

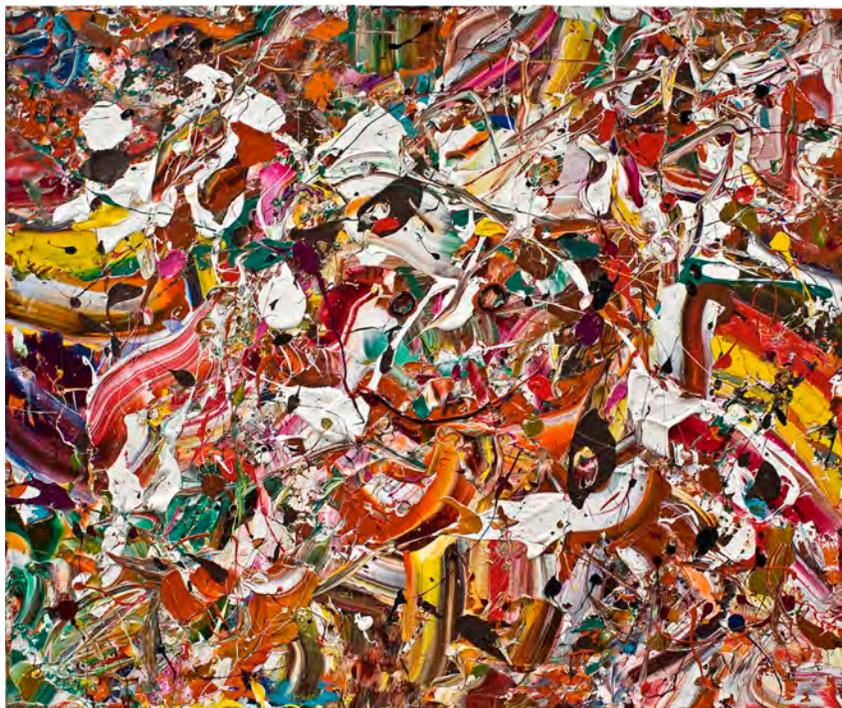
ARTnews

by Doug McClemont
March 2011

In Michael Reafsnyder's joyously frenzied paintings, each rectangular picture, with its layers of drips, swirls, daubs, and arcs, in every hue imaginable, was also a map of its own creation. Together with his cacophonous multicolored, biomorphic ceramic sculptures, these works seemed primarily designed to energize their audiences.

For his showy topography, Reafsnyder used a variety of application methods: spreading the paint with a flat edge, allowing it to drip from above, applying it directly from the tube, touching it with his hand (or perhaps his arm), or, while the paint was still sticky, lifting it off the surface. The lush, thick surfaces put one in mind of cake frosting as much as they did Abstract Expressionism. Arguably Gerhard Richter's spirit was being channeled—and challenged—as was Jackson Pollock's. For the only nonabstract element in the works, the artist used a primitive smiley face—two circles above an up-turned curve—as a deliberately silly trademark. This symbol appeared in most of the large works and reminded viewers not to take the art-historical references too seriously.

Above all, the lovely disorder of color in each gestural painting captured a sense of perpetual motion, and indeed the viewer's eyes were compelled to keep moving within each work. The five sculptures in the rear gallery were displayed on individual plinths, and each reiterated the exuberance of the paintings. Titles such as *Paint Feast*, *Love Field*, and *Good Day Sunshine* (all 2010) also conveyed the artist's impulse for excess and his feel-good approach to abstraction.



THE LOS ANGELES TIMES
March 12, 2010

**Michael Reafsnyder at
Western Project**

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer



Eight raucous and deftly handled new paintings by **Michael Reafsnyder** continue his delirious engagement with painterly hedonism. Drizzled, dribbled, smeared, scraped, scuffed and slippery swipes of bright, wet, acrylic color engulf the canvases like nontoxic spills. Inevitably, a small arc topped by a couple of little circles emerges somewhere in the boisterous field -- Reafsnyder's signature take on a smiley face, squeezed directly from the paint tube.

Amid all the high-spirited energy at Western Project, a small surprise occurs: The paintings are nearly upstaged by a half-dozen modest ceramic sculptures sitting quietly on plywood pedestals. These are not Reafsnyder's first ceramics, but they are his most assured.

