

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

DALLAS

### DAVID AYLSWORTH

HOLLY JOHNSON

Cole Porter first posed the question in 1938. "Is it an earthquake or simply a shock? / Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock?" David Aylsworth, an Ohio-born, Houston-based abstract painter who has shown regularly in Texas over the past 15 years, is also a musical-theater buff, and he adapted that lyric for the name of his exhibition, "Is it the real turtle soup?" It also names one painting; other titles draw on lyrics from shows ranging from *Hair* to *Company* to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. This kind of showbiz esoterica is destined to go over the heads of most viewers, but borrowed lyrics can have the advantage of being cheerily bright. And some names—*Ga-Ga at the Go-Go*, *Yet to be Upon His Knee* or *Low and Lazy*—fit well with Aylsworth's nervy, slapdash style.

When the artist talks about his work—the 13 oil paintings in this show, all 2008, are modest to substantial in size—he describes "staging" his compositions, and refers to his abstract forms as characters. He treats the components as if they are actors that he, as director, is blocking in purposely awkward scenes. Bulbous or sharply angular shapes take their places with often comic gracelessness. Some collide while others are posed in a kind of standoff. Aylsworth is a fan of taste-defying color combinations that he lays on with justified faith that it will all work out in the end. His blues tend toward turquoise and his reds are rosy and pink. In *I'm 41* (at 75 by 90 inches, the largest work in the show), an enormous purple blob lists across a bright yellow canvas and heads into a gaping white shape that appears to be attempting to choke it down. There can be hints of sunny landscapes, and Aylsworth is not above evoking a seaside holiday. But then he turns around and piles together angular shapes resembling debris at a construction site.

David Aylsworth: *I'm 41*, 2008, oil on canvas, 75 by 90 inches; at Holly Johnson.



Like the Tin Pan Alley types he admires, Aylsworth knows how to make the task look easy. Perhaps it's a given that musical comedy is always just slightly ridiculous. But as with Aylsworth's painting, the shows and songs he favors have one prevailing theme, and it's worth taking seriously. The payoff of the Porter lyric that titles the exhibition comes at the end of the song. "Is it a fancy not worth thinking of? / Or is it at long last love?"

—Charles Dee Mitchell