

An explosion of colours

Artist John Barkley experiments with a bold, new palette

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The Ottawa Citizen
February 26 2003

Fans of Aylmer artist John Barkley are in for a shock. His last major exhibition in Ottawa was held three years ago at St. Laurent and Hill Gallery in the Byward Market. The show was all but sold out minutes after the vernissage.

Barkley was painting semi-abstract landscapes in those days. He was beginning to be more daring with his colours but was still rooted in browns, greys and ether muted earth tones, often trying to show the negative influences of industrialization on the landscape.

Well, Barkley has a new exhibition opening tomorrow at St. Laurent and Hill, coinciding with a solo show at Peak Gallery in Toronto, his second there in the past year. (This boy is definitely in demand.) The work prepared for the Ottawa show is completely abstract and in the boldest swipes of reds, blues and yellows. There are still some signs of his environmental angst – colours he calls “caterpillar yellow” and “construction red” and various polluted shades creeping from the edges of the canvas like so much heavy machinery and industrial waste. But these references are not obvious to the casual observer unfamiliar with Barkley’s background.

Barkley admits to an influence from such Canadian abstraction icons as Jean-Paul Riopelle and Paul-Emile Borduas. At least one of Barkley’s untitled works resembles Riopelle’s so-called mosaic paintings.

These are the kinds of multilayered, multi-textured works that, from a certain light, take on the appearance of ceramic mosaics or stained glass windows. Barkley, however, has not tried to duplicate the same neat, pretty picture look of a Riopelle mosaic. Instead, his style is more spontaneous and roughhewn.

Riopelle preferred to call himself a landscape artist, rather than an abstractionist, even when the work was totally non-figurative. Likewise, some of Barkley’s abstract work still shows the traces of the landscape artist he was early in his career. But most of the new series is much more about painting for the sake of painting than it is trying to interpret or refashion a landscape.

Barkley is pushing the limits of his painting, to see how daring and adventurous he can be with his self-described “hot colours.” This new emphasis coincides with the death a year ago of his father, a landscape painter. Barkley said his father’s ill health for some years had an

influence on his own psyche and painting, leaving him most comfortable with earthy, sober tones. With his father’s death, Barkley fled into new territory and a brand new palette. He may also find himself with a different batch of fans.

John Barkley’s exhibition opens tomorrow at St. Laurent and Hill Gallery, 333 Cumberland St., and continues until March 12.