

Polar forces: recent paintings by Michael Davidson

It now seems fitting that my studio visit with Michael Davidson coincided with the inaugural snowstorm of the season. Somehow, that first storm always strikes a sideways blow, as both people and their machines struggle to cope with the conditions. Cars skate dangerously across roadways, while pedestrians cower under parkas. Nature, however, takes things in stride: the trees are steadfast, snow resting gently on their branches. With this weather comes an uneasy feeling that we are visitors in this world, connected yet separate, and nature clearly has the upper hand when it chooses.

Inside Davidson's studio, the conditions seem to persevere. The high-ceilinged space can't quite block the chill, despite a furnace chugging noisily as though it, too, was unprepared for this change of events. Large windows offer views of a continuous snowfall that has shifted the landscape toward a monochrome, high-contrast scene of dark and light.

And here, in front of these paintings, the ones that Davidson has planned for his exhibition *The Lock in the Key*, all of the visual and emotional intensity of the day seems to crystallize onto the canvas. It's as though, in the course of travelling here, my mind has already steeped itself in the language revealed in these paintings. In a reduced palette of almost entirely black and white, the paintings depict graphic, almost emblematic compositions that conjure dark and evocative associations: ravens, crucifixions, missiles, imposing towers and shadowed figures. Yet while the images they suggest are haunting and primal, the paintings cannot be called bleak or stark; rather, they seem determined to bring the viewer into their fold.

Elemental forces are at work here. Davidson speaks of a desire to convey a unification of opposites in this body of work. He draws from Jung's notions of individuation: a process of psychological transformation that includes the realization that all of the seeming polarizations of the world—us and them, good and evil, strong and weak—are in fact intertwined and interdependent. In these paintings, a delicate balance is sought between figure and ground, dark and light, and abstraction and representation.

Their associative richness is based not only in their visual compositions, but also in their connection to a painting trajectory fuelled by major figures in abstraction, such as Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis and Adolf Gottlieb. The dark themes that encompass the works of John Scott are also present here, as are the heavy, pronounced blacks that saturate the recent canvases of Davidson's partner Nicole Collins. Visually, Davidson's paintings speak to the power behind tight palettes, especially the use of blacks that seem to absorb all light to create voids that reach through the constraints of canvas and other physical barriers. In this, his use of black reflects his intention to generate interior landscapes, compositions that trigger associations, memories, and the subconscious. A series of open yet guided associations sets the stage for the conversation that ensues between the painting and the viewer. As Davidson notes, the paintings have their own presence and power. When you enter into a room of them, he says, you are "entering their world."

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http://generalhardware.ca/michael_davidson/