

Review: Howard Sherman, Artist Picks

February 25, 2013

Native Houstonian and painter Howard Sherman affirms his talent for visual decision-making in an exhibition of paintings that mostly aren't his own. On view through March 22 at Alliance Gallery, *Howard Sherman: Artist's Picks* features one of his canvases alongside the work of six local abstract, formal, and process-oriented painters. (Disclosure: Sherman is represented by McMurtrey Gallery, where I work as assistant director.)

"Picking this exhibition has been an effortless pleasure," Sherman writes. "I was attracted to these artists because I am interested in many of the same things in my own studio practice: matters of tactile surfaces, hard edge graphics, and unorthodox processes which cause irregularities in one's work to fully bloom."

Entering the gallery, you are first greeted to the right by three small paintings by Robert Ruello. Like birds of paradise, these brightly colored abstractions pull you in for close inspection.

The layering of color is simultaneously odd and alluring in these paintings, since "the saturated colors are applied directly to the canvas, followed by less saturated layers of grayed color, with the final layer being a pure white shape," according to Ruello. This technique creates a perplexingly endearing effect. The calm plasticity in Ruello's paintings makes a gentle start to an otherwise big and bold collection of large-scale pieces.

Traveling along the gallery wall counter-clockwise from Ruello is Sherman's painting *Fear eating machine*. The large canvas is a typical Sherman mixture of graphic outlines, heavy layering of color, and expressive brushwork. What makes Sherman's style unique is his characteristic sense of fun bordering on hysteria. Placed in the corner of the show, the curator's own painting does not take center stage, but rather acts as a buttress reinforcing all the other artworks and giving viewers a vantage point for understanding Sherman's own paint process.

Flanking the wall adjacent to Howard is a large Geoff Hippenstiel painting, in which mounds of silver paint mummify a soft sunrise hue peering out from the background. One of Houston's most prolific painters, Hippenstiel leaves no doubt that he can fill a room, let alone a canvas, with a lush field of gestural



Robert Ruello
Unknown Adventures in Unknown Spaces #9, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery.

abstraction. The most painterly piece in the exhibition, it was a stark contrast to its neighbor, a hard-edged geometric painting by Michael Guidry.

Guidry utilized latex wall paint to create a site-specific mural on the back wall of the gallery. Working tirelessly during installation, the end result was a feat of calculated effort in composition. A bold excursion from previous paintings, *Settlement* resembles a mushroom cloud after an atom bomb explosion. Bold and expressive, yet pre-meditated, Guidry's brash spirit is akin to Sherman's but his process is practically opposite the curator's. Adding Guidry's mural to the exhibition proves to be a thoughtful and provocative choice.

Tucked away in an opening along the back wall is Tudor Mitroi's oddly shaped work on wood. The shape resembles a satellite view of an elongated California broken free from the continent and floating aimlessly in the Pacific. Combining techniques of painterly elements with literal mark-making, the painting lies between abstraction and representation. Mitroi hints at a specificity that offsets his work from the others.

Marcelyn McNeil's *Crudely Drawn Mimic* has strength in form and a quiet softness in color. Her subtle chromatic choices produce a stoic, atmospheric heaviness offset by bold, red linear marks. McNeil's seemingly naïve brushwork seduces the viewer into participating in her confident manipulation of space.

Opposite Hippenstiel's large canvas hangs Shane Tolbert's massive grid comprised of nine stitched-together pieces of dyed fabric. Rather than using acrylic or oil, Tolbert creates his circular gestures with a bleaching mixture that removes black dye from the fabric, leaving behind a glowing chromatic pink.

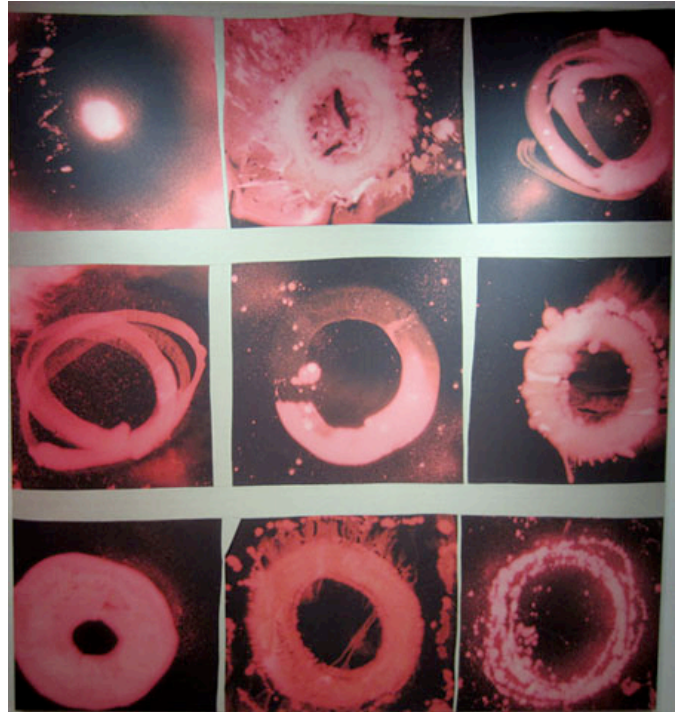
Surely inspired by Yves Klein's fire paintings, Tolbert veers from traditional mediums in a wonderfully fun and hypnotizing way. Tolbert's ingenuity makes this piece one of the most striking in the exhibition.

Howard Sherman: Artist's Picks primarily includes emerging and established contemporary abstract painters from Houston, Texas. Participating artist Shane Tolbert describes Sherman's approach as "bringing together a community of painters because their work should be seen in the context of one of another as a historical document of 'the state of things' in Houston." Still, a room full of good painters does not guarantee a great exhibition. What makes this exhibition successful is Sherman's unwavering dedication to paint as a medium. His selections divulge how variegated the painter's process can be and reveals these artists as poignant components of Houston's art scene. In Sherman's curatorial statement he asks viewers to "Come in and listen to [the artists] speak," and these paintings have a lot to say.

-DEBRA BARRERA

Debra Barrera is a local artist and writer.

<http://artsandculturehouston.com/review-howard-sherman-artist-picks/>



Shane Tolbert
Untitled, 2011.
Pigment dispersion on dyed fabric.
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Devon Britt-Darby.