

Mina Totino
Or Gallery
Vancouver
March 4 to March 16

Some tenets of Abstract Expressionism have turned out to be an influential source of inspiration for a number of painters emerging in Vancouver. The spontaneous gesture, the intense battle between paint and support, the artist as heroic communicator of emotion and inner instincts have once more come to the fore. These elements contribute to a renewed focus on our emotional resources that have progressively been getting left behind culturally in the last twenty years or so

through desensitizing from the mass media, an impersonal late-Modern aesthetic (as seen in architecture for example, and even formulaic personality concepts that repress the emotion and supplant it with predetermined responses).

The strategy here is to be non-strategical. Not that artistic decisions aren't made, the work is scrutinized closely and carefully, however, the act of painting is of the moment, and what results during this process is a crucial factor; the margin between what works and what doesn't is not based on strictly rational means. This approach affirms human inconsistencies, stepping to the side of logic, and unlocking the doors to emotion as a conveyor of heightened passion, sensitivity, and gut-level responses that can otherwise be suppressed with too much premeditation.

Mina Totino's series of acrylics on paper use stumps as the prevailing imagery. Searing reds, oranges, greens, violets and blacks are slashed in aggressive strokes and markings on the paper indicating a splintering violation of the tree's existence in the world, for all that it may be worth, and whether it is from human interference or natural causes is unknown. In spite of this devastation there emerges a certain poetry, for the painting is beautiful, the impact arresting.

photo: Stan Douglas



Mina Totino, installation view of *Stumps* (1984), courtesy: Or Gallery

Representation and abstraction hover in a state of suspension; the paintings can be read either way. The painterly attack is derived from Abstract Expressionism, the recognizable image in its purposefully either/or condition finds reference not only from de Kooning and Guston of the 1950's, but also from more contemporary artists such as Baselitz and Rothenberg. Somewhat different from both latter artists though, whose iconography is meant to negate itself in some way, Totino's images turn to metaphor.

Life goes on. Death is the blackened stump which will travel the drawn out process of decay, and evolve by way of nature's inevitability. There is an existential bent in Totino's acceptance of life and death, she makes no moral or sentimental judgment about cause and effect; it is a universal fate. All the same, she does affirm the living; the energy and passion transferred through the directness and materiality of the brushstrokes breathes life back into the picture. The lower half of the

paintings concentrate on mysteriously complex and abstract forces seething beneath ground level, and as Pollock inferred, it is this "energy made visible" that is a measure of success for many artists.

In spite of complaints about the often empty gestures and egotistical nerve of the artist to presume we might be interested in their emotional outpouring, the right degree of vital energy emanating from the work can be contagious and become a vehicle for the recognition of our own emotional resources. Totino is not really concerned with stumps as such, but more about the human condition.

Keith Wallace

From: Vanguard

May 1985