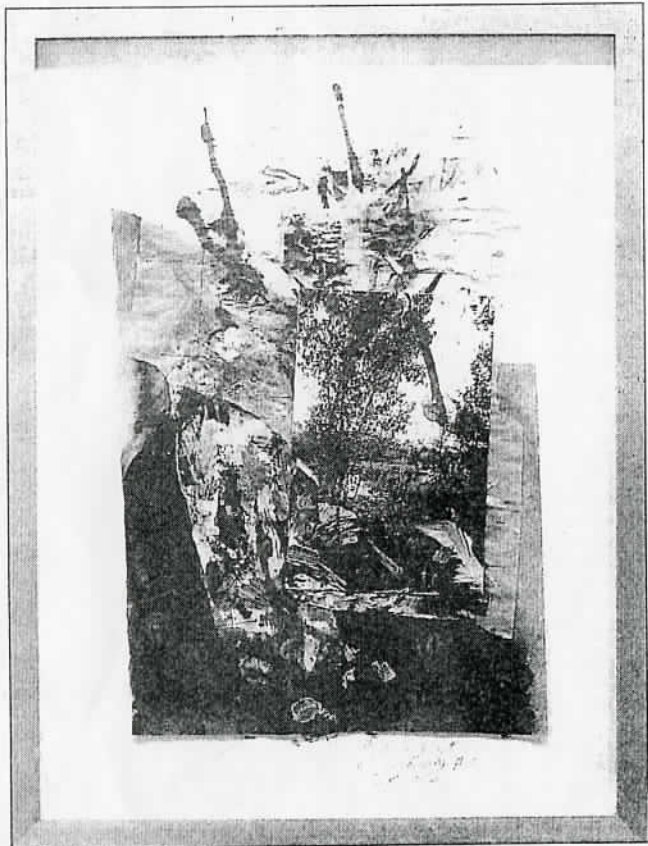


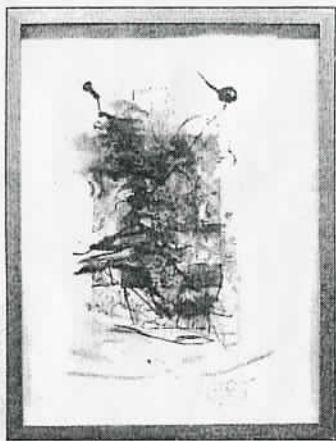
HOBBEMA'S LIGHT, NEW PAINTINGS BY MICHAEL SMITH, ON VIEW AT TREPANIER BAER THROUGH FEB. 15.

Michael Smith tests the limits of light



Michael Smith's Hobbema's Light with Constellation #4 2002, on display at the Trepanier Baer Gallery.

'I'm trying to get my eyeballs detached from what we're taught'



Hobbema's Light with Constellation #2 2002.



Hobbema's Light Illumination 2002, an acrylic on canvas.

NANCY TOUSLEY
CALGARY HERALD

Most landscape artists give you a road into the painting. Michael Smith is trying to take that road out.

It's one of the many picture-making devices that traditional landscape artists use to give the illusion of deep space.

That's not what interests this well-known Montreal painter. Nor is he interested in convincing us that what we're looking at in his paintings is a picture of a place that actually exists.

Smith's landscapes are painted from memory — memories of the experience of places, paintings by other artists, photographs (his own and others') and films.

All are woven into a single, dense fabric out of which an image emerges.

In his fifth exhibition at Trepanier Baer Gallery, that image is the single upright tree. Just by choosing it, he recalls every other image of a single tree a viewer might bring to mind.

Smith runs through some of the possible associations: the icon of Canadian art, the tree of life, the act of making a painting, struggle, defiance, the body, his own physical self and, finally and most wryly, "the famous English gallows, that great piece of village entertainment."

Born in England in 1951, Smith grew up in Derby, an industrial town in the Midlands, and studied painting at the Falmouth College of Art amid the palm trees on Britain's Atlantic coast.

