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Artist gets subtle changes with metallic paints that we just can't pin down

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by Kenneth Baker



DAVID SIMPSON: Wishful Sky, 1981

Painting may not match the pace of events as video or digital media can. But painting can still bring into focus perennial human concerns such as knowing the objective basis of subjective sensations.

The recent abstract paintings of David Simpson at Haines force us to think about how we locate ourselves.

Look left inside the gallery door and try to name the color of "Wishful Sky" (1998). At the right time of day, from the right angle, the painting's faintly metallic surface looks translucent, like a thin, pearly cloud cover, leaking a faint blue. But step in front of the painting and its surface appears to harden, its color grows more reflective.

As subtle changes wash through its overall hue, most of them fall between words we have to name what we see. In this manner, Simpson's best paintings in metallic acrylics continually keep us off balance as we try to locate ourselves with respect to them -- that is, to align what we experience with language adequate to nail it down.

If we linger in this state of being off balance, we may realize how often we refuse to look when we sense that the language of description will fail us. Simpson apparently aims to open and explore that sort of unthought gap between episodes of ordinary conscious vision.

His aim is not unerring. The metallic medium he trowels onto canvas, to unpredictable effect, had closed some of the smaller pictures to an extent that leaves them artistically dull despite their superficial brightness.

But by including canvases of various sizes and hues, the show gives a fair idea of the many aesthetic variables in play in Simpson's ostensibly simple process..