

Rhode Island School of Design

MFA Painting Program Thesis Exhibition

KATHRYN
MARKEL
——
FINE ARTS
EST. 1976

July 9th - August 15th, 2015

Opening Reception

Thursday, July 9th, 6:00-8:00pm

This exhibition features new work by ten artists, all recent Painting MFA graduates at The Rhode Island School of Design. There is no agreed upon curatorial theme, these artists' interests are too disparate for that, but there is an obvious shared condition of having spent the past two years together, studying painting or something related.

I have noticed a few themes that might run through the group: attempts to reverse- mirror the everyday, the felt contradiction that often what's perceived as more personal is more easily and collectively valued when shared; a sense of social responsibility. All of them seem to be trying to make sense of the world around them via art's capacity to contest the very privilege of a worldview.

Anthony Bragg's project is rife with the de-familiarization strategies of allegory and science fiction. He excels at the Guber-esque switch between sculpted art material and theatrical ersatz wherein one might encounter a crypt-like water fountain under-lit with blue l.e.d., or a monumental shelving unit holding uncanny stacks of re-made ready-made electric yule-tide wood logs emitting a toxic glow. Bragg's is a speculative world, where a would-be discarded space helmet might contain a post-civilization diorama seemingly from the ruins of another planet (or perhaps our own).

Irmak Canevi is a collector of remainders, a decorator of information systems, and an archivist of primitive accumulation. Embedding, imprinting, casting and suspending in tensegrity the profane detritus, residues and footprints of unspecified origin: bottle caps, rubber bands, used coffee cups, discarded flyers, fruit, paper towels and art supplies.... The work displays the elegance of an ancient calendar describing god knows what seasons or itineraries, emptied of all discernible rituals other than mildly obscured cycles of consumption— leaving ample space for fascination and poetry.

Kate Darby Slater's paintings are just as likely to lift from the aesthetics found in average Americana (football, destination weddings, tea cups, palm trees) as they are Matisse's arabesques or the suggestive atmospheres of his interiors. Slater conceives of her work in painting as a kind of mnemonic exercise, wherein the active construction of memory is forced to contend with paint's slippery modifiability and the fleeting nature of local color. Her abstractions achieve a sense of place through an unlikely mix of both Proustian recollection and cut-up method. While the results may offer little more than a residual image, her painterly facture offers something every bit as real and unverifiable as memory itself.

Andrew Giannakakis's abstract paintings are amalgamations to the amorphous, to the subtly built of surface and the process, which obscures itself, in successive layers of impasto and pentimento. While often he courts the horizons of landscape space across vertical canvases, Andrew is operating in a world so far past Guston's return to figuration, so many steps removed from the radical playgrounds of COBRA, and so familiar with the negations and impromptu accidents of informal painting as to be able to begin with the gesture as a very representational idea in itself. Giannakakis isn't satisfied with this clarification of painting language, so rather like speaking in tongues, he turns brushstrokes into suggestions of imagery only to smear them away again. Just try to see the internal organs and plumbing, beer steins, ornamental flowers and sausages you thought you saw when you first glimpsed; he deliberately extends, models and morphs his gestures into other forms or neighboring passages where the painting unfolds as the weight of pictorial space collapses in on itself.

Suzy González's hybrids assail perceptual biases that become culturally visible through processes of patterning and graphic re-covering, the couture of collage, and the ornamentation of the physiological body. Her Archimbaldo-esque figures, surrealist mannequins, decoupage statue imagery, and life-size cut outs cast into relief a likeness as recognized through difference and otherness. Using traditional art materials combined with highly coded and charged stuff like beans, corn husks, blood, hair, and taxidermy, Gonzalez covers, inscribes, camouflages, segments and impresses upon the figurative body (both animal and human) a constitutive identity. Describing her attraction to collage, she says "it allows for the healing of a violent fragmentation."

Michael R. León's paintings, videos and installations are fueled by a personal but socially encrypted symbolic narrative. Deeply layered and destined to disintegrate into fiction, they are loaded with pop and catholic icons, colonial insignia, Meso-American myth, geometries, border stories and drug war paraphernalia. His paintings sometimes take the Picabian approach to layering images of profane and nominally sacred symbols and methods of painting. Leon's anti-allegorical tableaus are composed of interrupted views of place and figuration, where formal divisions and segues between symbolic forms and figures obscure and marshal any single reading of narrative. The hymnal is all heavy metal from here; his work is populated by a bestiary of auto-body, animal and mythical saints/devils, while his brush contends with street styles, comics, tattoos, gestural painting, gothic and late renaissance themes of cultural cannibalism anthropophagy, death, sacrifice, and identity.

Jon Merritt's work both establishes and evades the obvious semiotic reference points of geometric abstraction and neo-modernism, opting instead to use right angles to shape assemblages imbued with a more fluid form of cultural possibility. If that seems like a lot to chew on, try sitting down to eat at one of his painted constructivist tables. It is nearly impossible to describe their 8-bit romanesque design, except in references too complex and numerous to serve his work's directness and simplicity of form: part symbolic ping-pong, part Bauhaus industrialism, recombinant forms of animistic or vegetal mutation, Ikea legs, primary-color-painted wooden block "Montessori minimalism", gothic pattern mixed with the pythagorean, Persian/Caucasian textile narratives about locales and cycles, the Deleuzian diagrammatic vs. the symmetrical classical-ized forms and veneers of 80's postmodern Italian design.

Whitney Oldenberg's work is heavy. Literally. She often binds her paint with absurdly heavy and rugged materials like rocks, plaster, wool, and vermiculite, in order to construct sculptures and paintings depicting lightweight semi-soft everyday objects. Oldenbergian indeed; in her own words, her task is to "anchor the subject in actual, undeniable presence rather than free floating and impersonal intensities." Only an artist with a confessional sense of humor could make a statement with such gravitas for work that lends gravel to the pliable, chewing gum- whimsy of her particularly colorful and shape defying sense of form.

Sarah Pater's paintings might first appear as minimalist monochromes, only to reveal slow imagery in the subtle differentiation of colors across the picture plane. The aesthetics of emptiness and attention drift on-the-clock take over; longing and boredom are conveyed through painted lines resembling window blinds, pictorial shadows on walls, the soft efflorescence of O.S.H.A. lighting, indoor plants, a prisoner's cinema imagined across the corners of walls and drop ceilings. Pater's subtly humorous subject is the strange spatial absence found at the intersection of office space and office time; where the question of utility is fraught with the anxieties of "spending" and "wasting", as opposed to the reverie of "passing" time and "traversing" space.

Fernando Pezzino's recent mural scale paintings play with the aesthetic codes of large scale neo-modernist geometry. They would sit comfortably in both transportation hubs or destination museums, that is, if they had anything to do with such spaces at all. The simple geometric schemes of his gridded and puzzle-pieced abstractions evoke color-coded information graphics, municipal signs, soccer teams, flags, or maps. Despite their scale and constructivist form, Pezzino's affinities are more tribal and intimate than global and distanced. His abstractions continually fragment and coalesce between individual parts, interstitial passages and interrelated forms; they are painted over a subcutaneous-like filaria of twine, which is layered into the canvas priming and then removed from the surface, as if pressing up beneath the color from the ground of the painting.

Jackie Gendel
Assistant Professor
Rhode Island School of Design