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Painting Overtakes Pixels in Aldrich Museum Exhibition

Written by Susan Hodara

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Steve DiBenedetto, *Cephlaglyph*, 2010

For the first time in more than 20 years, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is filled exclusively with paintings. "Painting in Four Takes" presents concurrent solo exhibitions of four contemporary painters: Steve DiBenedetto, Hayal Pozanti, Julia Rommel and Ruth Root. Each artist has a distinctive toolbox of motifs and methods, resulting in works that are wildly different. But considered together, the shows attest to the flourishing of painting in a culture that is saturated by digital images, and to the expressive power of paint applied in all its variations by the human hand.

"In this virtual age, there is a hunger for the physicality of painting," said Richard Klein, the exhibitions director at the Aldrich, in Ridgefield. "These are all works that you can't completely understand unless you are standing in front of them."

The 10 new, large-scale paintings in "Ruth Root: Old, Odd, and Oval" are irregularly shaped, with eye-popping stripes, spots and geometric forms. Standing in front of any of them, museum visitors will see that what appeared to be a single unit is actually two panels, the upper made of patterned fabric, the lower of enameled and spray-painted plexiglass. They will notice that the plexiglass panel is attached to the fabric panel by curious looping folds, and that the whole work is suspended – seemingly precariously – by a few grommets.



Hayal Pozanti's "Sixty Seven"

The artist's largest pieces to date, the paintings are playful. Yet there is a friction between the two sections: the supple fabric, its repeating digital arrays designed online by Ms. Root, against the unyielding plexiglass, with its wavering hand-applied paint.

Ms. Root, 48, has been experimenting within the tradition of abstract expressionism for two decades, and the rest of "Old, Odd, and Oval," which was organized by Amy Smith-Stewart, the museum's curator, provides context for her new works. In an adjacent gallery, the cockeyed, rounded edges of a group of small painted collages made from 1998 to 2003 signal the artist's abandonment of the rectangular format.

Upstairs, all the paintings in "Julia Rommel: Two Italians, Six Lifeguards" are rectangular, but Ms. Rommel, like Ms. Root, produced them in untraditional ways. She worked on her pieces for months, painting layer upon layer, wiping, sanding, sometimes cutting, repainting, stretching and restretching the canvases on stretcher bars over and over again. The ensuing images are thick expanses of color interrupted by wrinkles, folds, staple holes and embossed indentations. "They hold the memory of the way they were before," Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

Seven paintings were made for the exhibition, which was curated by Ms. Smith-Stewart. All are abstract, with whimsical titles suggesting tiny, mysterious narratives. In the monumental "Moroccan Boyfriend," overlapping planes of brilliant blues evoke a beckoning portal. Furrows and ghosts of staples cut horizontally across the pale green of the smaller "Healthy Breakfast." The surface of "Relatives," with its rectilinear divisions of soft blues and peachy pastels, is creased and slightly puckered, its rounded corners revealing how dense the paint has become.

"Two Italians, Six Lifeguards" opens with five older pieces, small monochromatic canvases that were painted by Ms. Rommel, 35, from 2010 to 2012. Even then, she was restretching and manipulating; the blue in a painting titled "St. Francis" was almost completely bleached away. Ms. Smith-Stewart described these works as "early vestiges of her process."

Photo



Julia Rommel, *Relatives*, 2015

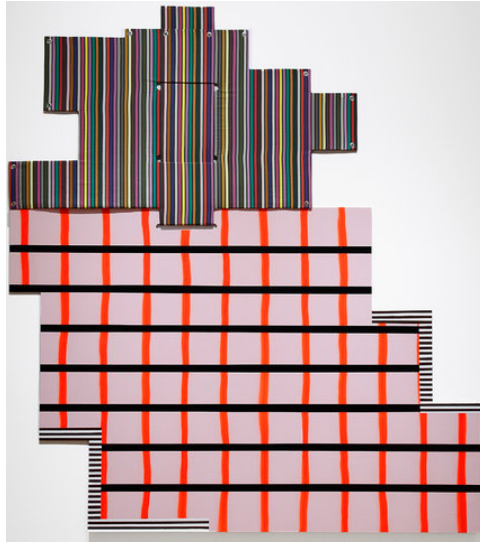
Near the top of one of the new paintings, "Greetings From Uruguay," a wide yellow brush stroke curves upward, as if escaping from the fields of yellows and blues below. Such a mark is absent in the other pieces. "That, to me, is the freest she has ever been," Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

