

The universe according to John Barkley

"Only work which is the product of inner compulsion can have spiritual meaning."

- Walter Gropius

A massive yellow back hoe is grinding its way down a non-descript road, through an untamed landscape, in a nameless country. As it digs a trench into the earth, everything below the surface is revealed in its beautiful, raw state. It looks like a painting by John Barkley.

As a painter, Barkley is fired up by the land, and always has been, whether he is interpreting a forest with an almost figurative eye or abstracting a piece of the earth-which might also contain a reference to the back hoe grinding its way down the road.

As a thinker, Barkley's interests reach into the nether regions of all kinds of concerns-the purity of Piet Mondrian's colours, the imperfect lines in Roland Poulin's drawings, the theories behind the paintings of Jean-Paul Riopelle. Each interest has infused his work in some way, which results in intellectual works that are destined to have the kind of staying power all artists would love to have.

The paintings are about mankind's tendency to impose structure on nature. Nature balks at being tamed, and does its best to bring itself back to the state in which it was meant to be, no matter what we do to it. They are also about our desire to frame the cosmos, by explaining it-but it insists on remaining mysterious. The paintings are about lineage, and Barkley's affection for his late father, who taught him how to paint on sojourns into the country. And although the work is often completely abstract, there is always something there to explore in terms of imagery. And so the paintings are also about creating pictures.

In the process of making art, Barkley allows his subconscious to play director. While in the throes of creation-and between periods of creation-he is thinking and reading; wondering about ideology, trying to determine if painting has to be didactic to have meaning, considering whether we have a right to bring nature into line.

- Melanie Scott