

VISUAL ART

Sky Glabush

by Pete Smith

"It all boils down to a question of faith." This is the first sentence of Thomas Lawson's classic 1981 *Art Forum* essay "Last Exit: Painting," wherein he famously argued that representational painting was the last hope of the avant garde. In the decades that have followed, most painters (along with most worthwhile critics) have given up on notions of the avant garde, or the neo-avant garde. This is due to the perceived irrelevance of a linear progression, master narrative view of art historical styles and "advancing" methodologies that assigns value to works of art chiefly on the basis of novelty and historical priority. From this point of view, the idea that a series of black squares painted in the 1960s could signal a final solution to anything is considered miserly and laughable. Although '60s monochrome paintings might present an end point to a specific way of thinking about painting (a Modernist one), it is certainly not viewed as the definitive end, wherein no other scenarios are able to legitimately unfold. Most of the disparagement that the discipline of painting continues to receive is issued by antiquated art academics who stubbornly refuse to accept the downfall of their own blue-blooded, scholarly upbringing. (The flagship example of this is the meager discussion of art after 1985 in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* [Thames and Hudson, 2005].) You can't teach an old dog new tricks, and those who make up this rear-guard vanguard are the oldest dogs in art town.

One of the most fascinating aspects of painter Sky Glabush has been the way in which he has fully taken on neo-avant garde rhetoric and, much like Lawson,



presented his conclusion that the only legitimate way "forward" for "advanced art" is through traditional, representational picture making. Glabush's recent exhibition, "Background," at MKG127 in Toronto, continued this pursuit of painting as picture making, but in a manner quite different from his work of the past five years, which was mostly large scale, suburban landscape paintings. "Background" presented a stylistically eclectic mix of works. Each of these works made clear reference to earlier, Modernist styles that had implicit and/or explicit relationships to various systems of belief: spiritual, ideological and religious. The Modern era is perhaps chiefly characterized by its loss of faith, its move away from religious belief toward, possibly, the first secular society in human history. The paintings in this exhibition point toward the wide array of belief systems that artists, and Westerners in general (especially represented here by psychedelic Hippie culture), have

aligned themselves with in order to fill that void.

One of the most intriguing groupings of works in this exhibition is the series of watercolour on paper paintings titled "The Secret Doctrine." Clearly making references to early European Modernist abstraction by artists like Paul Klee and František Kupka, Glabush uses the translucency of his material to achieve a stunning luminosity. Like crystal shards refracting light, Glabush frames these forms perfectly within the unrestrictive confines of their rectangular frame. The symmetrical geometry of their composition draws a clear parallel between these earlier Modernists and non-Western religious paradigms. The use of symmetrical, centred compositional structures is a recurring motif that Glabush uses in "Background." Through this shared convention he forms ideological links across time and space, from the standard modern art historical cannon, to Arabic religious art, to '60s psychedelia. The most challenging work on



display, and it could literally be read as a provocation, is the large work titled, *untitled (sound)*, 2011. This text-based piece reads: "Have you heard of Bahá'u'lláh?" Glabush, who is a member of the Bahá'í faith, has rendered this work in graphite on canvas. Graphite, as a mineral compound, is a form of carbon that is very close to diamond. As the 35,000-year-old paintings of Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc prove, nothing is more archival than carbon. But this painting is also incredibly delicate. Touching up against its surface will smear and destroy its image. It is eternally fragile.

Although these new works by Glabush will be viewed by most as a departure from his last work, I am arguing that they are, in fact, an outgrowth from the ideological framework presented in the earlier works. If Glabush's large scale, low-intensity hued canvases of the previous five years can be read as portraits of a certain kind of decay, of a collapse in the Utopian ideologies that underpinned Modernist architecture and led to a crumbling, dystopian landscape characterized by vacancy, then his new paintings can quite clearly be seen as a logical continuation of that project. And if Glabush's previous work can be read as snapshots from the mortuary of modern idealism, as embodied by a faded, suburban pastoral, then these new works are a report from its autopsy. The time of death is 1970. But it is the cause of death that is the true subject of Glabush's radiant fascination. ■

"Background" was exhibited at MKG127, Toronto, from November 19 to December 17, 2011.

1. Sky Glabush, *The Secret Doctrine (parts one to nine)*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 19 x 15" each. Photographs: Toni Hafkensheid. Images courtesy MKG127, Toronto.

2. Sky Glabush, *untitled (sound)*, 2011, graphite on gessoed canvas, 60 x 48".