In the next gallery, "Hayal Pozanti: Deep Learning" pits technology against the human mind. Ms. Pozanti's paintings and digital animations, all created for the Aldrich, are composed of characters from "Instant Paradise," a 31-symbol alphabet that she invented. Like anthropomorphic hieroglyphs, combinations of ciphers frolic across her canvases, spelling out numbers that refer to data on human attributes that Ms. Pozanti, 32, unearthed online. The source material for a painting titled "One Hundred Twenty Two," for example, is the number of dreams the average person was said to have monthly; for another painting, "18," it is the number of variations said to exist in the human smile.

Initially, Ms. Pozanti's work was heavily digital, relying on imagery appropriated from the Internet. She was propelled to painting by the need to bring tactility into her practice; Ms. Smith-Stewart said, "She wanted to make tangible things."

Ms. Pozanti's palette combines black and white with patches of color. "She uses colors you would find on a digital color picker against more natural colors that she hand-mixes," Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

On three monitors suspended from the ceiling, Ms. Pozanti's characters stream horizontally and vertically, depicting transcriptions of conversations that she conducted with chat bots in English and then translated into "Instant Paradise." Accompanying them is Ms. Pozanti's reading of the text in the phonemes of her lexicon. Her voice sounds robotic, except for brief spurts of giggling – "emotive sounds that she added to make it feel more human," Ms. Smith-Stewart said.



Ruth Root, *Untitled*, 2015

“Steve DiBenedetto: Evidence of Everything” also contains an audio component, a four-channel sound installation in the stairwell between the first- and second-floor galleries where his paintings are hung. Titled “VTOL,” it is an improvisational blend of electric guitar, percussion (played by the artist) and altered helicopter sounds. Its pulsating rhythms shift from aggressive to hypnotic, dystopian to transcendent, a fitting soundtrack for the works on view.

Mr. DiBenedetto, 57, paints apocalyptic landscapes that teem with collapsing architectural structures, ominous helicopters, unruly octopuses and abstract labyrinthine patterns. “Evidence of Everything” presents 35 canvases made from 1997 to 2015. Standing in front of them, viewers will see dribbles, smears, assorted textures and sweeping brush strokes. “He’s trying every conceivable way of applying paint,” Mr. Klein said. “Look at the subtlety of what someone’s hand can do, the enormous richness and complexity.”

Mr. Klein, who curated Mr. DiBenedetto’s exhibition, noted the artist’s far-reaching inspirations, which include speculative and science fiction, psychedelic art and the film “Easy Rider.” Excerpts from authors including J. G. Ballard, Thomas Pynchon and William Blake are interspersed among the paintings, and one area holds a collection of ephemera – works on paper, photographs, books, album covers and other materials – culled from the artist’s studio. Citing these and the show’s title, Mr. Klein said: “We are attempting to give evidence of Steve’s multilevel cultural influences. He’s embracing a worldview that is very broad.”

That worldview, Mr. Klein said, has emerged in Mr. DiBenedetto’s work. “As weird as his paintings are, they are not divorced from reality,” he said. “They are symbols of the chaos and instability in the world. I think ultimately his intention is to make paintings that make sense of our time.”

As for the intention of “Painting in Four Takes,” it is meant to be precisely what its name states: four separate painting shows. “We’re not trying to make some overarching point about the state of contemporary painting,” Mr. Klein said. “It’s impossible to do that.”

Instead, visitors can immerse themselves in the individual exhibitions, he said. “These are significant singular artists,” Mr. Klein said. “We’re giving people four opportunities to have a meditative experience seeing their work in depth.”

“**Painting in Four Takes**” runs through April 3 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield. Information: 203-438-4519 or aldrichart.org.