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### Melding divergent forces, with a smile

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer

The five large-scale paintings in **Michael Reafsnyder's** enchanting exhibition "Aqualala" at Western Project — his first L.A. solo show in four years — are among his most deft and accomplished. Slathered, watery blues and deep purples are painted wet-on-wet, in great gushes of sensuous color.

Licks, swipes and squiggles of crimson, white, bubble-gum pink, turquoise and other hues punctuate them. Each canvas is contained, its edges a strict boundary for the paint's otherwise Dionysian delirium, while Reafsnyder's trademark smiley-face still ices his pictorial cupcake.

What's new here is sculpture — typically (for this artist) eccentric in its joyful fusion of high-minded material abstraction with goofy, down-and-dirty pleasure. If the imaginative paintings suggest rapture of the deep, the sculptures bring us the mermaids one might hallucinate there.

Bumpy, lumpy blobs of heavily worked and kneaded clay are glazed in splashes of thin, watery color — and yes, the smiley-face grin turns up, seeming right at home. The sculptures' sizes are modest, each a couple of fistfuls of clay mounted atop a pedestal. They all have the presence of glorified knickknacks, at once treasured yet disposable.

Reafsnyder is adept at walking a razor-sharp line between seemingly incompatible differences.

These mermaids merge Willem de Kooning's "Clam Diggers" with Capodimonte porcelain figurines. It shouldn't work, but it does. Perhaps the subject — a lingering, multicultural myth of being torn between comfortable origins and a hostile world — is not quite so eccentric as it first seems.

**Western Project**, 3830 Main St., Culver City, (310) 838-0609, through March 17. Closed Sundays and Mondays