

Michael Smith: Wrestling Vision

McClure Gallery at the Visual Arts Centre

6 – 28 JANUARY

Michael Smith's exquisite, large-scale 'landscape' paintings, recently on show at the McClure Gallery, count amongst the finest works of his long career and demonstrate once again the phenomenal staying-power of his abstracted figuration.

The exhibition featured three paintings shown here for the first time: *The Burial*, *Cradle of Words* and *Constellation Breaking* (all 2005). These were complemented by a selection of small associated collages incorporating digital images and other mixed media. Smith's paintings occupy an arresting middle ground between representation and abstraction. However, as any longstanding viewer of his work can attest, his work is more abstract than representational, and most successful when the ground plane of representation is held taut just under the threshold of expression. Read initially as consum-

mately painterly and abstract fields, the figurative elements therein slowly emerge from the backdrop and stake a real claim upon the imagination of the viewer.

The Burial, inspired by the photographs of nineteenth-century Civil War photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, is at once ossuary and alembic. Here, the landscape is visualized as a veritable agent of alchemical transformation. As we stand upon the threshold of this immense painting, with its ground in a state of seemingly perennial flux, we are at once dwarfed by it and held effortlessly in its sway. It is not long before we recognize the corpses that populate the lower left quadrant of the painting plane. We then identify this densely forested landscape as nothing less than an unsettling bone yard opening up at our feet. The recognition is at once harrowing

and haunting – and induces a real frisson. Smith drew upon images such as O' Sullivan's riveting 1863 photograph, *A Harvest of Death*, which documented the killing fields of Gettysburg. The host of unburied dead strewn across the battlefield is now sequestered to similarly moving effect in Smith's painting.

Cradle of Words reads as a vast seascape with a horizon line above or below which fragments of written language, deeply embedded in the organic *prima materia* of paint, seem to restlessly emerge. The text comes from the artist's own diaries and is 'written' in such a way that it melds effortlessly with the abstract field. Floating in, on and under this Sargasso sea of viscous acrylic paint, the artist/poet's words drown at one moment and are resurrected in the next.

The small collages in the exhibition complement the large paintings and leave us with clues as to their intention and meaning. In a work like *Burial Study* (2005) the digital image of an O'Sullivan photograph with its dead bodies is juxtaposed with a celestial map from antiquity.

Smith has said of this work: 'Painting, for me, is a manifestation of a process of wresting an illusion of light into matter, materiality – its mark-making offers traces of time.' In all these paintings, temporality, brushstroke and luminosity are eloquent traces of the artist's subjectivity, and provide the viewer with gripping, endlessly palpable epiphanies.

JDC

