

Michael Reafsnyder's philosophy of painting comes across as forthright and elemental:

Take a blob of oil paint.

Do something to it.

Do something else to it.

Etc., etc.

Reafsnyder's sixteen small wooden panels in this, his second solo show in Los Angeles, rarely get much larger than 12 or 16 inches on a side (one is a modest 20 by 27 inches, and by comparison to the rest



feels immense). Yet, each one seems to have required tubes and tubes of paint to make. Bright and insistent, like small eager children vying for attention, they together describe a full inventory of application techniques; oil paint is piled, smeared, scraped, dragged, combed, pressed, smudged, buttered, blotted, daubed, pounced, and run over with a squeegee or a spatula. A brush

might also have been used but it's just about the only tool that doesn't make its presence clearly felt, with nary a slathered brushstroke left visible to the eye.

Sometimes the paint is left lying on the surface, just as it fell when squeezed directly from the tube. Then the skinny, snaky cylinder of crimson, cobalt, lemon yellow, or uncorrupted white reads as a three-dimensional line, somewhere between an element of traditional drawing and sculptural high relief. Elsewhere the paint has been scraped down so close to the bone that color is transformed from a blaring declaration into a whispered memory barely heard. Occasionally the pure pigments melt together into muddy puddles of brown *merde*, but more often they shriek in primary and secondary hues.

Here and there a word has been scratched into the surface of the painted panel, like a petroglyph on an ancient rock or a graffiti-style inscription on a neighborhood wall. The artist's name, occasionally coupled with the initials of his country, seem to have been carved with a stick (the wrong end of that unseen brush). The charged territory of identity politics is thus signified—notably, by using only the most rudimentary of means—but it is casually regarded as simply inseparable from the stuff of painting itself.

Reafsnyder's work has been considered in terms of the postwar European CoBrA group (in particular, the raucous easel pictures of Karel Appel and Asger Jorn come to mind). The chaotic surfaces, torrents of aggressive color, and childlike glee of his paintings certainly seem cognizant of that

somewhat critically beleaguered precedent. While the vivid soup of CoBrA paintings frequently offer up images loosely associated with Northern European folklore, the corporate spirit of American consumer culture is embedded in the surface of Reafsnyder's art. Each painting turns out to be a visual essay on the Smiley Face, that bland symbol of vacant cheerfulness and empty satisfaction that has proliferated in the popular consciousness for more than thirty years.

As employed by Reafsnyder, though, the Smiley Face seems utterly without irony. There's nothing snide or smirking in these paintings, nor do they appear as escapist admonitions of the "don't worry/be happy" variety. In fact, there's something fierce and creepy about the button eyes and toothless grins that finally emerge into view from his sloshing seas of colorful paint. "Dialectical materialism has taught us that conscience depends on social circumstances," the CoBrA group asserted in 1949, "and when these prevent us from being satisfied, our needs impel us to discover our desires." The social circumstance of American painting today is engorged with Puritan reticence and rebukes, which not only forestalls contentment but also makes a mockery of the very ambition. Reafsnyder has found a way to sharply criticize that morbid, smothering tendency without giving up on spontaneity and pleasure. His small and darkly sunny paintings stand as little tantrums of defiant joy.

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Michael Reafsnyder
Untitled, 1999
Oil on panel
10" x 14"