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David Tycho's beckoning gestures

Vancouver painter's abstract works immerse viewer in an array of influences

By Jennifer Moss, Special To The Sun February 10, 2011



Artist David Tycho with his painting, Vital Gesture No. 10, at Petley Jones Gallery in Vancouver.

Photograph by: Glenn Baglo, PNG, Special To The Sun

As Elvis Costello once said, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture - it's a really stupid thing to want to do."

The same is true of trying to find words to explain Vancouver painter David Tycho's abstract art. Tycho himself once wrote in an artist's statement, "Words and painting have never made good companions."

But seeing as Costello now has a TV talk show about music, and it seems to be working out quite well for him, perhaps it's worth a try to describe the effects of a Tycho painting on the viewer, after all. Experiential, compelling, highlighted with energetic lines that are so thick and textured as to barely qualify as lines . to stand in front of one of his pieces is like taking a bath in the act of creation.

It's a scented bath, mind, with all kinds of fancy stuff dropped in, in the form of artistic influences that range from abstract expressionism, to landscape painting, to Japanese calligraphy.

But the effect of full immersion in a Tycho painting is simple. You either fall for the warmth and immediacy of one of his "vital gestures," or you don't.



Expressionistic abstract art like this can leave some people feeling at sea. When there is no anchor of recognizable subject matter in a painting, it can be difficult to discern how to access it.

Tycho himself has taken years to understand the true depth and difficulty of his chosen art form.

"People think you just slop a bit of paint around and call it art. But other painters who really know what's involved . they're the ones who can recognize when something works or it

doesn't."

Tycho graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1983, having studied under Gordon Smith, who taught him a thing or two about painting.

"I had excellent teachers there," he says. "They were great motivators."

Inspired to continue painting, Tycho moved to Asia for four years, where he fell hard for the restrained sensuousness of a Japanese style of calligraphy known as Shodo. He became fascinated with the Zen monks in Japan, and their habit of painting calligraphic masterpieces on huge expanses of white paper with brushes the size of floor mops.

"They would dip the brush in ink and walk backwards on the paper, it was like a dance. And they would make these calligraphs that were actually illegible to most Japanese."

This was an epiphany of sorts for Tycho, who noticed the way the monks' original subject, the symbol they were painting, became secondary to the actual act of making the calligraphic mark.

Tycho began to see this as an approach to painting that he could get behind. It's an approach with "the goal of creating an image filled with vitality and stated in as few brush strokes as required."

Building on an earlier fascination with abstract expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, Tycho set off down the path that brought him to where he is now.

"The works are ultimately explorations of line, colour, form and gesture, and their ability to elicit emotional responses," he says of this series.

The landscape in many of these paintings, particularly the brooding Vital Gesture No. 10, or the bright Vanier Park, might at first seem to be the "subject" of the works.

And, indeed, if these are paintings "of" anything, it is the land. Tycho is an avid hiker, and has an almost spiritual connection with the wilderness of British Columbia, as well as the austere drylands of the Sierra Nevada.



"I still spend a lot of time in these wild places, but for this show I also looked at the urban area where my studio is, or the beaches near Kitsilano."

However, the landscapes or urban environments are mere starting points for these works. By the time Tycho has worked over his horizon lines with broad, sweeping, and carefully placed calligraphic brush strokes, the land-as-subject idea recedes behind the more elemental aspects of the landscape brought to bear in the painting: the mood, the light, the feeling of a place

are evoked rather than stated. Tycho succeeds in capturing the vitality and strength of the landscape without feeling the need to narrate, and thus diminish it.

"Although natural for many viewers to find subjects in abstract paintings, the works are intended to be viewed more as one would listen to instrumental music, without feeling a need to attach a meaning," Tycho says.

The Zen monks of his youth would probably approve. Like Costello, the Buddhists saw the inherent futility in trying to accurately describe beauty.

A famous Zen parable warns students, "Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon."

Tycho's vital and vibrant paintings avoid pointing at anything and, as such, there is unquestionably a touch of moonlight about them.

AT A GLANCE

David Tycho: The viTal GesTure

Where: Petley Jones Gallery

When: Feb. 17-March 3

info: petleyjones.com

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