Where the paintings are fast, the sculptures are slow -- hand-built slabs of clay that unfurl and unfold like dense bouquets of jungle blossoms or exotic undersea creatures. (The style is not similar, but the sensuous, sometimes erotic forms allude to the brilliant work of Kenneth Price.) The color is likewise different from the paintings, more low-key and pastel, with matte areas intermingled with shiny glazing. Brighter bursts are mostly restricted to the form's curvilinear edges.

The unexpected result is small objects (nothing is over 18 inches) that look like animated drawings in space. The smiley faces also turn up, but Reafsnyder tears them asunder: One eye might encircle the end of a cylinder, while the grin assumes the form of a rolled length of colored clay. The joy is built right into the complex forms, which gives these sculptures the appearance of sentient life.

Western Project, 2762 S. La Cienega Blvd., Culver City, (310) 838-0609, through April 3. www.western-project.com

Surface Tension
ART LTD. June, 2007
By Kim Beil

"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."

Jun 2007 by kim beil

Michael Reafsnyder at R.B. Stevenson Gallery

Artweek, June 2007.

By Victoria Reed



"Floating", 2007, acrylic on linen, 35 x 44 in

Garish, silly, whimsical and satirical, aptly describe Michael Reafsnyder's paintings, and these are terms that no self-respecting mid-twentieth century abstract expressionist painter would accept. But Reafsnyder's paintings exist for the pure joy of being abstract except that it isn't a familiar type of abstraction; they are a very twenty-first century twist on modern American art.

Part of Reafsnyder's appeal is that he is subtly making us rethink abstract art, evidenced by the initial disorientation felt upon entering his recent exhibition. Although Reafsnyder's technique is familiar—broad areas of thick paint cover each canvas with the painter's strokes, gestures, slashes, and drips—his colors and subject matter unsettle. Roughly 3-by-4 feet, the palette is too bright and unreal. The pink isn't a soft hue seen at sunset or the pale color of skin, but it is a vivid cotton candy color. Turquoise doesn't resemble that natural stone as much as a piece of plastic, and the blue could only have come out of an acrylic paint tube. These hyper-realistic hues are best suited to a Web page.

More unsettling still is the artist's play on subject matter. Amid the expressive strokes and broad painterly gestures, Reafsnyder usually inserts a cartoon face. Simply drawn googly eyes and a smile upsets the seriousness, angst and pathos normally associated with the expressionist canvases.

For Reafsnyder, painting should be about the material and not the artist's hidden feelings. In his statement he wrote, "Painting's capacity for frivolity, lushness and seriousness is outrageous. Unfortunately, it is that capacity that has been mismanaged and misguided into convoluted theories of interiority, expressionism, truth, and authenticity." In other words, Reafsnyder is merely exploring the paint material and canvas surface in the same manner as the previous generations of artists. They were/are both trying to combine sophisticated issues of "pure" painting with childlike spontaneity.

Reafsnyder, however, was born in 1969 when pop was waning, video art was emerging and minimalism was trying to dominate the American art scene. By the time he became an artist, the pure intentions of abstract painting belonged to the distant memory of his grandfather's generation. The expressive nature of abstract art could easily be copied and the quality of the paint itself allowed for thicker paint textures and more luminous canvases. Thus, Reafsnyder can literally play with the paint, but with the eyes and attitude of a generation comfortable with the color television, Technicolor movies, and animated films. Reafsnyder simply takes the tubes of acrylic paint and has fun—there are no deep thoughts hidden in his canvases.

Although smaller pieces as *Sunny Fresh* (a fusion of fuchsia, electric green, carrot orange, turquoise, red, and white) and *Top Shelf* (another amalgamation of distinct colors) hold their own space and allow us to appreciate the artist's gestures, I prefer Reafsnyder's larger canvases. *Glazing*, with its grand scale, muddied background (a pejorative term for the

artist) and mixed colors, gives the illusion of depth. There is more play here and I can look beyond the surface; but this is beside the point. Reafsnyder asserts that acrylic colors exist on their own, gesture never goes beyond mimicry, and the canvas itself is meant to jar our senses. We are left both inspired by his technique and humbled by his truth.

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

February 23, 2007



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

Los Angeles Times

January 14, 2006

ART REVIEW

Just going with the flow

The fluid form of abstract painting is celebrated in the 'Step Into Liquid' exhibit at the Ben Maltz Gallery.

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer



One sign that a group exhibition is significant is that it changes the way you perceive works of art that you thought you knew. At the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, Step Into Liquid is a significant show.

