

Urban's abstracts get figurative

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Anyone familiar with the sinewy abstract works of heavy-hitting Toronto painter David Urban will surely be diverted by this surprising new collection of small paintings making up the 24th exhibition in the Art Gallery of Ontario's continuing series Present Tense — the series the gallery calls its "link to the present."

Organized by the AGO's recently appointed assistant curator of contemporary art, Ben Portis, this crowded, hectic little exhibition is a tumultuous muster of three discrete but related bodies of

work: eight small paintings Urban refers to, a bit portentously, as *Conventions of Abstract Thought*; three works called *Kite* paintings; and a suite of five jostled, febrile, rather sweaty little pictures marshalled under the overall title *The Recognitions* — presumably after the majestic novel by the late William Gaddis. (Urban, who is as literate as he is visually informed, has always had a deft way with titles).

The paintings upon which Urban's stellar reputation currently rests were, first, large, chromatically bright, spatially open paintings in which fields of colour were traversed by ribbons of alternate colour pushing through the painting like highways on a map. These exceedingly popular works were

followed by denser, darker, slow-moving paintings, often in blacks, greys and earth-tones — moody planes of sanguine colour carved there by agonized, stuttering, Cézanne-like strokes. These sweaty, churning brushstrokes are still present in these new paintings. But what is so startling about these new paintings, of course, especially to committed Urban-ites, is that they are more or less figurative — a development hitherto unheard of in the painter's work.

By figurative, I mean that there are recognizable objects in the paintings: a yellow kite in the *Kite* paintings; chunky, faceted coagulations of thick pigment that seem inescapably to be tulip blossoms in the *Conventions of Abstract Thought* works; and, strangest of



Urban's Conventions of Abstract Thought #8: allusions to Cézanne, Picasso and Braque.

all, a whitish shape like a lichee fruit that curator Portis refers to as a "recurring spheroid" which "conflates an eyeball with a skull." Portis even suggests there may be a drum-kit floating around in

there amidst the "cartoonish clumps" making up the slow, heaving approaches to imagery in the paintings. And, of course, supporting all this ruckus are hints of horizon lines, table tops, and a lot of other conventionalized pictorial allusions to and reminiscences of painters Urban has clearly been thinking about over the years: Cézanne, yes, and Picasso and Braque. Léger, perhaps. Jean-Paul Riopelle. Philip Guston, surely.

Urban's palette here is severe: greys, powdery blacks, cold aloof blues, muddy reds, and yellows, whites like dirty snow. Grimy, recalcitrant, desperate, joyously onerous, these new Urbans are very touching in the way they embody the nakedness of their maker's diligent immersion in

painting's history — and in the trajectory of his own development within that history. This results in paintings that fairly quiver and surge with what critic Harold Bloom once termed "the anxiety of influence."

According to curator Portis, however, Urban's pictures are not only laced with anxiety. "There is a spent rage here," Portis writes in the show's catalogue, "rage at looking, rage at the masters, but," he continues, rather obscurely, "the painter consolidates and time heals." I'm not sure what this means. What I do feel is that these new, small, gritty, deeply intelligent paintings fairly leap at your throat with the bounding vitality of their own brilliant earnestness. They seem to me to be sullen, not angry. Sullen and haughty with the creative doubt that must inevitably tincture all meaningful creative struggle.

Until March 30, 317 Dundas St. W., Toronto; 416-977-0414.