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WEST COAST ART + DESIGN



“Michael Reafsnyder: Surface Tension”, Kim Biel, July 2007

“Originally, I wanted to make paintings that were like hamburgers,” Michael Reafsnyder says with an utterly straight face. In the back room at Western Project in Culver City, Reafsnyder sits beside a selection of his paintings, large and small. One of his recent ceramic figures peers over his shoulder with a bemused expression. Reafsnyder holds up his hand in a C-shape, miming an impossibly fat hamburger of the variety that exists only in advertising photographs. “So, you have a hamburger, and from the side you look at it and you can see all the ingredients individually, right? But then you could bite into it and you’d taste it all at once. I wanted a painting where you have all the ingredients, but then all the ingredients together. You can see all the layers but you still have the hamburger that you can enjoy as a whole.”

If Reafsnyder's paintings are indeed hamburgers, then they are well on their way to international franchise. With shows in Australia, Spain, Austria, Germany and Singapore in the decade since receiving his MFA from Art Center, Reafsnyder's work has tapped into an international hunger. Reafsnyder recalls the advice of his professor, the critic and painter Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, that "the most radical thing you could do right now was claim to be an abstract expressionist." Reafsnyder continues, "You never really hear people say that. That gave me a lot of leeway."

Though an angst-ridden, testosterone-driven avant-garde may characterize the history of abstract expressionism, Reafsnyder says firmly: "That kind of heroics is where I hop off." Instead, he admires the "roughness" of the imagery created by the second-generation abstract expressionists Joan Mitchell and Norman Blum. Reafsnyder is also interested in the work of the artists of the COBRA group, active in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam between 1949 and 1952. Again he draws the line at what he refers to as their psychological probing about the desire to return to the childlike. While Reafsnyder's paintings may achieve a similarly unencumbered aesthetic, they are opposed to the work of the COBRA artists in that there are no psychological monsters hiding under his bed. "I didn't want my paintings to be put off as just [an attempt to regain the childlike]," Reafsnyder explains. "I wanted people to see that my paintings are composed, and they are made to guide you in a very specific manner. It's not just a big fur ball. Viewing the painting is highly structured. So putting the armature on top forces you to follow that structure."

This construction is not always immediately obvious. For instance, in Reafsnyder's 2005 painting *Skyrider*, a thick band of smooth pumpkin orange, ultramarine, white and olive paint divides the canvas into thirds, making a liquid descent from the top right edge. As it trails off into the lower third of the painting, this energy is picked up by a thicker, darker swath of luminous jade, navy, and royal blues, which form an arcing diagonal speeding back towards the top of the painting. On top of this, a set of deceptively mechanical markings, oozing colors that are precisely applied, form a sort of railroad track, guiding the viewer back to the roiling center of the composition.

This contrast, between controlled structure and the exuberant freedom of movement that distinguishes Reafsnyder's paintings, does not equal automatic success. He admits, "I destroy tons of paintings. Sometimes a painting seems done, but it's done in a very predictable manner or in a manner that I've mastered before, like the easy solution. So then I start scraping and removing and trying to undo what I know. And when I start scraping and removing sometimes it becomes a big muddy disaster. Sometimes I come back the next day and say, 'Wow, that was horrible.' It's just kind of embarrassing. I always imagine someone coming in and saying, 'Ugh!' I think sometimes I also destroy some that had good solutions, but I just wasn't

confident enough to keep them.” Given the popularity of Reafsnyder’s work, however, it’s easier to imagine someone entering his studio and screaming, ‘No! Stop!’ as Reafsnyder rips the canvas from the frame. His eye for the editing process has ensured that those paintings fortunate enough to escape his studio are all vibrant and highly articulated, the layers of paint legible both on their own and as a whole.

Reafsnyder also recalls Gilbert-Rolfe’s insistence that his students take themselves seriously. “He talked a lot about good art coming out of bad ideas. Or silly ideas that lead you into interesting terrain. Try your bad ideas instead of trying to be a sociologist or theorist,” Reafsnyder paraphrases. “It’s more of an acknowledgment that you don’t have everything under control and that when things are frivolous or silly, interesting things can happen.” Gesturing over the surface of a nearby canvas he follows with his hands the trajectory of several thick swipes of paint as they melt into the blue shadows of the composition, “Everything was going into the middle and then these forms emerged. When I paint, I get so into it and so wrapped up in it that I always wondered how I’d detach myself from the paintings. So, way back when, 10 years ago, I was concerned with how to place marks in the surface of the painting that would serve as an indication that I’d finished with it. There was always a mark that I would make, like the sign-off, like now it can go into the world. I think of the smiley face as that finishing mark. Sometimes it sets the attitude for the painting, and it’s kind of a friendly gesture for the viewer. Either people are okay with it or they hate it. I’ve never had a mild reaction to it.” He pauses and adds, “Which is fine.”

