



*THE SPONGES*

JAY ISAAC

Monte Clark Gallery

#105, 525 Great Northern Way , V5T 1E1 Vancouver, BC, CA

May 3, 2014 - May 31, 2014

## ***JOLIE LAIDE (BACK)***

BY BRAD PHILLIPS

Vancouver is a city notoriously inhospitable to painting. For a town with less than a million people, it's foisted into the world influential artists like Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ian Wallace, and Steven Shearer. Graham occasionally makes a private Picasso, where Shearer, when he makes paintings, seems to be making paintings *of* paintings.

Jay Isaac's first solo show with Monte Clark in Vancouver is full of authentic and experimental *paintings*. Big strange abstract paintings. Reworked, overpainted, textured, compositionally confusing paintings. In Vancouver the show is akin to watching aliens step out of a spacecraft in your backyard.



**Jay Isaac**, *untitled*, 2014, Acrylic, chalk, sand, Acrylic, chalk, sand, gel medium on canvas, 80 x 57 inches; Courtesy of the artist & The Monte Clark Gallery

The title of the show is *The Sponges*, and each work within the show is untitled but united under that word. The paintings are made with sponges, and there are sponge shapes on the canvasses themselves. Isaac has been making paintings for a long time now; he knows how to paint. That these are made using sponges and the debased medium of acrylic paint seems not to be unintentional.

Isaac's last show in Vancouver was at CSA Space, a small independently run gallery above a bookstore. It was a show consisting primarily of oil paintings of flowers. During that time he was working from observation, producing startlingly accurate nudes, landscape, and still life pictures. In the past the public has expected artists to be able to master figuration before they're allowed to abandon it. There is a general consensus that Picasso's Cubist work is to be taken seriously because of the earlier work that shows he can make a painting look like a thing that we recognize from life. It's a retrograde idea. When Isaac began showing his work it was abstract, he moved through different interests, settled for a while on realism, then took up abstraction again. The press release for the show notes that the work, while being related only superficially to Yves Klein and his own sponges, is also paying tribute to Klein's interest in aesthetic "badness"—and all throughout Isaac's work, you can see an interest in a mostly forgotten obsession of the 1980's, so called "Bad Painting" made by people like Larry Poons and Jules Olitski. The works in this show are an embodiment of the French expression "jolie laide"—translated roughly as "ugly/pretty," a celebration of deformity, crossed eyes, bad teeth. In these works there is a correlation in that what draws you towards the painting can then confuse and upset your eye. They are sometimes ugly from a distance, beautiful from up close, or the other way around. For people familiar with Isaac's work, there is a fuck you element to paintings like these, in that they indicate he *could* paint you a

beautiful calming nude, or a bunch of magnolias, but what you're going to get is an awkward acrylic painting with a giant sponge painted on it—painted *with* a sponge—that incorporates sand and dirt and doesn't offer anywhere soothing for your eye to rest.

Of the six paintings in the show, five incorporate some amount of purple. Purple is infamous for being hard to work with, for easily going wrong. The smallest painting contains what would usually be the forbidden combination of purple and orange. Colors that are just not meant to sit side by side. It's an indication of Isaac's virtuosity with color that this is actually the most pleasant painting to look at. Standing in front of it, it makes no sense to my eye that I should like it, but I found myself standing there doing just that.



Jay Isaac, *untitled*, 2014, Acrylic and chalk on canvas, 60 x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist & The Monte Clark Gallery

A "good" painting is supposed to allow the viewer both an access point and an exit. Certainly the large scale of some of these paintings gives one the sense of being able to inhabit the space depicted. One untitled painting (pictured above) is a confusing mess of black and blue geometry, wonky triangles, misshapen squares, and inelegant curving lines. But three quarters of the way up, in the middle of the painting, are two white imprints made by a sponge, side by side. They exist as a hypnotic relief in a picture otherwise giving off dissonant information. The way into a painting like this is to stare at what is made easy for you—recognizable shapes; the problem is how to get out again, or to come to understand what it is you're doing inside of it.

Isaac has become very adept at making work that both entices and upsets the viewer. Whether it's through coloration or awkward composition, there is a constant tension between a promise of beauty, and then the deprivation of typical beautiful presentation. Again and again there is an antagonistic aspect inside of the work—especially if you're someone who paints, or is familiar with what painting is *supposed* to do. The paintings in this

very atypical Vancouver show, if you love paintings, draw you close with the usual painterly charms: color, line, shapes. But the closer you get, the more you sense you're being told to go away again. Because the paint is acrylic, plastic—not oil, sensual. The colors are discordant. The lines that look elegant from a distance look purposefully clumsy from a foot away.

At a time when painting is suffering heavily under the weight of prettiness, it's a welcome relief to see abstract paintings that aren't quotational, that exist without any apparent derivation, and are not design-like and attractive. They challenge the very convention of what makes a good painting. And this is an important thing for a work of art to do. It's strangely perfect that it's taking place at a show in Vancouver, where painting has already been told to mind its own business.

—Brad Phillips

(Image on top: **Jay Isaac**, *untitled*, 2014, Acrylic and chalk on canvas, 60 x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist & The Monte Clark Gallery)

Posted by Brad Phillips on 5/23/14

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