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Smoke as Medium: Dennis Lee Mitchell's Art

by Donald Kuspit

Clement Greenberg, the leading theorist and advocate of modernist painting, argued that what made a painting successful was the painter's mastery of the material of his medium—his ability to give raw paint aesthetic purpose by giving it compelling form. Paradoxically, this could be achieved by treating “the physical fact of the medium” as an end in itself—emphasizing its “literalness,” as Greenberg said, so that it acquires abstract presence, that is, the “presentational immediacy” of pure art. The feelings it may evoke in the viewer are beside the point of its literalness, just as whatever it may seem to represent are subjective hallucinations. By Greenberg's measure, Dennis Lee Mitchell is a modernist master, indeed, a daring modernist innovator, because his medium is not material paint but immaterial smoke. This makes him the consummate modernist master, if, as Marx wrote, in modernity “all that is solid melts into air.” For smoke is a kind of solid, visible air—“a collection of airborne solid and liquid particulates and gases emitted when a material undergoes combustion or pyrolysis,” as the dictionary tells us—that dissolves into invisible, intangible air. Smoke—an ambiguous, phantom-like substance—is more difficult to handle than paint, for smoke is unstable compared to paint, and has its own momentum compared to paint, which however fluid needs the painter's hand to move it and make it “moving,” while smoke is self-propelling, moves on its own and is deeply “moving”—rich with dangerous meaning, for where there's smoke there's fire. To master smoke is to master one of the elemental mysteries.

Much the way a snake charmer gets a snake to move rhythmically, so Mitchell gets smoke to move rhythmically, indeed, seem to dervish as though in a delirious trance, as the hypnotic abstractions in the *Infinite* and *Finite* series, 2011-2012 suggest. Like all of Mitchell's works they are, to my eye, a kind of painterly drawing, their evocative surfaces texturally exciting. They have the authority and authenticity of what the critic Harold Rosenberg called abstract expressionist “signature paintings”—self-representations in expressive abstract form. More pointedly, the numerous circular forms, self-contained and isolated at once, symbolize the core self. They certainly convey a strong sense of self and autonomy—more pointedly, what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott famously called a True Self, spontaneously alive—like, one might say, smoke.

Mitchell's works seem to herald the dematerialization of art even as they can be said to cunningly rematerialize it by using smoke—oddly immaterial however material—to make it. They have a special place in art history, not only because of their use of smoke, but because they rescue painting from decadence, not to say the obsolescence that some advocates of dematerialized art said reduced it to inconsequence. They also give abstraction a new emotional depth, for while Greenberg argued that abstraction had nothing to do with “unconscious feeling”—he used Freud's term—but only with the creation of an aesthetically engaging surface (as though conscious aesthetic experience has nothing to do with unconscious feeling rather than rooted in it), Mitchell's abstractions plunge us into the emotional depths: like Leonardo's apocalyptic whirlpools, his churning, spinning forms drop us into the abyss. Nietzsche said “if one looks into the abyss, it will look into one,” which is what Mitchell's

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whirlpooling forms seem to do. They have an existential urgency about them. Mitchell marks the void, rendering it visible by blackening it.

Mitchell has made the best use of thick smoke, for its dissolving into thin air announces our own. His smoky black forms are fraught with the death instinct, as Freud called it. It floods the surface completely in the all-black works of 2015-2016. They carry Ad Reinhardt's black paintings to a nihilistic extreme. Mitchell's smoke art is a triumph of death—the black death that stalks life, overruns the light.