

Deconstructing the pile that is art

Painter's works show glimpses of beauty -- perhaps unintended -- and some incoherence

By Fredric Koepfel

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Normally I ignore artists' statements as extraneous to the purpose of looking at and appreciating their work. Most artists are surprisingly inarticulate when it comes to describing their purposes and methods, and they often resort to clouds of obfuscating jargon.

Not so Steven Wise, whose laconic statement about his show, "Piling It On," at Material, reads thus:

"All of the works in this exhibition are the product of the same activity. The works are created by a devotional, meditative repetition of color and mark. Each painting represents the end of an activity of mark making. The painted surface is the product of this activity. The end painting is the final layer that has been built above older layers. The painting is piled up until the artist chooses to end this activity."

These sentences may sound like R2D2 describing the "Mona Lisa" -- paint piled up until Leonardo decided to end the activity -- yet Wise expresses, in his deadpan manner, the fundamental basis of Western art, that the act of painting is a physical exertion using paint that results in an object that we call a painting. The emphasis on the physical nature of "art-making" has had a profound effect on recent art, with many artists concentrating on the obsessive repetition of tiny marks on paper or canvas, as if making a drawing or painting were a feat of endurance that entailed the risk of carpal-tunnel syndrome.

This approach to art -- obsessive mark-making and piling up layers -- drains features such as beauty, drama and content from the art work and substitutes gesture, pattern and randomness. Wise's use of the words "devotional" and "meditative" add a spiritual level to the endeavor, endlessly repeated mark-making as aid to a prayerful state, as a path to enlightenment or oblivion.

The question is, how are we viewers expected to react to this kind of work?

As is necessarily the case in Material's small gallery, this is a minimal show: Six 12-by-12-inch oil-on-board paintings and three ink-and-acrylic drawings. If you look at the paintings for a few minutes, the question arises: Do the marks produced in the process of mark-making have to be beautiful, or does their significance lie simply in the fact of their making? I

mention this issue because several of the paintings in "Piling It On" seem not just unsophisticated but amateurish, even crude, the mark-making not devotional or meditative but hurried, sort of "gotten-over-with-and-whew," merely repetitious rather than purposefully repetitious. The artist might contradict me -- "Was *too* devotional and meditative!" -- but I'm talking about appearances from my side of the piece.

And it seems necessary to bring up this point because a couple of these little paintings are quite beautiful, and it seems to me that such a quality must reside not only in my aesthetic and emotional reaction but in the work of art itself, and since the work of art is a product of building layers and making marks until the artist decides to stop, then the beauty consists of precisely those qualities that the artist would probably reject as irrelevant: Harmony of tone and color; pleasing shape and composition; a sense of revelation held in check by form; the balance between the artist's involvement with paint and surface and an element of almost Olympian detachment.

I'm referring primarily to the painting reproduced with this review, which both as a jpg image in an e-mail, as I first saw it, and in the gallery I find utterly compelling, particularly in the contrast between the dense, layered gray undersurface and the multitude of tiny gold circles that overlay it, surrounding that mysterious tree-like shape in the center.

Wise does not title his pieces, but lists them as series under letter designations; these paintings fall under the "A" series. I encourage readers to look at Wise's Web site -- alphabetaprojects.com -- to see the other projects on which the artist centers his obsessions. A disadvantage to doing that is that some of Wise's work looks better on his Web site than on the wall in the gallery. In the virtual world of the Web site, the three drawings in this show look great; in the harsh real world, they're an incoherent mess.

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