

A Delicious Paradox

By STEPHEN MAINE
July 24, 2008

A hidden gem of a summer group show now on view at Gary Snyder's recently inaugurated Project Space offers the delicious paradox of a tightly curated exhibition attesting to the fecund sprawl of contemporary abstract painting. The show's title implies that no single modifier of "abstraction" will suffice to characterize a currently dominant trend; reductive, gestural, and hard-edge proclivities are represented by accomplished mid-career painters. As always, more interesting than genre classifications are specifics of procedure, and Tad Wiley, Laurie Fendrich, and Luke Gray have adopted distinct approaches to the central issue of abstract narrative: revision.



Laurie Fendrich, 'Dart Mouth' (2007)

Mr. Wiley contributes three commanding paintings that are restricted in both palette and drawing, but far from "minimal." The artist seems to extract his motifs from the infrastructure of the metropolis and, while the figure/ground relationship dominates, their interplay is visibly negotiated, readjusted, tweaked. In "Lake Effect," two stacked rectangles in a beefy blue have their sides scooped out, evoking the precast concrete architecture of the interstate highway. The negative spaces have a greenish cast, and those edges — and the blue masses themselves — have been retaped and repainted to optimize their subtly vertiginous upward thrust, suggesting a street-level point of view.

Mr. Wiley paints with broad brushes in enamel on massive, 6-by-4-foot wooden supports, yet his unartful touch yields a diaphanous, translucent film of pigment. The interplay of matte and satin surfaces contends for the viewer's attention with the quirky forms. In the 7-by-6-foot "Untitled #1022," whites inflected by pink and green impinge, from upper left and lower right, upon adjacent vertical rectangles in reddish umber and mustardlike ochre. The exact curve and placement of those corner dropouts were rejiggered as the painting developed, and the vestiges of the artist's decision-making are still faintly visible.

In her four canvases, each 3 feet high, Ms. Fendrich also negotiates a compromise between process and product. Her more conspicuous adjustments are to color rather than contour. While the relation of internal elements is far more complex than in Mr. Wiley's work, little is left to chance in her meticulous compositions, jazzy clusters of willfully enigmatic convexities adrift in muted, decorous fields. Their vertical axis lists to the left or right, aligning them with art-historical movements during which graphic design was a force to contend with: Russian Constructivism, Art Deco. The rubbery noses, ears, and bunched fists of 1930s comics figure, too, as does (she's a painter, after all) synthetic cubism. The canvases are funny and bouncy; their buxom bulges would seem to have been mapped out early, and repeatedly resurfaced until chromatically just so.

Evidently, she pulls back from each contour when she repaints so that within the precise interstices reside complex and fuzzy combinations of underlying colors — magenta, lime green, cobalt blue, orange. Being a fraction of an inch wide, these polychrome border regions don't come across in photos, but they light up paintings such as "The Monkey Puzzle" and "Slow Learning." Self-consciously telltale, they are nevertheless captivating to examine.

In contrast to Mr. Wiley and Ms. Fendrich, Mr. Gray appears to have no second thoughts — or if he does, he saves them for the next painting. The younger son of the late painter Cleve Gray, he carries on in the gestural tradition in which his father worked. Mr. Gray follows the classic method of staining his canvases, of which three midsize examples are here, in broad areas of noncommittal hues and later moving in with loaded brushes, indulging a linear impulse and delineating pictorial space. On parade is unapologetic mark-making, a snaggle and flutter of semi-autonomous brushstrokes in fast-drying acrylic paint that emphasizes the individual mark rather than subsuming it in an oily matrix.

Mr. Gray is a tonal painter, meaning that the space of his turgid canvases is structured primarily through value rather than hue. He uses a lot of inflected grays and earth colors, with black and white advancing and receding and shots of chroma, yellow in particular, adding pizzazz. More in the spirit of Sam Francis than Willem de Kooning, Mr. Gray does not excavate pictorial history with any urgency, preferring to shoot from the hip and hope for the best. But in the lower right corner of “Slippage 0409,” he finally gets his color to move: Yellows turn spectral, grays go cold, and snaking black slithers all over the place. Mr. Gray’s latter-day, quicksilver take on Action Painting feeds into the unfurling, scrappily pluralistic story of abstract painting now.

Until August 1 (250 E. 26th St., between Seventh and Eighth avenues, 212-929-1351).