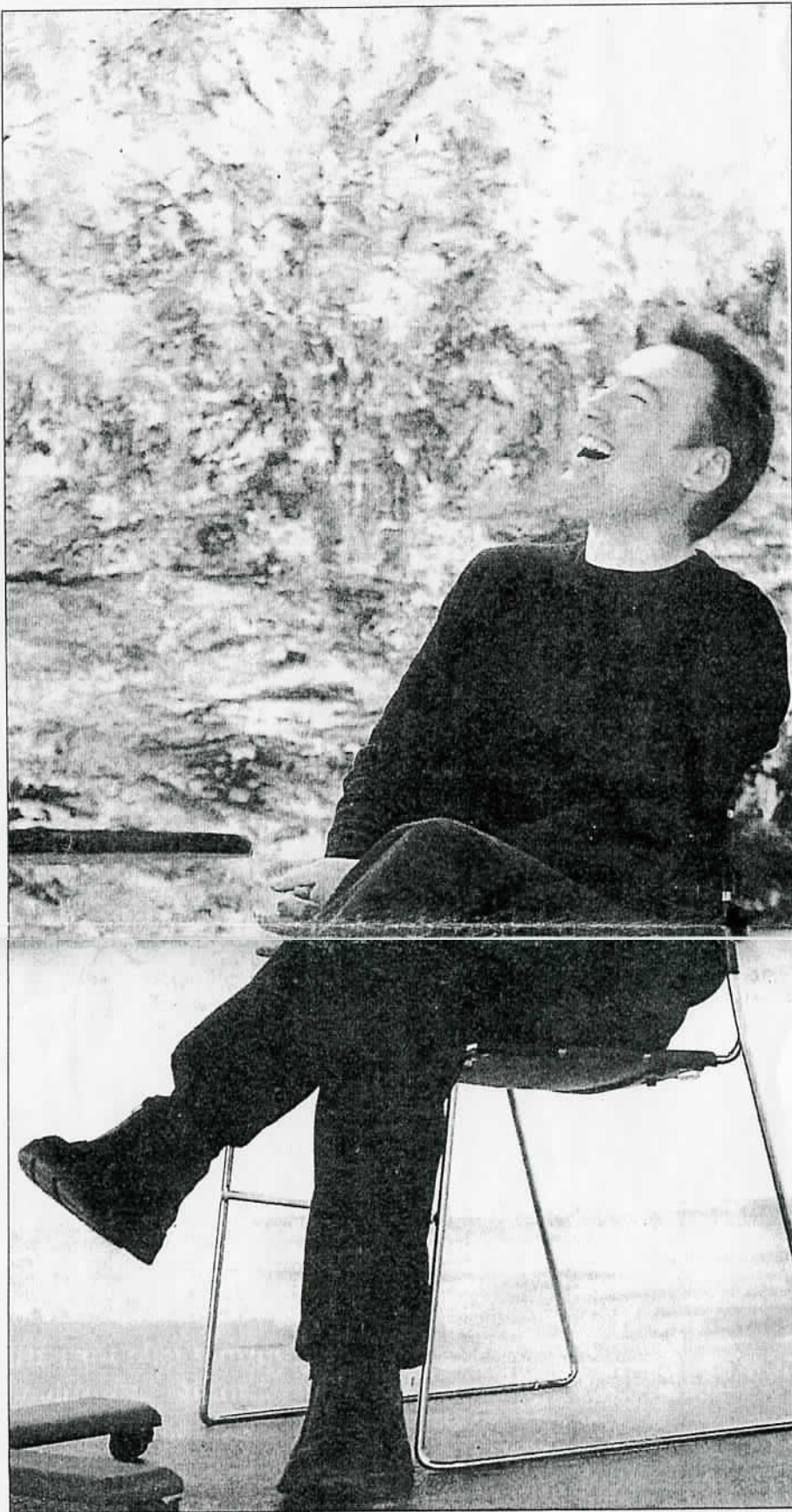
He named the new series Hobbema's Light for the 17th-century Dutch landscape painter. Smith admires him especially for the peculiar light that seems to emanate from the ground up in his paintings.