I've been looking at (and enjoying) James Hayward's paintings for more than 20 years, but I've never quite considered them in the way they appear here. Otis' guest curator-in-residence, Dave Hickey, has assembled paintings by five artists — Jane Callister, Pia Fries, Michael Reafsnyder and David Reed are the others — whose work reanimates a major American postwar tradition. In the 1950s and 1960s, fluid forms of abstract painting, from the drips of Jackson Pollock and the sponged puddles of color by Helen Frankenthaler to the pours of Morris Louis, had asserted continuity between nature and art.

The paintings in Step Into Liquid pick up the thread while severing the continuity. Hayward's paintings have the authoritative power and hypnotic grace of the surface of the sea, the sheer face of a mountain cliff or the sweep of a plain of grass — yet without any recourse to illusion, metaphor or representation. Think of them as cultural equivalents rather than natural embodiments.

Hayward's four paintings date from 2005, and each uses the same format — a vertical canvas, 6 or 7 feet high and slightly narrower than it is tall. One is black, one yellow, one white and one a green so dark as to appear almost black. Along the edges of the canvases, under-painted layers of other hues can be glimpsed.

The thick oil paint is applied in deliberate strokes of a regular, if not quite uniform, length (7 or 8 inches). The brush marks indicate use of a medium-width brush, and the regularity of the application has a repetitive quality that borders on ritualistic. The paint strokes are laid on in every conceivable direction — except, notably, horizontal (like a landscape) or vertical (like a figure). The size and scale of the canvas and the brush marks gently guide you into a comfortable position in front of the painting. They carve out a physical space of contemplation, from which these gorgeous paintings feel vast, unfathomable and in perpetual flux.

They're oceanic without the ocean.

Hayward, 62, and Reed, 59, are the show's elder statesmen. Fries, who was born in Switzerland and works in Düsseldorf, adds an international element. Callister and Reafsnyder, both born in the 1960s, are two of the most engaging younger painters working in Southern California right now. The show packs a lot into a modest space.

In the fall of 2004, on the 40th anniversary of the landmark survey exhibition California Hard Edge Painting, Hickey organized an Otis show of geometric abstraction. Step Into Liquid is its complement, focusing on wet, fluid abstraction rather than crisp geometries.

Reed's luxurious paintings are the pivot between the two shows: He mixes oil and resin to crash Baroque waves of translucent paint against hard-edged rectangles, like flowing electrons moving through the windows of a computer program.

Callister's exceptional recent paintings represent a slight shift in her work. All three miraculously evoke the conjunction of land and sea, the space of a primordial shoreline where timeless stability and constant vacillation continuously trade places. Yet none is in the least descriptive, in the manner of a traditional landscape painting. A warm, fleshy pink ground is interrupted by pours, puddles, splashes and clumps of abstract color-shapes, which appeal to a sense of visual tactility.

Reafsnyder continues to update the signature motifs of modern alienation to the monumental scale of mass culture. For example, Slippy is a large, dark painting in which indigo acrylic has been swiped with a squeegee as a background. Then, great swaths of glossy color are smeared, splashed and dripped across the surface, while a bright orange smiley face grins out at you. Signs of pleasure come in a variety of guises, and here a visual overload of paint does the talking. Following Reafsnyder's marvelous one-man survey that closed recently at the Las Vegas Art Museum, the Otis show gives rich context to his quirky work.

Fries' paintings are the exhibition's weak link. Each is an inventory of paint application methods, from thick wedges and troweled-on oil to skinny squiggles squeezed straight from the tube (it looks like silly string), often in pastel hues and always on pure white panels. Disconcertingly, embedded within the paint are silk-screened prints that appear to be tangled piles of crepe-paper ribbon.

The point seems to be that printing fits with the other techniques because, in a world characterized by reproduction, our assumptions that direct application of paint embodies uniqueness and reveals authentic feeling are false.

True enough, but the idea is long-established (not least by Fries' teacher, Gerhard Richter), and these paintings don't have adequate visual appeal to sustain them.

Step Into Liquid features just 17 paintings yet accomplishes more than most exhibitions twice its size. Come on in; the liquidity is fine.

