

These doors of reverence are truly eye-opening

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John R. Barkley, Mia Thornhill at Peak

A couple of surprises here. The first is Mia Thornhill and her Urban Rights series of paintings. Thornhill, who lives and works in Newmarket, Ont., is 76 years old. She paints every day, for at least four hours. And what she paints are not, as you might imagine, tasteful, tentative little paintings, modest still-lives, say, or careful, tepid abstractions. No, Thornhill, wades into painting as if her life depended on it.

All of her paintings here – this exhibition is her first – are diptychs, two-part works which, when joined together horizontally, make up panoramic sweeps of hot tumbling colour that sears its way onto Thornhill's turbulent canvases.

Thornhill is not by any means deft. There isn't much in the way of elegant painterly handwriting here, or virtuoso hot licks. And drawing is not, I think, her strong suit.

But for sheer painterly bravado, for paintings that look as if they were painted because the artist had to paint them, Thornhill's wild slappings and scribblings will do quite nicely.

Part of what lifts Thornhill out of the range of the amateur is her painterly generosity, which

sometimes approaches a kind of painterly profligacy. All that red (red pigment is expensive!) All that eyeball-searing blue! And how well she has learned that creamy whites, trowelled onto the canvas like cake icing, inevitably lend a painting an opulent, high-calorie grandeur. All in all, Thornhill's paintings are rough and jostled but, in the long run, always about the joy of the painterly act.

Teamed with Thornhill is the work of Ottawa painter John R. Barkley, whose work I had never seen before. Unlike Thornhill, who simply wants to paint, Barkley, who is young, is a self-styled "painter and theoretician," as he puts it in a gallery statement, and says things about his paintings like how they are about "the interconnected Ecology of Consciousness," a term he maintains refers to "the correlation between personal consciousness and the state of the environment." The same could be said, I should have thought, about any earnest landscape painter – John Constable, for example – but let that go.

Highfalutin language aside, what kind of painter is John R. Barkley? Not a bad one, actually. His large landscape-derived abstractions, smearings and pullings of pigment that leave behind, in their wake, the ephemeral sparkle of watery pools and Earth-coloured thrusts that suggest

raking trees, are handsome and, at their best (as in Void Steps), even majestic. Sometimes, however, as in the cross-hatched Verticals and Horizontals #22, things come unglued and run toward muddiness.

Barkley seems strongest when he is working large and, one suspects, rapidly. His Verticals and Horizontals #18, for example, is a big two-part painting in which a rush of algae-hued paint sluices away from the stern, dense, almost tachiste build-up of coagulated paint running down the left side. The movement is so headlong you can almost feel the whoosh of release as the paint slides away over the rest of the canvas.