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Art Review

A Show Goes Heavy on a Traditional Medium Yet Feels Fresh



MULTIMEDIA Jaclyn Conley's "Parched of Reason," far left, and a video still from "Blue Plasma" by Robert Federico are in "Full Circle: Ten Years of Radius" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

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We all know how commemorative group shows work. They don't, for the most part, since the artworks are often hung randomly about a room. Not so with "Full Circle: Ten Years of Radius," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. The guest curator, Regine Basha, from Arthouse in Austin, Tex., has made a valiant effort to group works by 14 alumni of Radius, an artist development program run by the museum and the Ridgefield Guild of Artists, by medium and subject. But in the end, the show as a whole is so beautiful and thought-provoking, the arrangement doesn't really matter.

The art is installed throughout the first few rooms of the museum's big, open upstairs galleries. It is not under-hung, but there is certainly enough white wall around the 20 or so works, pretty much one per artist, to give you enough space to contemplate them without the faintest possibility of distraction. Two works by each participating artist might have helped to fill things out.

Given that our understanding of art has undergone tremendous upheaval in the past couple of decades, it is surprising to find so much painting in this show. It is painting, what's more, that uses traditional art materials, mostly oil on linen, and adheres to centuries-old genres, including landscape, history painting and portraiture. It is 2009, right?

I am curious about this focus because digital technologies have radically altered how images are made and experienced. Meanwhile, our understanding of visual art has been torn from its roots in ritual and tradition and thrust into the context of mass media and cultural studies. Art today has a very different look, purpose and social position than it did a century ago, or even four decades back.

This is not to say that the work here is reactionary, for much of the painting in this show suggests a nuanced awareness of the world in which we live. For instance, Jaclyn Conley's dramatic,

skillfully painted mis-en-scènes possess a real cinematic quality, while paintings by **Joseph Smolinski**, Ben Weiner, Christopher Mir and Bryan Jones touch on environmental issues and concerns.

These paintings belong to our time. It is just that they look backward as much as they look forward in their ideas and influence, suggesting the possibility of a new shift toward reclaiming some of the qualities that distinguish visual art from other imagery.

Whatever the outcome of these efforts, art today is now part of a broader visual culture. This, too, is reflected in the works here — from Paul Favello’s digital photographs of appropriated war-related imagery to Kelly Bigelow Becerra’s collage prints made of scanned imagery cut and combined into pictorial vignettes that re-create memorable scenes from the artist’s childhood.

Art as a form of writing seems to lie behind much of the abstract art that is assembled for the exhibition, some of it quite good. Jim Hett’s eye-popping, odd mixed-media drawing, “They’re All the Same Except They’re All Different” (1998-2008), presents a dense accretion of colored lines slowly built up in a cumulative process over long periods of time. It is casual yet obsessive; art as daily ritual.

The same calligraphic quality underlies Beth Gilfilen’s abstract painting, “The Big Hunch” (2008), which is based on exploratory, expressionistic drawing. She paints with no fixed or prescribed ideas in mind, simply allowing the imagery to develop and unravel intuitively. The results are lyrical, colorful and fun, but also startlingly strange. They even suggest an alchemical process.

There is some video art in the show, as might be expected, but not much. “Blue Plasma” (2008) by Robert Federico magnifies simple scenes — fresh water flowing freely over a rock, the flickering of a flame — to the point of abstraction. He makes the familiar strange, a technique that also harks back to the past, specifically the early-20th-century Russian Modernist avant garde.

Perhaps it’s a symptom of the cultural moment, but on the face of many of the works assembled for this show, art seems to be heading back to the future.

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