

LOS ANGELES

ALI SMITH

Mark Moore Gallery

BEFORE STEPPING into the cavernous Mark Moore Gallery, I knew nothing of Ali Smith's work. This turned out to be a good thing. Unburdened by expectation, I was able to absorb the five-painting show with fresh eyes.

The large-scale paintings are explosive, forcing an awareness of their materiality and of the artist's process. Smith's brushstrokes are big and assured and have a raw physical quality. The paint is densely layered and in some cases protrudes from the canvas as if Smith unloaded a full tube of paint and then shaped it into blobs and swirling disks. The color palette ranges from bold primaries to intense, almost garish, brights to muted and subdued hues, sometimes all in the same painting. Seemingly random compositions bring together an uneasy blend of abstract and semi-representational forms: everyday domestic objects like chairs and lamps, simple geometric shapes, straight and curvy lines, and architectural elements. The improvisational character of these compositions is like improv jazz or stream-of-consciousness writing: what at first appear to be haphazard combinations slowly reveal an underlying structure that comes alive through reception.

While I was at the gallery, about six

other people came through, spending the requisite seven seconds per painting — which surprised me. This isn't gloss-over art — each painting is a universe unto itself and it's only through active viewing that surprising details are uncovered. The largest painting, a diptych titled *The Navigator*, looks like a machine in Willie Wonka's factory. Spread across a yellow background, clusters of objects and structures resembling bridges and mountains link and collide, producing a chain reaction reminiscent of the Fischli and Weiss video, *The Way Things Go*.

The exuberant *Geek Love* pulsates off the wall. A chaotic mix of fuchsia, red, black, light pink and bright blue, it depicts a closely jumbled collection of shapes and objects that seem to grow out of a red table-like surface. Thick pink, flower-shaped blobs of paint dominate the lower part of the painting. It's like a psychedelic dream featuring neon toys, the detritus of a long-ago childhood.

In *Terrains Vagues*, the colors are subdued, the paint is less dense, and the brushstrokes are flatter and more refined. Against a grey-washed background, a fairly detailed set of objects and shapes is arranged in a precarious stack that references Duchamp's famous staircase. In this painting, Smith exhibits the most control over her brushwork and a stronger formalism in her composition to great effect; it's a refreshing departure from the cruder technique of her other paintings.

Smith's paintings are like mind-maps — uninhibited expressions of her innermost thoughts and feelings, filled with props that playfully mix fantasy and reality. Judging by the range and versatility she demonstrates in this small sample of her work, it is clear that Smith is in no danger of tapping out. On the contrary, there is plenty more to be mined.

—Elizabeth Anderson-Kempe

Ali Smith, *Terrains Vagues*, 2008



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