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Art Review: Michael Reafsnyder at Western Project

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by Christopher Knight

Eight raucous and deftly handled new paintings by Michael Reafsnyder continue his delirious engagement with painterly hedonism. Drizzled, dribbled, smeared, scraped, scuffed and slippery swipes of bright, wet, acrylic color engulf the canvases like nontoxic spills. Inevitably, a small arc topped by a couple of little circles emerges somewhere in the boisterous field –Reafsnyder's signature take on a smiley face, squeezed directly from the paint tube. Amid all the high-spirited energy at Western Project, a small surprise occurs: The paintings are nearly upstaged by a half-dozen modest ceramic sculptures sitting quietly on plywood pedestals. These are not Reafsnyder's first ceramics, but they are his most assured.



Where the paintings are fast, the sculptures are slow – hand-built slabs of clay that unfurl and unfold like dense bouquets of jungle blossoms or exotic undersea creatures. (The style is not similar, but the sensuous, sometimes erotic forms allude to the brilliant work of Kenneth Price.) The color is likewise different from the paintings, more low-key and pastel, with matte areas intermingled with shiny glazing. Brighter bursts are mostly restricted to the form's curvilinear edges.

The unexpected result is small objects (nothing is over 18 inches) that look like animated drawings in space. The smiley faces also turn up, but Reafsnyder tears them asunder: One eye might encircle the end of a cylinder, while the grin assumes the form of a rolled length of colored clay. The joy is built right into the complex forms, which gives these sculptures the appearance of sentient life