

DAVID URBAN

CORKIN GALLERY

Art in America

By E.C. Woodley

TORONTO Throughout much of the 1990s, David Urban was one of the most celebrated young painters in Canada. His signature looping bands were fresh and compelling forms of mark-making that could be fluid and direct, or less sure-footed, like late de Kooning run through with late Guston-like doubt. As representations of painterly gesture, they spoke of existential concerns.

Urban has increasingly made the history of modernist painting his own, adapting motifs of Malevich and Mondrian or invoking elements of Marsden Hartley. In the 19 works in his recent exhibition (all 2012), Urban puts into play languages developed during the two decades of his career. The small canvas *Recognition* revisits one of the tough, openly awkward motifs of his 2002 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Two thick, black-and-white, right-angled geometric shapes represent figures against a curled, ropelike fragment and a ground divided into bright red, orange and sea blue. The piece is a complex jumble of constructivist portraiture and modernist still life and landscape.

The Water Image, a monumental triptych with a palette mostly restricted to red, white and yellow-orange, is the fourth work in a series begun in 2006. These paintings feature a boy—a simply drawn representation of Urban's son—in states of innocent reverie. In *The Water Image*, this character sits protected by tree forms beside a lake depicted with quickly brushed crisscrossing lines, a roller coaster-esque range of mountains in the distance. There is a radio at his side, and further from him a wheelbarrow. These objects are signs that project the luminous clarity of platonic forms. The boy gazes into a rectangular frame set on the water's surface. The frame here serves as a contemplative device that doubles as a mirror and a window and is emblematic of the entire

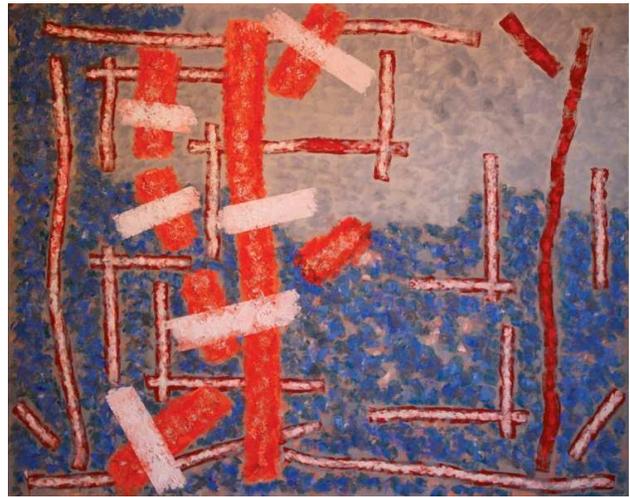


Photo: David Urban: *The Eye as Dove*, 2002/2012, oil on canvas, 8 by 10 feet; at Corkin Gallery.

work, its dual sense of depth and surface, vastness and solitary intimacy.

Urban—who first trained as a poet—has achieved a contemporary and concise painterly equivalent to the complex, impure modernism of Wallace Stevens's mature poems. This is relevant, resonant painting that speaks “of ourselves and of our origins” (to borrow a phrase from Stevens) and of the interdependence of the imagination and the world. If one allows oneself the time to be taken in, the work produces a strangely joyful and profoundly meditative effect.

The Eye as Dove, produced in 2002 and reworked this year, hung opposite a painting that it inspired, *The Parable of the Dove*. To the earlier composition of gentle grays, pastel pinks and branchlike shapes, Urban has added wider white and orange bands that have a more directly material presence. In *The Parable of the Dove* the interior space of the branches is built up roughly, by scumbling layers of almost dry white paint with a layer of thinly applied red. Its overall directness combined with the depth of movement in its mottled-blue ground makes this work a more intense, less reticent version of its counterpart. The relationship between these two works mirrors the exhibition as a whole, imparting a sense that art, in relationship both to itself and to life, can be endlessly reconceived.