

Features: MutualArt

March 21, 2012

Watchlist: Captivating Contemporary Artists



Two works from from two talented contemporary artists: Left: "Orbital" (2012) by Ali Smith; Right: "Fancy Pants, (2011) by Christopher Davison. Both artists currently have solo shows at Mark Moore Gallery in LA.

A new era of contemporary painting and drawing is upon us, and lately we've found ourselves enthralled by artists who have taken these genres to a whole new level. We're talking colors that overwhelm the senses, translated onto the canvas in ways only the richest of imaginations can conceive. Recently we had the pleasure of chatting with two very different yet equally remarkable contemporary artists - [Ali Smith](#) and [Christopher Davison](#). Both currently have solo shows at LA's [Mark Moore Gallery](#), so making a trip to the venue this month is doubly rewarding.



Taking inspiration from modern sculpture to ancient mythology, films and books to



long walks on the beach, these two artists create from experience and perception. Smith's motivation "comes from an initial curiosity about what a painting might become...it's about this long relationship I've had with painting, an evolution, that leads from one work to the next." (Left: *Ali Smith's "Bend and Stray" (2012)*)

Davison's works also stem from a variety of sources, like Renaissance artwork and mythological images, as well as his own people-watching on city streets.

"Inspiration is pretty direct, but the impulse to actually make the work is far more mysterious and powerful. It seems to gurggle up from some jewel encrusted

cave many leagues beneath the surface of the earth," he says. (Below: *Christopher Davison's "Saraghina," 2011*)



This power is expressed vividly on the canvas, and both Smith and Davison explore the manifold ways in which the artistic process plays out. "Thematically, I am often thinking about the idea of beauty versus awkwardness, as well as the tiny, detailed moments versus the overall, gestalt of the painting, and the issue of abstraction vs. representation is always present," Smith explains.

For Davison, the subject he returns to is the human figure, as he believes it's the most difficult thing to capture in drawing or painting. "When someone tries to draw or paint it, it's likely to veer in one of two directions: The structure that makes up the figure is either convincing but overly technical and

two directions. The structure that makes up the figure is either convincing but overly technical and lifeless, or the figure is full of life but completely lacking in any kind of believable structure. I'm interested in that strange combination whereby an artist is able to shape and mold a figure through a process that completely embraces its artifice, and yet somehow the end result is infused with this bizarre lifelike dimension," he says. "The dimension is not the reality of the eye... but of all of the senses rolled into one and spread out over time. The artists that truly inspire and motivate me are the ones who are able to capture this." Specifically, Davison cites [Picasso's](#) use of line, Matisse's color, [Lucas Cranach the Elder's](#) awkward ladies, William Blake's visions, and [Otto Dix](#) for "his all-around-awesomeness." Davison also mentions contemporaries such as Dasha Shishkin, Dana Schutz and Lisa Yuskavage as modern sources of inspiration.

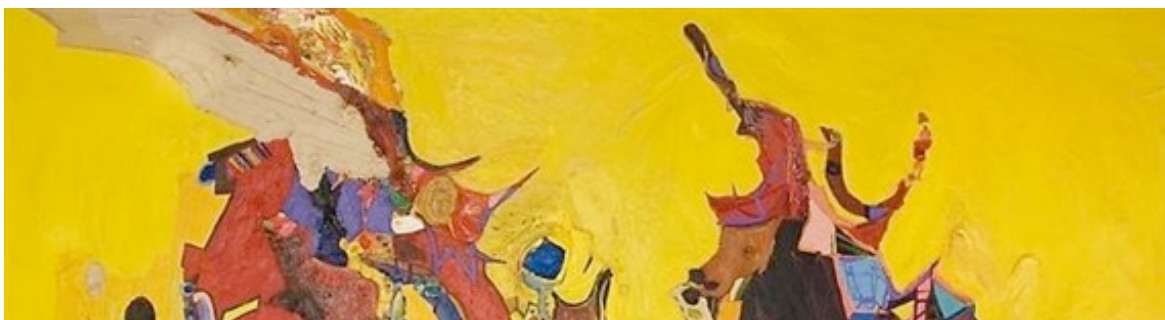


Left: "Cops/Takers," (2010); Right: "Entwined Figures," (2011). Both by Davison. Below: Smith's "Flip Side" (2012)