The five paintings of the same tree that comprise the show, along with four small watercolours, imagine it in different atmospheres and illuminations.

Two of the watercolours contain Smith's snapshot of the tree. His notes on the series — he writes intensely and is a published poet — contain the apt phrase "liquid earth in the after light."

Indeed, as your eyes, engaged by the surface, travel restlessly over a painting, the paint seems to become liquid again. An image appears to move. One tree seems almost to tremble in a slight breeze. Another looms slowly out of the dusk or rain. Another appears ready to fly apart.

Smith holds the eye on the paint itself. It is turbulent and heavily textured, built up in many layers over a long time. His paint surface is a deep, choppy sea of daubs, dashes, swipes and flecks of broken colour. The trees, or mountains, oceans, streams and



Greg Fulmer, Calgary Herald

Montreal artist Michael Smith named his latest series of paintings, on display at the Trepanier Baer Gallery, Hobbema's Light for the 17th-century Dutch landscape painter.

fields, that emerge are not drawn and rendered as illusionistic images. They seem to coalesce out of the lights and darks in the uneasy fabric of agitated gestures and marks.

Smith occasionally encounters the reaction that his paintings are violent. When he was in graduate school, he quips, some people thought: "Here's a very troubled individual."

In fact, some of his images do seem as if they have just exploded. They always ride the line between representing something and suddenly becoming abstract. They are at their most readable from several feet away.

Smith is an artist who is interested in how we see the world, in our perceptual experience. According to neuroscientists, perception is always a mixture, with no clear boundary in between, of what comes to us through the senses and how we interpret it. The situation is compounded for an artist who was trained classically in the landscape traditions of European painting.

"We see what we're taught," Smith says. "I'm trying to get my eyeballs detached from what we're taught."

As an art student, he struggled to observe the landscape with an objective eye. The longer he tried, the more he began to understand that landscape is not na-

ture. Landscape is a genre — all artifice — a construction based on centuries of artistic convention. What's more, it comes loaded with cultural and political meanings that are not immediately apparent.

As if to acknowledge this, Smith also paints from historical memory. The turbulence of his surfaces and his brooding colours can point to wars, disasters and events that cause wrenching change. Many of his paintings exude a melancholy that is the knowing opposite of the sunnier climes of the ideal landscape. And all of them meld his memories of experiences in England with his life in Canada since he immigrated in 1978.

"I'm straddled between two places," Smith says, "but there is always this well of something that never runs dry."

At the age of 12 or 13, he was taking the train into London to visit museums and art galleries. He grew up with Hogarth, Constable, Turner, the Dutch landscape painters, Canaletto, Soutine and Lucian Freud. And he took his training, complete with free art materials, at a time when the government supported education.

By the time Smith was 27, and starting graduate school at Concordia University in Montreal, painting had been deemed politically incorrect by the leading

edge of the art world and was declared DOA.

Teachers who thought Smith bright asked him: "What do you want to be a painter for?"

The result was that he had to think hard about what he was doing. It encouraged him to approach painting conceptually.

One outcome is that Smith now thinks as much about photography as he does about painting.

"Photography is something I spar with," he says, "and am continually thinking about."

It is much more than an aide-memoire. He borrows from the photographic surface and from photographic space. One example is the way the foreground of the painting Illumination, in the Hobbema's Light series, just seems to drop away.

Most often, Smith doesn't direct attention to his photographic references, but there are the two watercolours with collaged snapshots in Hobbema's Light. "These paintings stem from photographs I've taken myself," Smith says.

"I'm interested in the photograph because it has killed something. I'm looking for a portal to go in and open it back up. I think of the frozen moment as something that's very powerful. I go through acceptance and refusal of the photograph. So here I've made it explicit. Here's the bloody photograph."