



Jim Schmidt Presents: Abstraction at Philip Slein Gallery

July 21, 2011



Eva Lundsager. *Untitled*. Sumi ink and watercolor on paper

Like the exercise of repeating a word over and over until it becomes unrecognizable, abstract art reduces reality to its simplest parts – colors, shapes and textures – to the point that it no longer strictly resembles the external visual world. Yet when one speaks generally of “abstract art” it is difficult to picture a clear and distinct style. Since its inception, a seemingly countless number of tangential styles have developed under the banner of abstraction. In *Jim Schmidt presents: Abstraction*, a guest-curated exhibit at Philip Slein Gallery, 30 national and local artists meet in one space to create a populous, diverse and always surprising selection of contemporary abstract art.

The works cover a wide spectrum of form and media, from the amorphous and expressive to the geometric and exact; each of the drawings, paintings and sculptures work to thoroughly represent a niche of the elusive genre that is abstract art. The show opens with a few fluid works on paper from artists like Alexander Ross and Carroll Dunham, and progresses to reveal the linear regularity of Cheonae Kim’s paintings. Kim’s works immediately recall Barnett Newman “zips,” yet she has isolated the tall vertical forms and used a bright palette. Decidedly contemporary works, each “zip” displays a structural geometric pattern that evokes 8-bit Atari arcade games.

Erik Spehn’s paintings have physical depth, as they are actually paintings layered upon paintings through an additive process. Reminiscent of Agnes Martin’s grid paintings, they appear tediously precise and flat at first. The viewer must linger patiently to discover what is really worth recognizing. Spehn’s work ultimately unravels this deceptive flatness, revealing a history of his artistic process. He paints over tape, removes the tape, layers more canvas over the painting and gradually adds depth. This process of building up paint and canvas develops a subtle undulation on the painting’s surface. The top surface hints at this process; columns of horizontal lines may at first look like tape, but are actually where the paint met the canvas between the applied pieces of tape, which were later removed. The meditative stillness it exudes and commands of the viewer

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culminates with the discovery of a dense history of mark-making, revealing the artist often hidden behind similar geometric works.

In reaction to Spehn's second cream and white minimalist painting (same concept, different number of columns) in the back room, Ford Beckman's loud *Pop Rhythm Painting Green and Red* displays a deliciously deviant green-so-bright-it-turns-yellow paint splattering on a razzle-dazzle red background. This pared down pop-ified Pollock offspring delights the viewer in a full-bodied visual sugar-high as complementary colors clash clamorously and pulsate. The eye meanders endlessly, at the same time repulsed by its brightness, like gazing at the sky and locking eyes with the sun on a cloudless day.

Dennis Hollingsworth's *The Mad House (Wet on Wet #42)* stands apart as the most painterly, displaying an unmatched physical materiality and depth found directly on the surface of the painting. Sculptural in comparison to the flat abstraction found throughout the gallery, the canvas holds globs, drips and smears of paint, the result of an exploration into what one can do with the medium. It is viscous, carnal and rich, a futuristic battlefield of texture and color. Daubs and splatters mutate into cartoonish guts and blood that spill out of the frame, which is cut into as organs are removed and cavities refilled with blocks cut of hardened oil paint. Spiky, extraterrestrial white globules attack the organism. Flaunting geometric forms and expressionist drips, the canvas is unrestrained and systematic at the same time, bringing together the two opposing forms of abstraction on view throughout the exhibition.

On the opposite wall, Eva Lundsager's sumi ink and watercolor painting displays washes of light popsicle-tinted watercolors with the appearance of sedimentary geologic layers. Above the horizon looms a mushroom cloud, overshadowing the cheery peach, rose and lime palette below. This light-hearted canvas soon dissolves as the ink bleeds and stark sumi ink splotches begin to appear like dust settling post-disaster.

Intermingled among these works are a few additional noteworthy pieces: Sue Eisler's elegant, balanced wire sculpture and Terry Winters's black and white graphite and crayon drawing. Adam Fuss creates an ethereal pattern by repeatedly imprinting spores on paper, a distinctly organic image in comparison to the neighboring structure of Spehn's painting. John Chamberlain's small painting seems like a flattened two-dimensional version of his bold compounded cars – an abstraction abstracted.

Jim Schmidt Presents: *Abstraction is on view at Philip Slein Gallery, in St. Louis, MO, until July 30, 2011.*