

Michael Reafsnyder

Splatters, Smears, and Smileys Collide in
Michael Reafsnyder's New Paintings
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The canvases of California-based painter Michael Reafsnyder pulsate with energy. Layers of abstract marks bear the traces of their making as paint is directly applied from the tube, weaving together to create dense, intricate topographies. It's not always easy to enter the work: one must follow multiple strands of color before a narrative opens up and the viewer is absorbed by the sensual space Reafsnyder offers.

Each painting is completed in one sitting—a necessary constraint that, as Reafsnyder recently told Artsy, “keeps the painting from looking like a battlefield.” This approach, made easier by a switch from oil paint to acrylic, allows the artist to explore the canvas as a site of constant action. Each dab, smear, or gush of color is followed by an instinctive reaction until the whole is wielded into its precarious form. “Often there are false starts or paintings that go astray,” he explained. “Those paintings get destroyed but the information gleaned is used to make the final painting.” Each painting is the combined result of learned memory and sheer spontaneity.

Within the compositions that emerge, color seems to be the guiding principle. In *Astro Float* (2015), vertical swipes of orange, yellow, red, and blue form a skeleton for the piece—interrupted by mottled green in the upper corner, swirling into the linearity of the under layer. According to Reafsnyder, color doesn't create structure but actually precedes it and “hopefully unhinges” it. In his work, each added element serves to destabilize the others, creating a delirious logic that is unique to each painting.

For Reafsnyder, the balance between being “serious” and providing pleasure is crucial. “Navigating Ab-Ex painting and its purported seriousness is of primary importance to me,” he said, “especially having perhaps ‘misread’ the movement

upon initially encountering it and seeing the work as joyous propositions.” Some works bear a direct mark of this first take on the movement: a smiley face signature. In *Sherbet Slide* (2015), the cacophony of orange and blue interspersed with greens, black, and white, recedes once the iconic face is spotted, cheekily peeking out at the viewer. “This recurring image is often the final gesture and distances me from the work while allowing a generous space for the viewer and setting the mood of the painting,” he noted. “I never conceived of the image as a smiley per se, rather as an invitation to an experience of excess and defiant joy.”

by Alexandra Alexa for Artsy