



WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

“Abstraction 2,” Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, by James Scarborough

The five artist, fifteen piece Abstraction 2 exhibition at the Carl Berg Gallery is melodic as well as lyrical: a mangle-mangle of formal elements.

It's a visual hoot awash with bright colors, squiggly shapes, and compositions that describe both a conductor's baton and the path of its swoosh.

It's engaging but not ponderous; it doesn't try to solve big questions as much as indulge in some pictorial fun.

Mostly it's off-some and unpredictable: it confounds expectations as to what appears to be logical, stable, and coherent.

The strongest work in the show makes the biggest claims to goof our expectations.

Andy Kolar's 2 & 1 is more than life size; it envelops the viewer in a woozy tsunami of yellows, blues, and greens. It's an oversized, supercharged Morandi: simple compositions of seemingly unmodeled and static columns splayed across the picture plane.

With craft and craftiness, Kolar undermines any intimation of monumentality that the sheer size of the work might initially suggest. Unmodeled, off-center (the shapes list to the left, lava-lamp-lazy), the work suggests a scone of narrative: a celluloid still of Gumby-esque proportions.

Like patio furniture you buy on Melrose, the colors are hardly the stuff of Delacroixian or Friedrichean drama; the operative verbs are not to crash and thunder but to nudge and squish. Forms poise with trepidation on ungainly supports, about to topple. Narrow lines lead nowhere. The piece literally stacks shapes on the thin edge of a wedge. Though its overall shape is rectangular there are no literal square shapes in the piece; instead, it's built up of two abutted, non-rectilinear canvases.

Rebecca Niederlander's three hanging pieces also subvert expectations. At first glance her work seems gossamer-light and dandelion-airy. Hung from the ceiling they loom more than life-sized huge. They appear fragile; they seem as if the slightest breeze will set them in motion, like bird nest planets that orbit through an avian solar system.

But then a closer inspection reveals work that doesn't move with each passing breeze; it's made from coated copper electrical wire (the work bristles); it's got heft, it's got gravity as well as gravitas. Like a dodo, it deliciously subverts and conflates the media of mobiles and stables: in the air, doesn't fly.

Doug Meyer's Big Deal seems scientific, seems logical: a pointillist analysis of sorbet colored shapes that appear to be rectangles (he squares a circle) whose composition could be a flower or a mushroom cloud, set against a vibrant blue background.

But no: the pixilated squares are not the same size; they are ever-so-minutely off-square and effect a wobbliness to the sphere already set a-quiver by the contrasts of hot and cold color.

Luke Whitlatch's four pieces appear straightforward simple and elegant, the construction (unstretched canvas folded on the support) uncomplicated. Ditto for their unprimed canvases.

The titles, though (i.e. "Every time I see a mountain lion, it's always running away," "If perhaps the smoke may weep your eyes"), suggest enigmas. So do the irregular shaped canvases as well as the trickles of acrylic and the dye-stains that allude to the early 1930s proto-Surrealist paintings of Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst. The enigmas mount: the disjunction between oracular title and three-dimensional painting broaches sculptural concerns. With their creases, folds, and pockets, the works resemble exquisitely wrapped gifts.

The final goof? What's inside.

Compositionally Anna Marie Francesco's swirly Untitled recalls the expressionist angst of a decontextualized Van Gogh cornfield: a mashup of intensely lavender-hued spirals that seem to jockey with earnest velocity for pride of place on the picture plane. It's got that Pollock-fresco appeal: horizontally huge (96 inches), mark-laden, organic-composed, the broad rivulets of color appear to skirt across the surface.

Skirt? Hardly.

Up close the blunt grooves are inches deep: they cast shadows; they eerily resemble a scorched vineyard seen from a crop-duster. The piece seems to be embedded in the wall: like it was cast with a trowel. The lines don't so much dart over the surface as much as they appear to be composed with a plough. It balances delicately on that line between wall and support: it looks like vividly colored entablature poised in what could be called the 2.5 dimension, halfway between 2- and 3-D.

The work on display plays "Gotcha!" with what you think you see; it rewards more than that passing glance. It's healthy and vibrant. Not just that, it's abstraction, too.

Gallery hours are 11am – 6pm, Tuesday – Saturday. The show runs until September 1.

The gallery is located 6018 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles.

For more information call (323) 931-6060 or visit www.carlberggallery.com