

Lelde Muehlenbachs – JOHN KING: NEW PAINTINGS, 1989

Lelde Muehlenbachs is an Edmonton-based artist, writer and a former Curator at The Edmonton Art Gallery (renamed The Art Gallery of Alberta in 2007). Reprinted with permission.

I have always enjoyed looking at the work of John King. His ability for keeping robust, gestural drawing a key element in all his work has resulted in paintings that are spontaneous, interesting and viewer-friendly.

This series of work is one of the most complex he has produced so far, and it manages to amalgamate many of the concerns that had been isolated in other series. Simply put, King's paintings are about figure-ground relationships, and the way a lively foreground configuration creates tension with the background on which it is placed. As is generally true for abstraction, the context is there to allow for freedom and variety of expression. Solutions for novel visual solutions are infinite and keep the artist going.

Like many other abstract painters in Edmonton, King has experimented with different materials to find what best suits his intentions. Much of the search has been to approximate the freshness of working on paper with acrylic on canvas. Hundreds of works on paper and many digressions on canvas preceded and influenced the new paintings. In the past, the colored ground in a picture had been achieved with a roller, which added a feeling of fluidity as well as tooth for the ensuing calligraphic-like marks. Switching to the use of the scraper has now enabled King to concentrate on blocky, staccato rhythms that jostle one another for priority. To underline the directness with which he likes to handle his materials, King exploits the resistance that occurs when the scraper pulls paint across the canvas.

King often begins a ground by using a scraper to draw many similar, small, playful, curvilinear shapes, which appear to fall together like blown leaves. Superimposed on these is a simple, powerful, linear shape usually of a lighter tone than its surroundings. By drawing this shape with a scraper, King enhances its directional force. Tactility is kept anonymous. All this is not as simple as it sounds, because King then works back into the shape and the ground to regulate the pulse of the picture. The abrupt marks that invade the primary shape and the ground it rests on become yet another modifier. The paintings never really relax and King likens his pictures to theater where the lead roles always depend on the supporting ones.

Indeed, the configurations in King's pictures have always seemed animistic, incorporating a compelling personal aspect. His style of drawing is uninhibited with a vengeance. King never skimps on gesture and its rawness is amplified by odd-ball, that is to say, unpredictable colors. Sometimes they are subtle and intentionally deadbeat, at other times bright and zingy. However, they are always plausible in context.

King is a restless artist who continually reconsiders his art in order to go forward. He is taking long, hard looks at painters he admires, both contemporaries and historically important figures such as Robert Motherwell and Jack Bush. He has succeeded not in imitating but in finding solutions at once open-ended and undeniably his own.

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