In a recent phone interview, the critic Dave Hickey also spoke of the insouciance present in Reafsnyder’s work. “His paintings have the virtue of not caring. In other words, they aren’t particularly worried if you like them or if they’re the right thing to do. Even in an ecological age, his paintings are still about waste, about a conspicuous consumption of paint. They have a sort of aristocratic élan. They take enormous chances.” Standing in front of a selection of canvases it seems quite natural to anthropomorphize Reafsnyder’s paintings in this way, to let them go out into the world and do some work on their own, no matter what people think of them. Reafsnyder is deeply influenced by James Hayward, who was also an instructor at Art Center when Reafsnyder was working towards his MFA there in the mid-1990s. He recalls buying oil paint from Hayward and discussing painting. Less than a decade later Reafsnyder and Hayward would show side by side, in “Step Into Liquid,” the critically noted 2005 exhibition curated by Hickey at Otis Art Institute’s Ben Maltz Gallery, and in traveling shows organized by Hayward himself. Hickey directly relates the carefree language of Reafsnyder’s abstract expressionism to Hayward who, Hickey says, “discovered a way to make wet, messy paintings without bearing with it the whole accoutrement of self-expression. It’s messy in a lighthearted way. The paintings don’t have about them an aura of suffering.” In other words, there’s nothing terrible lurking behind these friendly facades.

As Reafsnyder describes his process in creating a large work, he points to several disparate areas where the ground of Caribbean turquoise still shows through. But the structure, or the armature to borrow Reafsnyder's architectural metaphor, is on top, the drawn paths of color offering up a distinct cognitive route. Like footholds on a climbing wall, they give his viewer a path to ascend, albeit a circuitous one, from which she can then rappel into the depths of the painting. "There's no premixing," Reafsnyder says, "everything happens on the surface. It's kind of a nod to the idea that the canvas is a place of activity. And it is—it's where everything happens. The big [paintings] are tough because it's just me and I'm sort of battling with them, moving up and down. And my studio's small, so when I paint I only have a couple feet on the side each way, so I'm right there in the painting. Sometimes it's hard to get back. I love the idea, though, of never really being able to take it all in at once." Reafsnyder is quite comfortable with this need for a constant, almost frenetic, negotiation of space.

Most of Reafsnyder's paintings are created in a single day, during his working hours between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. His recent shift from oil paint to acrylic has only served to accelerate this already rapid process. He explains, "With oil you could always go back into [the painting]. You could make decisions, but you could flub them a little bit, you could manipulate the timing a little bit. But with acrylic those decisions have to be made faster, and they become much more specific." It was due to those material considerations of oil paint that Reafsnyder's signature swaths of color are made with all sorts of knives: from palette knives to plastering trowels, even baking knives, which he admits to purchasing, with a grin and a sheepishly put-on French accent, at the upscale kitchen store Sur La Table.

It's easy to picture Reafsnyder working quickly. Pent up in the back of Western Project, his Los Angeles gallery, a small space that he says is larger than his studio, he can barely stay still: he is often stretching his legs, bending into semi-yogic postures while balanced in the seat of his chair. Still, his paintings are more than a record of this activity. Very conscious of his break from the tradition of heroic individualism that defined the early abstract expressionists, Reafsnyder's paintings are much more a celebration of themselves than of the artist who created them.

Born in Orange, Calif., in 1969, Reafsnyder still resides there today. A self-described "homing pigeon," he is content to let his paintings travel the world while he himself travels back and forth between the studio and his home each day, pressing forward his ongoing inquiry, discovering a host of unlikely solutions in paint. This great variety that is present in his work was highlighted this spring in a solo show at R.B. Stevenson Gallery in La Jolla entitled "Whirl" that featured nearly a dozen recent works.

Ultimately, the success of Reafsnyder's paintings lies in their ability to escape any easy over-determination. They remain defiantly lighthearted or "messy," as Hickey describes them, despite the natural tendency for such wild entropy to resolve into a smooth and consistently ordered state. There is great pleasure in watching this struggle as it unfolds on the canvas and continually subverts the expectation of any simple solution. "Sometimes I fear that I'm a little classical, like a Hans Hofmann abstractionist, like you have this balance here and here," Reafsnyder says, pointing to opposite corners of the painting. "So sometimes it's about trying to undo that. Sometimes I get to that point in the painting and then try to destroy it. When I finally undo it, that's when I feel like the painting is done."

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