



Ken Orr The Journal

Robert Scott's abstract paintings transform gallery into canyon of power

Gentle treasures in dynamic canvasses

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"I'm just trying to make a good painting and I don't even know what that is," muses Robert Scott.

Given the circumstances, this docile reflection is as surprising as it is modest. For moving through the spectacle of Scott's latest solo show is certainly not an experience in doubt or confusion.

Instead, his giant pictures transform the gallery into a canyon of power, taking hostage the available wall space from floor to ceiling along with any viewers who happen to be lurking about.

So it's no coincidence that an assorted clutch of the "manly" virtues are suggested.

Gutsy, potent and dynamic describe just a few of the vibrations that seem to be hurled out along with the paint. Indeed, during the years that Andy Warhol presided over North American art and treated concepts best described as "weird" or "radical" to regular overtime, "tough" remained the local choice for descriptive honors here in abstract city.

Now, in an era largely given over to the new age sensitive guy, some abstract proponents are lately evolving into the Robert Blyes of modernist art. And in the resulting confusion, a plethora of big, sensi-

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"If paintings don't have something to say, they're in trouble. But I try to say it visually," he declares.

For with Scott, the optical effect is not only paramount, it's an all-consuming concern while he's at work on canvas or paper, creating gloriously baroque passages with subtle color transitions.

While the energy yield wrought by such diverse materials as acrylic, copper slag and sand has a singularly visible integrity, there's also no denying that fierce emotions are everywhere in evidence.

This flavor of abstract art, for which Edmonton is nationally known, built its reputation through blazing forth with shapes and colors that take firm control of their surroundings.

But their large scale, inches-thick skin and technicolor blasts are more than signs of confidence. This art style is truly swaggering, often insufferable and usually disrespectful of its beholders.

And yes, there is alternating anger and anguish storming across Scott's built-up surfaces, but it's with the unexpected, gentle treasures that he ultimately delights the viewer.

confusion, a plethora of big, sensitive and dull canvases have surfaced in the most unlikely studios.

That's partly because sensitivity and modernist are almost a contradiction in artistic terms. At least to incorporate both into the same picture frame is almost impossible.

Scott, however, has wisely refused to pull his punches while painting or even when describing his output. Holding steady to his course, he's making even better paintings than ever, and all in an era very different from the bustling, confident New York of the '50s where this type of art was forged.

"I just hope they're strong for whatever reasons. I find they challenge me. It's like a discovery — a visual discovery. And if other people detect other things — fine. But there is no political message or some other thing I want to dwell on."

So it's just another pleasant and surprising contradiction when Scott confesses an appreciation for the greatest Canadian painter of feminine, Victorian sensibilities as he casts about for an example of why he values a strictly visual approach — letting the themes and emotions fall where they may.

"Emily Carr was painting trees, not loneliness. But there's loneliness there. I like that in her. I'm suspicious of people who try to paint lonely pictures."

Contrary to what this comment suggests, however, Scott does believe that a good painting communicates some sort of message.

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In their surprising intimacy, detected close-up, where the vigor of the slightest visual caress is apparent, Scott's canvasses overcome the wearing inevitability of much of today's modernist, abstract painting.

Scott's exhibition runs at the Woltjen/Udell Gallery till March 8.