

FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 1997



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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Inside Out: Michael Reafsnyder's compact paintings at Blum & Poe Gallery are some of the strangest of the season. After the sneers, guffaws and snickers they initially elicit subside, it's clear that this young abstract painter's solo debut ranks among the best of recent memory.

His modestly scaled oils on panel hit your visual system like a punch in the eye. Viewers don't *respond*

to these exceptional images as much as they *react* to them. Involuntary and extreme, such physical interaction demonstrates that something like instinct takes over in the presence of Reafsnyder's art.

That's no mean feat. Especially since Reafsnyder's panels are painted in a loose, gestural style that recalls the gut-wrenching, soul-searching flourishes of much Abstract Expressionism.

In pointed contrast to that style, which meant to plumb the depths of the artist's psyche in a quest for authenticity, Reafsnyder's paintings put the instincts of viewers front and center. Profoundly contemporary, these loaded works turn the old-fashioned idea of art as self-expression inside out. Like Rorschach blots, they tell more about viewers than whoever made them.

Plus, Reafsnyder's panels wreak havoc on conventional wisdom about abstract painting. Painted primarily in reds, yellows and blues squeezed straight from the tube, his furiously worked surfaces look as if they're the dimwitted second cousins of Gerhard Richter's exquisitely refined paintings.

Nevertheless, Reafsnyder's pictures do not rely on any sort of "aw shucks," country bumpkin charm. Cuteness has no place in these fiercely civilized paintings. Although many include stick-figure faces staring straight at you, these goofy components only intensify the jittery edginess generated by Reafsnyder's weirdly electrifying art.

■ *Blum & Poe Gallery, 2042 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 453-8311, through May 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*