

REVIEWS / APRIL 9, 2014

A Look at Painting as Journey in Vancouver

Equinox Gallery, Vancouver March 22 to April 19, 2014



"Persian Rose Chartreuse Muse Vancouver Grey" (installation view), 2014. Courtesy Equinox Gallery. Photo: Scott Massey.

by **Michael Turner**

Since its debut at El Castillo some 40,000 years ago, painting has remained the medium of choice for most of the world's artists and, perhaps as a result, is the activity most recognize when conferring the words *artistic talent* on children. Yet despite its long run and its relative measure, painting has endured its knocks over the years; not only from artists, writers, historians and curators who regularly pronounce it waning, superfluous, irrelevant or dead, but especially from those who work within its constraints, who continue to shift its ballast from one end of the hold to the other.

It is a serious journey, painting, no less serious in Vancouver than in other cities large enough to float art schools, commercial galleries and collecting institutions, where paintings are acquired to keep those that came before them on course.

And so it was that Vancouverites both aware and unaware of this journey braved grey wind and grey rain to converge at the recently super-sized Equinox Gallery for the opening of an exhibition where the artists finally matched its mass: "Persian Rose Chartreuse Muse Vancouver Grey," a collection of works by senior contemporary moderns Raoul De Keyser, Bernard Frize and Mary Heilmann; mid-career practitioners Tomma Abts, Elizabeth McIntosh, Silke Otto-Knapp and Laura Owens; thirtysomethings Monique Mouton and Rachelle Sawatsky; and the emerging Aaron Carter.

These artists, through various means and gestures, evince what painting has concerned itself with since the late 1980s, when the medium, like the Western and Eastern ideologies that shaped its century, gave up on names; when divisions, to use the terminology that curator Mina Totino applies in a statement both bold and diffident, could be reduced to a) painting that finds itself in a "confining endgame" (i.e. painting in "quotation marks") and b) painting that "embraces doubt, produces questions rather than conclusions," of which the latter was on display.

Greeting viewers near the entrance of the exhibition's long, rectangular space are three smaller works arranged diagonally as well as horizontally. Their contents suggest an index of the materials used in the making of the work inside, to say nothing of their marks. The support and surface of Carter's To Do (2014) is a miniature construction site of plywood, fibreglass mesh and plaster, onto which is drawn, in gouache and watercolour, landscape's green rectangle, a purple-grey dot, a brown squiggle and a chartreuse vertical line. Following that, Abts's Untitled (Triangle) (2009), a colour spit bite aquatint print where a wood-grain brushstroke form and a similarly wood-grain field join not through the four dots (dowels?) that hover in a square above, but through the flatness of the medium that both brought them into being and, as such, provides the print its parenthetic subtitle. Finally, upwards at the far right, Sawatsky's Untitled (2013), a tamped-down vase shape made of what looks to be fired clay, against which a floral bouquet of purple, blue and ochre powdered dyes have been pressed.

With these works and their display in mind, the larger space opens into what feels at first like a room with one too many works in it, if not for the relatively uncluttered and mostly flat, impasto-less surfaces of its

constituent parts.

Most notable, and to the far right of the room, is Frize's huge acrylic-and-resin-on-canvas *Compass* (2001), a multicoloured woven grid made with what appears to be a very wide brush and a great deal of patience. At the opposite end of the room, a few feet from the wall, is Mary Heilmann's orange-stained polypropylene-webbed *Clubchair 34* (2007). Between them, another instance of the grid, this time in the form of two long wooden tables by Monique Mouton, each of which contains a set of spare and perhaps preliminary pencil and watercolour drawings arranged in a 2-by-7 unit regime.

But this is it for grids—at least in their more immediate form. Like the diagonal display gesture outside the larger exhibition space, these patterned works act as much as reference points as works unto themselves: from Frize's technical accomplishment, to Heilmann's place of meditation (viewers are welcome to sit in her chair, as Heilmann might when contemplating her work as she is making it), to Mouton's exercises in advance of the paintings and the serrated left-margin boards that hang on and lean against the surrounding walls.

And what of the remainder of the works on these walls? What boldly steps forth? What remains comfortable in its diffidence? What, as Totino writes at the opening of her statement, “connects the dots of influence that have contributed to a complex and refreshing development in painting and its fraught history”?

Apart from Carter, who is barely out of (graduate) school, there is little question that the painters in this exhibition are well-read in their medium, and that most have experienced the kind of modulation that occurs after a concentrated amount of time at the library, the museum and the studio. This is particularly true of those who question what comes easily to them, who have struggled to refuse assonance and symmetry in favour of that which is angular, obtuse, difficult or wrong; who have, in many cases, eschewed the more traditional forms of paint for ink, dye and, in the case of Sawatsky's one-way-maze-containing *Impostor* (2013), bleach.

A good example of the modulated artist is McIntosh, whose abstract paintings over the past decade are less monuments to completion than documentation of the arguments, altercations and injuries she has experienced while at work on her canvases. Her contribution to the exhibition consists of three new oils, each of which are less instances of emergent figuration than repurposed abstract forms that unite to suggest just that: the figure.

In McIntosh's *The Girl* (2014), the viewer might sense the presence of Abts's parenthetic triangle in the V-shaped crook between its subject's bicep and forearm, to say nothing of its yonic form. Something similar occurs between her *Cubism* (2014) and Otto-Knapp's *Every Afternoon* (2009), where in the latter painting ballet-dancing boys occupy a slightly recessed, though no less malevolent, centre, their feet planted firmly on the ground, while ballet-dancing girls are (as girls have often been raised to be) “on pointe”—an action that is echoed in the former painting, where the “on pointe” gesture is not so much rendered through a cubed array, but assembled from its shards.

As is often the case when associations present themselves, when dots are to be connected, the viewer looks for more. In another of Sawatsky's ceramic wall works, the viewer is reminded of the aqueduct in the

background of another Otto-Knapp painting, *Group Portrait* (2013). One remarks on the shadows cast by Sawatsky's additional wall works (situated in a horizontal line above a row of paintings), and how their shadows, more than the gouache, dye and pigment marks upon them, lurk like the shadow cast by the bicycle wheel attached to the centre of the floating tertiary field of Owens's *Study* (2013). Or if viewers do not see associations, then perhaps recognizably contrasting yet unifying gestures, such as the fragile horizontal weft lines in Mouton's *Salvage* (2013) that beckon the warp lines in De Keyser's *No Title (8 Verticals/6)* (2010). Visitors may proceed onwards, until upon leaving the larger space they are again met with the modern grid's adversary—in the form of the diagonal display outside.

Michael Turner

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