialectical experience that is never resolved as the landscape slides in and out of focus with changes of viewing distance.

"When I look at Poussin," Smith says, "I'm looking at an architecture of a landscape. It's obviously a fiction. What I wanted to do in this painting was to look at that architecture ... and see if I can reinvestigate it as someone who has experienced a dislocation from European landscape and is exploring, either through looking or literally walking through a landscape here in Canada. I want to see what kind of layering of association might occur and how I can ... realign myself and how I look at a landscape that has become quite distanced, by a painter like Poussin."

At the other end of the spectrum are "Leaving #1-#4," a series of small paintings based on photographs taken of sea battles during the Second World War, and the small, all but abstract "Water Series," from

which six paintings were shown. The filmic images of "Leaving" read like progressive stages of an explosion on a horizon seen across a heavy sea. These paintings contradict the flatness of a photographic source with an impasto that mimics heaving waves. The influence of photography is also felt in the surface of *Madere: Broken*, another of the large works, but in an entirely different way. *Madere: Broken* is a tour de force of paint handling. Like a minutely detailed photograph, its surface offers far more overall physical/visual incident than the eye can take in at once. At every viewing the picture yields something new; its elusive blood-red imagery becomes even more slippery.

The agitated surfaces of Smith's most effective work teeter on the edge of image invisibility in a dialectics of uncertainty. Is it this? Or is it that? In the "Water Series," he evokes a wet, green place, and, with barely held-together compositions of variously coloured horizontal and vertical marks, suggests mossy banks, vegetation, transparent tilted planes and reflections. The surfaces seem just a step away from chaos. Yet, chaos or its threat are avoided by the mind that seeks the image and finds it in the afterimages of other sights. Smith proves both our human yearning for a connection to nature and our complicity in clinging to the landscape ideal. ■

"Michael Smith: Recent Work" was at Trépanier Baer, Calgary, from January 13 to February 10, 2001.

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