

BARKLEY SETS A FURIOUS ABSTRACT PACE

BY PAUL GESSELL

The Ottawa Citizen
July 22 2004

Aylmer artist John Barkley looked tired and stressed. It was a month before his first big solo show in Montreal, three months before a different show in Gatineau and five months before yet another show in Toronto.

He needed a distinct set of works for each exhibition and was painting like a madman. Who wouldn't be tired and stressed?

On top of that, there were complications in Montreal. Customers of Galerie de Bellefeuille in the posh Westmount district seemed to have an insatiable appetite, mainly for Barkley's totally abstract paintings, although some collectors were demanding the semi-abstract landscapes as well. Every time Barkley completed more paintings and sent them to Montreal, supposedly for the show opening today, they were pre-sold by Galerie de Bellefeuille. Customers simply could not wait for the exhibition and did not seem deterred by the fact Barkley's prices

have tripled, quadrupled or more during the past three years.

All the paintings in the catalogue prepared for the Montreal exhibition were sold more than a month before the opening. Therefore, as today's date approached, the gallery kept clamouring for more and more work so paintings would not have to be borrowed back from the purchasers for the exhibition. It was, for Barkley, like trying to fill a bottomless bucket. And there were still the shows at the Maison de la culture de Gatineau and Toronto's Peak Gallery to stock.

Such is the price of popularity (and having an aggressive dealer). Consequently, Barkley was working 12-hour days these past few months at his studio in the Enriched Bread Artists complex on Gladstone Avenue. There was no time for his usual karate, yoga or gym sessions. No time for a pint with the boys at the pub. No time to hunt for a new home with an ensuite studio. No time to plan the trip to New York

Barkley hopes to make soon to launch a new chapter in a career that is definitely hurtling toward the big time.

In the build-up to today's show, Barkley kept several canvases on the go at a time in his studio, applying, trowel-like, layer upon layer of brightly coloured paint; startling red, cobalt blue, muddied yellow (the colour of "power" in Barkley's universe). In between the nooks and crevices of these bold primary colours, the artist fashioned swirls of pale pastels, notably greens and pinks.

Each canvas is as powerful and unforgettable as the cosmos unfurling on the first day of Creation. The abstract paintings (and those are the ones Barkley loves the most these days) echo the mosaic-like works of Canada's most celebrated 20th-century artist, the late Jean-Paul Riopelle, another artist with an obsession for abstracted landscapes. In Barkley's work there are also touches of the

frenetic streaks of Gerhard Richter, the German painter who is frequently described as the New Picasso. Dig a little deeper into Barkley's psyche and role models like Canadian icons Tom Thomson and Paul-Emile Borduas pop up.

At heart, Barkley is like Thomson, a Nature Boy, but a Nature Boy with a masters in religion, a yen for Jung and an often disconcerting intensity. His stare is hard and his smile tight. He speaks derisively of a certain flavour-of-the-month local artist who "composes" his abstract paintings before placing a brush on the canvas. Barkley's come from the unconscious, the brush often leading him he knows not where.

Barkley's primary inspiration, even in his totally abstract works, is the landscape and the constant encroachment of the modern, industrial world. This approach, along with other influences, are examined by Melanie Scott, an Ottawa-based art critic, in an essay

in the catalogue for the Montreal show.

"As a thinker, Barkley's interests reach into the nether regions of all kinds of concerns – the purity of Piet Mondrian colours, the imperfect lines in Roland Poulin's drawings, the theories behind the paintings of Jean-Paul Riopelle," Scott writes. "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."

Barkley's Montreal exhibition continues until Aug. 3. The exhibition at Espace Odyssee at Maison de la culture de Gatineau runs from Sept. 15 to Nov. 28. The exhibition at Peak Gallery will be sometime in November.