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Knodel, Marilu. "The Seattle Scene." *Artnet.com*, 1997, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/reviews/seattle/seattle2-11-97.asp.

The Seattle Scene

In what local broadcasters are calling our "Holiday Blast"--almost two feet of snow in as many days--I wonder which was worse: the cabin fever that overcame me after spending a half day inside, or the fact that my neighborhood brew pub ran out of beer? The snow and subsequent rain damaged G. Gibson Gallery, forcing it to close the back room for renovation. And Greg Kucera gallery posted pictures of the water damage that destroyed an estimated five percent of its inventory, but the space was cleaned up sufficiently to mount January shows.

Abstraction Rules?

The Center on Contemporary Art's show "square painting/plane painting," organized by Lauri Chambers with Rhonda Howard, presents abstract painting produced by well- and lesser-known artists from around the country. CoCA's space, handsomely configured into discrete bays, was a bit too densely installed. Thomas Nozkowski's works, for instance, were hung on endcaps, taking up the interstices that should have given viewers some breathing room. The installation itself moved from the hard-edge abstraction of Paul Mogensen, Suzan Frecon and Mary Henry, to more conceptual and systems work by Denzil Hurley, to some funky mixed medium works on cardboard by Dan E. May; to the more expressive paintings by Jacqueline Barnett and Robert C. Jones. There is a definite generational slant here; the youngest of the group, Alfonse Borysewicz, was born in 1957. This progressive movement made visual sense, allowing the viewer to focus on broader categories of abstract "style" without suggesting equivalences in direction or design.

In the press release Chambers states, "These are not pictures, they are paintings....There is no text which will explain it," providing us with a clue that Chambers seeks a purely visual response for the work. And yet there arise traces of architectural edifices, evidence and metaphor of human obsession, hints of spirituality and duress, and the claustrophobia of society's strictures, all divined through the viewer's human need to find meaning. Abstraction was a mind-blower at the beginning of the century, one so daring that it continues to feed and nourish artists, but it was an unfamiliar vocabulary--where is the universality in that? So, in fact, the viewer one way or another brings in outside text, conjuring rhyme and reason themselves, some gleaned from personal experience, some from ingesting the critical evaluation of others. How can text, social or other, not come into play with this work? Is the title punning when it says the works presented are "square," meaning not just their geometric shape but their social status? Are the works not just "plane" (where meaning and surface stay squarely in the two dimensions) but "plain," not fancy, just doing my job ma'am? In posing this descriptive title most of the works then break it down in some way or another, by introducing space, activity or figurative references.

Suzan Frecon's tight, flat, architectural works are appealing despite a rather limited range of straight-edged interlocking shapes. One piece, a deep sky blue central field with an orange strip running along the bottom, up the right side, with a small dip into the main pool of blue, might even be the most stylized

seascape ever--blue sky, beach, and wave about to crash down. Frecon's references touch upon '70s Minimalism, yet her teasing a landscape out of abstraction recalls the work of Robert Motherwell.

Denzil Hurley's systemic *NB9* (1992-96), consists of 36 small white canvases, either a square or a rectangle, each with a centered black square. As installed, in alternating patterns of square and rectangle, they line up to make one larger work. Although using a predetermined pattern, Hurley is still able to tease out a dynamic visual experience; the viewer's eyes trace back and forth to find the irregularities in paint application, the way the shadows perfectly fill in the space between the works, or divine alleyways made when the variably shaped works change places. With an economy of means, Hurley allows that mathematics and geometry are the only type of universal language that could inform our reading and bring the works into dialogue with the outside world.

Like Hurley, Dan May too uses a grid pattern in his *Untitled* (1994), in which a deep cardboard box holds 13 rows of 8 envelopes, lined up on each side with black hatch marks. The envelopes are lightly washed in green, with a central transparent white dot in their center. Each envelope sports its own simple lines that suggest a house, or a dog-earned roof line, a bridge, a tightrope or a trap; even infinity came to mind. Here, as with the artist's smaller collages and paintings, a sense of pictorial depth is avoided but references are retained to the outside world, one inhabited by bodies, and minds, and ideas.

Robert C. Jones's over-all strokes with wrought iron forms that hold his garden-like palette of yellow and blue in spatial tension brings to mind certain, more ascetic works by Matisse; the interlocking forms and irregular black outlines release the painting, and the viewer, from any sense of urgency about the work. Jake Berthot's works suggested Rothko's abstraction, although without the scale and glowing surfaces of a spiritual experience. (But, as always, when organizing an exhibition the work one receives may not be the one that the curator most specifically wanted; indeed, sometimes the artist's inclusion is a sign, one set to bolster a premise without illuminating specifics about the artist's oeuvre.)

The most scumbled, dense and dramatic works, by Jacqueline Barnett, have the agitation of a Soutine without his implied social commentary. Although it is unfair to draw these parallels, generally one makes such correspondences to push and tease out some sense of continuity. In organizing this show, the curators surely meant to state that abstract painting is alive and well; this statement would have been better supported with the inclusion of a younger generation or two of practicing artists.