

Drawing on words; layering on meaning

By Murray Whyte, Toronto Star, June 29, 2011

A David Urban painting is never finished. While that's not exactly true, it's true enough of the deeply committed Toronto painter, whose predilection to work and rework his compositions, layer upon layer, speaks of the kind of restless, furtive quest that freights his work with an almost alarming, emotional intensity.

In his current show at the Jane Corkin Gallery, Urban shows paintings we've come to know as his brand, for lack of a better term: a pair of dynamic, kinetic compositions called *Returner*, 1 and 2, that cross a strange borderland between abstraction and representation in a wilfully dense, dark cartoonery evocative of one of Urban's personal idols, Philip Guston.

But in another series of paintings, Urban departs. Smaller in scale and painted and repainted in thick, densifying layers, these works highlight Urban's fascination, in that deep, unapologetically modern way, with the sensuality of material and texture, and the resonance of human gesture that paint tracks across the canvas.

At the same time, he produces forms that confound in their perception and intent. Simple shapes like triangles, rectangles and squares toggle between simple, two-dimensional abstraction and frustratingly oblique perspective; Urban teases with the occasional insertion of contexts, like horizontal lines that confound and suggest objects sitting on a surface.

Urban's not toying with you any more than he is himself. That's because for Urban, art is not a game but a never-ending inquisition into how and why we see, and a personal struggle to translate, somehow, the confoundments of an internal emotional roil into paint on canvas.

Urban's art is art as it once was: unapologetically genuine and deeply sincere. At 45, he's a unique foil to a postconceptual generation that obsessively makes art about art; the vulnerable intensity on display here makes it clear that Urban's art is about life — his own.

David Urban, Returner, is at Jane Corkin Gallery until Aug. 11.