

David Urban

◀◀ ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO

For the last half-dozen years, Toronto artist David Urban has enjoyed a reputation as one of the country's most eloquent and unapologetic artists. He is also, for the record, an indefatigable defender of abstract painting. The combination of attributes is no small feat, especially when one places this accomplishment within the larger aesthetic conditions of the past two decades—which have ranged from indifference to downright hostility to much recent painting practice. If you missed those heady years, the party line for dissing the oil-on-canvas thing went something like this: it was complicit with the market; it was an extension of Western hegemony and phallogocentric ideology; it held fallacious, even dangerous views regarding individual autonomy and innovation (beauty is bad, aesthetics suck, etc.).

Like a bad rash that just wouldn't go away, the critique seemed to stick—and at times multiply around certain painters. Right or wrong, there has been a kind of ontological hangover surrounding much of the modernist discourse (and its favoured child, painting) that has made for a lot of grumpy people. As a result, the art community has tended to privilege the slick dissonances of new media and the cut-and-paste culture of technology over more traditional explorations. But like bell-bottoms or last night's curry, what goes around comes around. In 2003, those critical departures of installation and new media so lauded a few short years ago are looking a little dog-eared. Predictable, marketable and—the sure mark of convention and fashion—repeatable in every art school in the nation, the once radical now doesn't look a whole lot different in style and substance from its painted predecessor. Alas, whether through the strains of discourse or just plain boredom, the ironic meanders of the postmodern mind have led back to a significant rethinking of the act and implications of abstract painting—and to Urban's recent show at the AGO.

The fact that David Urban's exhibition (curated by Ben Portis) is part of the Present Tense series at the Art Gallery of Ontario is itself worthy of note, given that the venerable Toronto institution has been loath to use the terms *painting* and *present* in the same breath for some time. The show is made up of three discrete but similar series from 2002: *Conventions of Abstract Thought*, *The Recognitions* and the kite paintings. They share the same palette of muddy primaries, stark black and white, an emphasis on drawing and the delineation of space, and a direct and unmistakable parlance with voices from the less-travelled backwaters of early 20th-century modernism. In format, size, application of paint and just about everything else, the works have the distinct feel of someone having a complicated argument with their old man. They are respectful and admiring of their sources to a point, but clearly frustrated, full of small cruelties and memories of lost opportunities, and perhaps even a little pity. All of which is to say that they are tough, slightly dissonant paintings, thoroughly indifferent to current taste, and given the considerable risks to one's reputation in launching a completely new body of work at the AGO, very brave.

To spend time with the three bodies of work—to *work* with them in the way one used to look at art—is to confront the somewhat disquieting and not altogether unpleasurable feeling of vertigo. One's equilibrium is sent slightly askew by trying to reconcile a thoroughly new and explorative program and what amounts to a road map of some of the last century's failed experiments. Clearly informed, yet retaining some of the naivety and optimism of their sources, Urban's new paintings suggest a variety of potential paths for further work. They're certainly not pretty, and some of them look downright awkward, but, at the end of the day, he has found a way to move forward in a world of sometimes suffocating cynicism, where stasis is touted as inevitable and wise people know better than to actually commit to something. Best of all, the project feels authentic—full of piss and vinegar, itching for a serious fight with the art gods—but without a whiff of either fashion or condescension. JOHN KISSICK

DAVID URBAN *The Recognitions #3*
(*Red Palette*) 2002 Oil on canvas 61 x 76 cm
COURTESY GALERIE RENÉ BLOUIN

