

Michael Reafsnyder at Mark Moore Gallery

By Shana Nys Dambrot

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Not so much composed as engineered are Michael Reafsnyder's new paintings. In attempting to describe his technique, one wants verbs in lieu of adjectives. One feels compelled to speak of the artist's own physical movement in applying the paint rather than the trajectory of the viewer's gaze which it precipitates. For although the surface topography is vibrant, and the florid intensity of the colors sublime, it is the intricate architectural structure of his brushless brushwork that ultimately captures the eye and the imagination.

Reafsnyder's practice is anachronistic, gestural and gloriously impractical. It revives an interest in painting's sensual aspects not often seen since Ingres spoke luridly of the artist's brush as an extension of his own hand and eye. More literal than figurative realism, yet far less chaotic and arbitrary than pure abstract expressionism. Reafsnyder reintroduces a hedonistic urge for the paint itself, yet remains engaged with formal considerations. This kind of subversive statement addresses the rivalry between line and color, which has persisted from the renaissance to modernism and beyond, by building linear shapes out of pure color. In 1904, the French critic Fernand Caussy wrote that color was "brute and inorganic" and that a preference for it over classical drawing was to be dismissed as nothing more than an exaggerated feeling for nature. The following year witnessed the inception of "fauvism" – a term originally used sarcastically to denote artists who stubbornly insisted on working with colors that seemed beastly and out of control.

In this context, painting such as this can be understood as an antidote to the struggle with rarefied digital-age graphic flatness. By way of countermand, Reafsnyder's compositional networks are distinctly modular; crawling across his surfaces like the ivy that infiltrates, disintegrates and also holds the old stone house together. These splashing, gurgling, half-organic edifices are rife with invisible lavender, chartreuse and vermilion highlights. The paintings' shadows, tones and caverns absorb the light even as primary colors and aggressive impasto kick it back. Despite the frenetic energy at play, the wide boulevards of compressed (read: squeegeed) pigments underscore their curious sense of balanced intention.

The paintings are heavy and deep, containing complex cosmologies that are nevertheless quite devoid of content. Instead, it is the artist's body that is recast in them as a suitable subject for abstract painting. The swooping, smearing, squeezing, oozing and congealing of pile paint onto the canvases conveys the extreme physicality of Reafsnyder's process. His flesh and bone presence in the work is indelible and undeniable; it's obviously time-consuming and labor intensive character creates an effect closer to that of sculpture or performance art than to the stubborn two dimensionality of most painting and drawing. He demonstrates a Dionysian exuberance and a predilection for baroque excess, yet in the Smiley Face, Reafsnyder has chosen the simplest icon which to tether the works to popular culture. This last is indicative of the multiple levels on which the work succeeds, providing plenty of material for the more theory-driven viewers as well as piles of pure sensory enjoyment for the rest.