

Green man rising; John Barkley's artwork reflects both the landscape and the painter

Peter Simpson – The Ottawa Citizen – October 7 2013



Who is that appearing out of the background of John Barkley's painting? Is it Barkley himself, or an ancient protector, the omnipresent Green Man?

Green Man Rising is a centrepiece of Barkley's exhibit of recent paintings, titled *Underneath the Surface*, at Gallery 3 in Wellington West to Oct. 17. You may not see the figure in the painting, but he's there, emerging from the rich foliage of greens, blues, reds and yellows, a virtual forest of colours. The amorphous Green Man emerges as if from nothing, other than millennia of tradition in many cultures, a constant figure in art and architecture.

The Green Man appears when nature is threatened, Barkley says. I wonder how autobiographical the figure is, as Barkley cites as inspiration the public battle over a new highway near his studio in Wakefield, Quebec. He was among those who protested the extension of Highway 5, which is now open and making it more convenient for us all to travel over what once were sensitive wetlands and stands of centuries-old trees.

There is a certain type of autobiography in all of Barkley's work, in the sense that his late father was a landscape painter and encouraged his boy to make art, and Barkley the younger has pursued the cause artistically, academically, and personally - living and working among the trees and nature. To look at a Barkley landscape is to look into the man himself, in a way that cannot be said of artists who paint less-challenging "landscapes."

Barkley's work has wavered through degrees of abstraction, the details of the land emerging and retreating from one canvas or series or year to the next, but he still considers all of his paintings to be landscapes at heart.

"I always come back to the land, no matter what," he says. "It's not just landscape, it's my spiritual ideas of what's important in the landscapes."

The recent paintings provide a revealing glimpse into his fluctuating style. Some are immediately recognizable as landscapes, such as Golden Vista, an impressionistic explosion of fall colours that, stared at long enough, absorb and contain the trees and water that would seem to be the subject.

Other paintings are entirely abstract, such as Shaman, Tapas and Kala, a trio (but not a triptych) of paintings with spiritually inspired titles that make me think of the continents seen from near space.

I imagine the predominant pinks and reds as continental plates, moving minutely and eternally, the grandest demonstration of nature's ultimate power over mankind.

Another painting seems to be not a distant view but an extreme close-up. Green Man rests between Barkley's abstract poles, with layer upon layer of various greens, slight touches of red and yellow and a backing coat of light blue. Green Man demands interpretation by each viewer, yet I immediately see it as almost oppressively dense foliage, as if I'm struggling toward the clear skies barely visible in the distance.

Then I realize what Barkley has done: he's put me, as the viewer, into the place of the Green Man. I am the Green Man. We are all the Green Man, if only we care to see.

What: Underneath the Surface, recent paintings by John Barkley

When & and where: To Oct. 17 at Gallery 3, 1281B Wellington St. West