

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Squeeze, scrape, squeeze

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

When you look at a painting that you really like, it's common to break out in a grin. Disconcertingly, paintings by **Michael Reafsnnyder** are in the habit of smiling back.

At Michael Moore Gallery, three large new paintings and two smaller ones show the artist complicating the impressive work he's shown there in his last two outings. Hefty loads of thick, chaotic oil paint in brilliant colors continue his eccentric homage to the 1950s painters of the CoBrA (Copenhagen/Brussels/Amsterdam) group — Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky, etc. — Europeans who riffled through folk art, children's scribbling and prehistoric imagery in search of freely expressive motifs.

Also still on board is the cheesy 1960s icon of the smiley face — an emblematic half-circle topped with two dots. Made from thick coils of oil paint, the blank stare and its dumb grin diabolically update the CoBrA motifs of modern alienation to the scale of mass culture.

Like the paint, the logo is a sign for pleasure. But given the almost violent palette in which it is embedded, this bliss flirts with danger.

Reafsnnyder has vastly enlarged the size of his paintings. The largest work here is 6 feet by nearly 8 feet. The concentrated power of his earlier, more mod-



Mark Moore Gallery

SMILE! In "Grace" (2002), Michael Reafsnnyder applies paint in thick coils straight from the tube.

est works explodes.

Forget about brushstrokes. Paint on the surface is smeared with a squeegee, then more paint is layered in swoops, squiggles and arabesques by squeezing it straight from the tube. Reafsnnyder gets an infectious rhythm going — squeezing, scraping, squeezing — that suggests release and renewal, not to mention a scatological spin on creativity.

He has also enlarged his field of references. In addition to CoBrA, the push-pull color theories of Hans Hofmann come to mind. So do the big, august abstrac-

tions of Germany's Gerhard Richter, whose use of a squeegee to smear his lush paint tamps down their expressiveness, making them seem remote, austere and one step removed. Reafsnnyder's smears nod in that direction, but august gravity is replaced by wild-eyed charm.

His exuberant abstract fields of lush paint create a visual bramble, from which a rudimentary figure lurches into view. A wide vertical swath is made with the squeegee at the center, and a curved swath tops it. Distinctly phallic, this mushroom-headed figure is adorned with the smiley

face, and some have snowman-style buttons down the front. The weird, playfully erotic kick is self-deprecating, and it contains a sly element of surprise.

Mark Moore Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-3031, through May 10. Closed Sunday and Monday.