

KQED

"Laeh Glenn's Ordinary Objects' Anything But"

By Sarah Hotchkiss

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In a muggy crush of people at 49 Geary's first First Friday of the new year, Laeh Glenn's quietly surprising solo show was a welcome moment of reprieve. Ordinary Objects is an exhibition of 16 paintings, all roughly the same size (just under 17 by 13 inches), nearly all untitled, and within the same black, cream, blue, gray color scheme. The surfaces are flat, graphically rendered oil on panel, wrapped by unexpected disruptions in the framing — a bottom edge missing here, a triangular gap between frame and panel there. The uniformity of color, shape, and size make the paintings' varied content all the more thrilling.

Altman Siegel's press release claims "Glenn's work directly addresses the traditions and formal tropes of painting with a nuanced awareness of contemporary culture's excess of and accessibility to images." In this light, the uniformly-sized paintings could be read as image search thumbnails. But what query yielded this result?

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While some of the works resemble illustrations of optical illusions, others are cartoony renderings of inanimate objects. There's one grayscale still life of pears, and more than a few straight-up odes to monochromatic shaped-canvas minimalism. Glenn's hard edges and sometimes-mysterious shapes call to mind Stuart Davis, especially in the lone blue painting on the main space's right wall.

If Ordinary Objects is an attempt at stringing together different elements into a unifying statement, or at making "new meaning from familiar vocabularies," as the press release states, I'm not sure if I understand that language. To me, the 16 paintings are a cypher. Their flatness, the exclusion of all but three colors (at most), and the simply shaped but often unfamiliar elements make them symbols in a puzzle I can't quite crack.

But I also don't want to. Art critic Jerry Saltz recently complained about the glut of what he deemed "Modest Abstraction," writing, "Nowadays we see endless arrays of decorous, medium-size, handsome, harmless paintings. It's rendered mainly in black, white, gray, or, more recently, violet or blue." Check.

While Laeh Glenn's Ordinary Objects are easily grouped under this rubric, they are anything but boring. The bizarre combination of self-serious geometric shapes with subtle variations in color and Snoopy-esque cosmic apparitions is amusing, entertaining, and above all, intriguing. In a space as brightly lit and tight-lipped as Altman Siegel, a little humor goes a long way.

The strangest painting, by far, features a coffee mug against a plaid background, dark liquid pouring into it from above. The mug boasts downturned eyelashes and an adorable "o" mouth. Is the mug actually animated or are these details simply decorations on the mug's surface? Is this a glimpse into a Toonville type of world or a banal morning ritual? The areas of flat color, Glenn's hard edges and chromatic restraint are deadpan. All I could do was giggle helplessly, quietly, and move on to the next painting with a smirk on my lips.

In the same op-ed, Saltz claims, "All this art is dying to be understood. And it is, instantly, by everyone, in the exact same way." Glenn's work defies appearances — withholding the easy consumption Saltz decries to puzzling and tantalizing effect. Her linear installation, the language-like combination of simple elements into more complex structures, reminds me of R.H. Quaytman's ongoing "Chapters," in which site-specific elements are borrowed from institutions and their archives. Quaytman then represents this material in a variety of permutations as a visual narrative of her own exhibition history. If Glenn's work is a similar ongoing exploration of the artists' peculiar visual vocabulary, I look forward to the next chapter.

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