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VISUAL ARTS & ARCHITECTURE: Serene scenes vibrate with seasonal energy

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Brett Smith's paintings make a striking first impression. Minimalist, monochromatic, filled with movement, they show off the artist's affinity for nature-based subject matter, as he presents his vision of seasonal transitions.



Brett Smith

In this detail of 'Winter I' (above), Brett Smith's stark, barren trees remain vital against the energized brushwork of his wintry sky.

REVIEW

Brett Smith: "The Nature of Things"

Through Dec. 22. Noon-6 p.m.
Wednesdays-Saturdays. Prices:
\$2,000-\$12,000. Vaknin Gallery, 905
Juniper St., Atlanta. 404-513-0169,
www.urivaknin.com.

Bottom line: Sophisticated abstraction in first solo show.

"The Nature of Things," on view at Vaknin Gallery, offers 12 works from the South African-born artist. Using pastel, pencil, oil and ink, he combines smooth fields of layering, textured patches of paint and jubilant scribbles. Executed largely in black and white, the results are elegant and atmospheric; slight shifts in form from one image to the next resemble time-lapse photography, as though with each successive painting, Smith mirrors nature's process of constant change.

"Spring I" highlights his canny ability to manage small-scale marks: frenzied clusters of abstracted leaves spill from imaginary branches. Each variation that follows buzzes with an increasing sensation of motion — formations tremble in the air, reconfigure, scatter and make way for something new.

"Summer I" and "Summer II" overflow with fine, wriggling lines jostling against soft, sweeping brushstrokes. From a distance, these works evoke a wash of creamy light and areas of shadow. A closer look reveals animated patches of white and black, delicate floral scrawls and subtle abrasions, part of Smith's process of drawing and erasing that he likens to nature's cycle of destruction and regeneration.

While his spring and summer works border on ethereal, Smith's winter scenes are sobering, relying on strong vertical shapes as well as spare, meticulously balanced composition. "Winter I" commands attention; its layers of underpainting add noticeable surface heft. A powerful canvas, it suggests the

violence and beauty of the season, as trees rise in the foreground in somber contrast to a backdrop of luminous and swollen sky.

The self-taught Atlanta artist cites Cy Twombly and Franz Kline as influences; that can be seen in the mix of gestural painting and precision of line. Joan Mitchell's energized markings also come to mind, though Smith contains the ebullience of his brushstrokes.

Eliciting distinct emotional responses — exuberance, solitude, serenity — Smith's recasting of seasonal variations forms a lyrical and sophisticated solo debut.