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Nicole Collins *Resolver* 2011 Courtesy the artist and General Hardware Contemporary / photo Jeff Bierk

Nicole Collins: Glimpses of Renewal

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The term “reconstruction” is often popularly associated with the post–Civil War period of American history, and it is also used in reference to the current financial crisis. In both appearances, the term is used in a regenerative sense: picking up the pieces from some form of near-cataclysmic collapse. As the title of [Nicole Collins](#)’ current exhibition of paintings in Toronto, one gets a similar sense of “reconstruction” as repaired trauma, both material and metaphorical.

The paintings in this exhibition demonstrate an enviable range of formal diversity. Despite the consistency of their quality, most of them appear quite different from each other. There is, however, a nearly narrative quality to their arrangement: an almost step-by-step conceptual instrumentality that implicitly relates to their making. Build it up. Scrape it down. Build it again. Some of the pieces on display are the product of this building. Some are the product of this scraping. Most of them are the product of both. One of the most fascinating technical achievements of the work is the repeated incorporation of silver leaf. Mostly, metal leafs are (unsuccessfully) used by second-year undergraduates when they’re trying to be experimental. What differentiates Collins’ use of metal leaf is how she is able to break apart the singular-scale rectangular form in which metal leaf is mostly applied. In Collins’ work, this leafing becomes unified fields of radiant iridescences under which specks of vibrant hues thoughtfully protrude.

There is a danger here in solely discussing these works in relation to the readymade critical frameworks of process art and materialist alchemy because these works are, in fact, principally about process and materials. But these paintings are also much more than that. It’s what Collins’ processes give rise to that sets these works apart. If notions of the alchemical have additional meaning here, it is in that pseudo-scientific transformative fashion: turning lead into gold. Unlike most paintings that traffic in these discourses, the gold that Collins is searching for isn’t confined to painterly parlour tricks and sexy surfaces. The true strength of these works is in the subtlety of their lyricism and the opulence of their metaphor. Build, tear down, and build again. Whether one is considering the disasters of war, the never-ending financial catastrophe, the frailty of human relationships or the hot-and-cold historical reception of painting, Nicole Collins’ works provide ample inventory for collective reflection; glimpses of renewal peek through their tiny fissures.