Smith also pays homage to past and present art-world greats. “I find my own work connected to a lot of early to mid-century artists: [Max Ernst](#), Matta, Gorky, [Joan Mitchell](#), Cy Twombly, Philip Guston, [Lee Bontecou](#),” she says. “I’m not concerned with whether their own visual language is abstract or figurative: some of these artists are more about a surrealistic, inventive language, and with others, it’s their raw, very emotional sensibility that I respond to, often just a certain spirit about how to approach painting that interests me...I am also really inspired by looking at sculpture, sometimes more so than painting—I often imagine what my work would look like in 3-D form, and I’m envious of sculptors who can make work that is ambiguous, whimsical; it seems really difficult with the limitations of gravity and material.”





Yet Smith has managed to capture that very essence in her art, as her vividly painted pieces have a palpable sculptural aspect to them - the colors seem almost alive in their intricate, unfurling tendrils. Smith's paintings play tricks on the eye, drawing the viewer into abstract worlds that feel like whimsical 3-D structures, captivating and inviting audiences to partake in her kaleidoscopic creations. "My work is never about the audience having a didactic experience with the work or illustrating a certain idea: instead, it's about a multi-layered visual experience that I hope is generous and as honest as possible." With equal candor she addresses the issue of meaning behind her art. "Abstract painting can be tough to discuss because it's not about a certain specific narrative, nor is it about decoding certain symbols, and I think sometimes viewers feel uncomfortable with that ambiguity. Instead, it's essential to learn to "read" a painting on a more visual level, and to me, that's where the meaning lies." (Above Center: Ali Smith's "Half-Life" (2007); Below Left: Christopher Davison's "Besties" (2011).



Davison's work has an aspect of absurdity to it, a dream-like 'Alice-in-Wonderland' feel that makes us want to plunge further down the rabbit hole. His pieces highlight the mystery of the subconscious - our latent desires and fears are played out in alluring prints and paintings. "I'm of the Joseph Campbell school of thinking that considers mythological imagery to be



something deeply embedded in our unconscious,” the artist says. “When we go looking around in that darkness we find universal figures representing our basic desires and fears.” It’s as though Davison’s dreams are doing the work, blending myth and fantasy with the human experience. Indeed, he

says, “to find those images I have to get out of my own way and give up the control of my conscious mind. When I’m working I do my best to not think up ideas – I trust unconscious impulses and I trust dumb step-by-step formal decisions...It’s like one of those flying dreams where as soon as you realize you’re dreaming you stop flying. In the studio I have to keep myself away from the thought that I’m actually holding the brush and mixing the paint.”

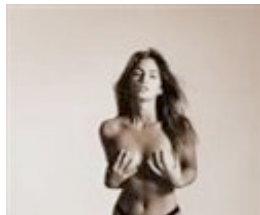
Both artists continue to produce evocative work that dares us to look beyond the obvious. Check out Ali Smith and Christopher Davison at the Mark Moore Gallery in LA; each [show](#) runs through April 7, 2012.

MutualArt accepts articles for consideration. Topics may include exhibition reviews, trends in the art market, art news and other appropriate topics. The suggested length is 750 words. We ask that all submissions be sent exclusively to MutualArt. We will not consider articles that have already been published in print or online. Submissions should be emailed to: editorial@mutualart.com

YOU MIGHT ALSO BE INTERESTED IN



Untitled, circa 2007
(MutualArt)



Cindy Crawford
(MutualArt)



The Art World’s Unsolved Mysteries
(MutualArt)



Sponsored

Gisele Bündchen: Earth Mother
(Vogue)

[?]

VENUES

EVENTS

ARTISTS

[William Blake](#)

[Lee Bontecou](#)

[Lucas Cranach the Elder](#)

[Christopher Davison](#)

[Max Ernst](#)

[Arshile Gorky](#)

[Philip Guston](#)

[Henri Matisse](#)

[Matta](#)

[Joan Mitchell](#)

[Mark Rothko](#)

[Sean Scully](#)

[Pablo Picasso](#)

[Dasha Shishkin](#)

[Ali Smith](#)

[Cy Twombly](#)

[Lisa Yuskavage](#)

FOLLOW US ON [twitter](#)



Copyright © 2007 - 2012 MutualArt Services, Inc.

All rights reserved.