



LAS VEGAS CITY LIFE

"A Gorgeous Mess"

BY KATIE ANANIA

More: Michael Reafsnyder, Painting and Sculpture 2002-2005 embodies a special kind of abundance that stems not just from a buildup of materials (although there's plenty of that), but a buildup of history. Reafsnyder's work, done mostly in oils or acrylics, but also on exhibit with drawings, bronze casts, and sculpture at the Las Vegas Art Museum, exudes an elegant yet balls-to-the-wall cheerfulness that sidesteps its own historicization while highlighting the absurdity of some of art's favorite movements.

Like Abstract Expressionism, for instance. Reafsnyder's principal method of artmaking is to squeeze paint directly from the tube and apply it, unblended, to the canvas. Jackson Pollock, you might remember, used a variation of this method to acknowledge paint as a direct extension of the soul. He let the paint fall where it fell in order to express hardship, joy, the chaos of the urban landscape, and existential torment. The thing is, Reafsnyder plays with the paint after it lands -- color is squeezed out and forms wormlike, three-dimensional passages on the canvas that are built up, pushed aside, re-formed, and re-textured with brushes, sticks, and squeegees. It's a thick, gorgeous mess.

Picture driving the Florida turnpike in love-bug season, when clouds of small insects, locked in the act of coitus, meet their death on your windshield. The glee you experience in re-animating these bugs with your wipers is insurmountable, and so are Reafsnyder's compositions. They're all about fierce, warm-hearted glee and the toppling of "triumphant modernism," which is serious, too serious for us. Imagine worms of paint being squeezed from their tubes and systematically smashed together to a soundtrack of Switched-On Bach.

These paintings are often garnished with smiley faces made of the same worms of paint,

sometimes with plastic googly eyes. There's some playing around with Pop art here, because he's quoting a notorious graphic phenomenon. The smiley face is the ultimate expression of vacuity and promise, and this precise gesture of cool cheerfulness bridges the old, new, absurd, joyful, parodic, and historical elements in his work.

Reafsnyder's bronze pieces provide another re-examination of the painting process, and an even more material connection to Pop coolness. These are done by painting a painting, casting its surface in metal, and throwing the painting away. It's an act of tracing, which means that we're not supposed to think about the painting and how authentic it is, but rather the process by which it's recorded and remembered. Think of the puns: The artwork is a cast-off; the art object is re-cast as a frozen, archived memory.

The drawings are another choice cut, which appear as a series mounted on a wall and showcase the artist's love of fluid forms. The forms are so fluid, in fact, that I'm reminded of my first look at a Helen Frankenthaler painting-- not in terms of composition or intent, but because I remember thinking that Frankenthaler's canvases must be trying to express depth, because there was so much paint soaked into the canvas that I thought she wanted me to imagine it going down in there, disappearing past the smooth cloth. I was wrong about Frankenthaler, and Reafsnyder is wrong here -- gloriously, superbly wrong. There are square smiley faces -- blockheads, and I hope this is code for all the disappointments the art world has to offer. They swim, and are broken and re-mixed across the paper in a leaky, liquid, decidedly careless way.

Reafsnyder takes a medium -- paint -- that was, in a certain context, reduced to pure flatness, and gives it a new topography. He's also about this backward practice where you sort of do things wrong but always in a symphonic way. And, as the first show in the Las Vegas Art Museum's new "Contemporaries" series, as well as Reafsnyder's first solo museum show, this collection of Merrie Melodies invites as many wrong turns, incorrect readings, and preposterous glee as history could very well allow or imagine.

More by Michael Reafsnyder

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**Las Vegas Art Museum
9600 W. Sahara Ave.**

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