

Laurel Smith » The Minimalist (RBC Canadian Painting Competition Ten Years)

by Catherine Crowston, Deputy Director / Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of Alberta

It could be said that Calgary artist Laurel Smith paints contradiction, bringing together seemingly oppositional ideas and diverse perceptual experiences. Her work engages both the idea of painting and the history of its conceptual polemics. Surface and field, image and object, representation and abstraction, reduction and ornamentation, material and immateriality all come together in her practice.

Smith directly references the history of Minimalist painting through a reduction of the work to its fundamental features and through her use of the object as a point of reference for painting. Her work, like that of her Minimalist predecessors, inhabits a space that is not easily classifiable as either painting or sculpture. It deals, rather, with the materiality of painting and the conceptual and physical boundaries that have traditionally separated it from sculpture.

The edges, corners and backs of Smith's works are as integral to their perception as the front. She relies on the perceptual effects created by three-dimensionality; cast shadow, reflected light and spatial depth. In her 2002 series *Faceted*, for example, she applied coloured paint to the back surface of the work only – the front face revealed a plane of flat white. The irregularly-shaped canvases stand out from the wall and our experience of their colour is created by the reflection of light against the wall on which the paintings hang. There is an astonishing sense of emanation from these works, of a space behind the surfaces that reinforces their dimensionality and physical presence.

While colour has been an important factor in Smith's work, her paintings are not about specific colours, but about how colour emphasizes structure, how it reveals edges, depth, materiality and the work's presence in 3-dimensional space. As in Minimalist architecture, we see the connection between planes, the effect of light on surfaces and the delineation of shape, both positive and negative.

References to Minimalism can also be seen in Smith's use of industrial materials, specifically in her incorporation of plexiglass and aluminum as supporting structures. At the same time, however, she asserts the hand-made quality of her surfaces. Laboriously constructed through the application of layer upon layer of coloured glaze, these surfaces are marked with smudges, smears and drips. On close examination they are fields that emphasize mark-making, layering and finishing. In the *Kerf* series of 2006 thin layers of coloured glaze were applied to sheets of clear plexiglass in varying degrees of transparency and opacity. In some cases, bare areas of plexiglass seem to sneak out from beneath the paint, extending the support of the work beyond the painted surface. Once again, our perception of these works is based on a subtle recognition of the spatial effect of coloured reflections that bounce off white walls or are seen through the transparent plexiglass edges.

In more recent years, Smith has created works that blend the excessive ornamentation of Rococo with the reductive simplicity of Minimalism, referencing two historical styles that are diametrically opposed. In a body of work which she calls *Ornaminimalism*, the artist collapses the minimal and the ornate. This most recent work arises out of the artist's interest in examining the excessive detailing of 18th century design, in particular the shell-like curves, botanical detailing and curvilinear forms of Rococo gilt frames and furniture. Here again, Smith stresses the hand-make quality of the surfaces with built-up layers of glaze, and, once again, the wall is an active component of the work. In this case, each work is a diptych, with two laser-cut aluminum panels hung apart from each other so that the wall surface between them becomes a third element, a void space that is seemingly left behind by their separation. Yet, on closer examination it is clear that the two halves never formed a whole.

The experience of Smith's paintings is at once meditative and enchanting. They are slow works that one must appreciate over many moments, not in an instant, like watching the play of sunlight or the slow amassing of shadows.