Image: Michael Reafsnyder, *And That's All Right With Me* , 2005

A Gorgeous Mess

Michael Reafsnyder waxes painterly in gleeful, sloppy More

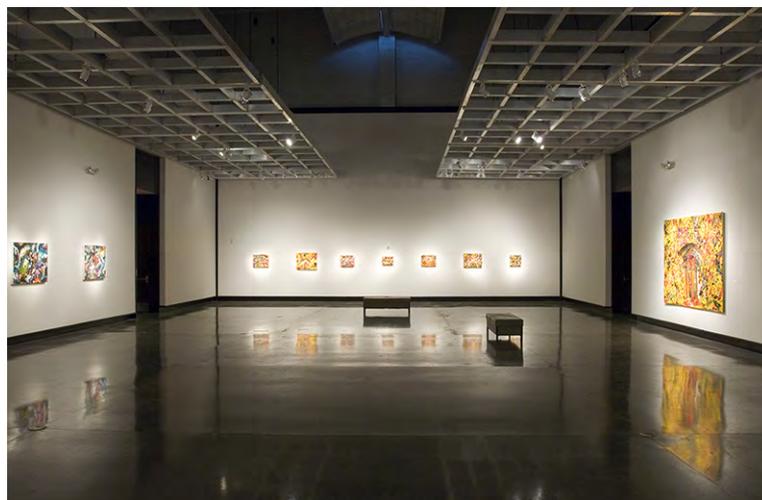
BY KATIE ANANIA for Las Vegas City Life
October 7, 2005



More: Michael Reafsnyder, *Painting and Sculpture 2002-2005* embodies a special kind of abundance that stems not just from a buildup of materials (although there's plenty of that), but a buildup of history. Reafsnyder's work, done mostly in oils or acrylics, but also on exhibit with drawings, bronze casts, and sculpture at the Las Vegas Art Museum, exudes an elegant yet balls-to-the-wall cheerfulness that sidesteps its own historicization while highlighting the absurdity of some of art's favorite movements.

Like Abstract Expressionism, for instance. Reafsnyder's principal method of artmaking is to squeeze paint directly from the tube and apply it, unblended, to the canvas. Jackson Pollock, you might remember, used a variation of this method to acknowledge paint as a direct extension of the soul. He let the paint fall where it fell in order to express hardship, joy, the chaos of the urban landscape, and existential torment. The thing is, Reafsnyder plays with the paint after it lands -- color is squeezed out and forms wormlike, three-dimensional passages on the canvas that are built up, pushed aside, re-formed, and re-textured with brushes, sticks, and squeegees. It's a thick, gorgeous mess.

Picture driving the Florida turnpike in love-bug season, when clouds of small insects, locked in the act of coitus, meet their death on your windshield. The glee you experience in re-animating these bugs with your wipers is insurmountable, and so are Reafsnyder's compositions. They're all about fierce, warm-hearted glee and the toppling of "triumphant



modernism," which is serious, too serious for us. Imagine worms of paint being squeezed from their tubes and systematically smashed together to a soundtrack of Switched-On Bach.

These paintings are often garnished with smiley faces made of the same worms of paint, sometimes with plastic googly eyes. There's some playing around with Pop art here, because he's quoting a notorious graphic phenomenon. The smiley face is the ultimate expression of vacuity and promise, and this precise gesture of cool cheerfulness bridges the old, new, absurd, joyful, parodic, and historical elements in his work.

Reafsnyder's bronze pieces provide another re-examination of the painting process, and an even more material connection to Pop coolness. These are done by painting a painting, casting its surface in metal, and throwing the painting away. It's an act of tracing, which means that we're not supposed to think about the painting and how authentic it is, but rather the process by which it's recorded and remembered. Think of the puns: The artwork is a cast-off; the art object is re-cast as a frozen, archived memory.

The drawings are another choice cut, which appear as a series mounted on a wall and showcase the artist's love of fluid forms. The forms are so fluid, in fact, that I'm reminded of my first look at a Helen Frankenthaler painting-- not in terms of composition or intent, but because I remember thinking that Frankenthaler's canvases must be trying to express depth, because there was so much paint soaked into the canvas that I thought she wanted me to imagine it going down in there, disappearing past the smooth cloth. I was wrong about Frankenthaler, and Reafsnyder is wrong here -- gloriously, superbly wrong. There are square smiley faces -- blockheads, and I hope this is code for all the disappointments the art world has to offer. They swim, and are broken and re-mixed across the paper in a leaky, liquid, decidedly careless way.

Reafsnyder takes a medium -- paint -- that was, in a certain context, reduced to pure flatness, and gives it a new topography. He's also about this backward practice where you sort of do things wrong but always in a symphonic way. And, as the first show in the Las Vegas Art Museum's new "Contemporaries" series, as well as Reafsnyder's first solo museum show, this collection of Merrie Melodies invites as many wrong turns, incorrect readings, and preposterous glee as history could very well allow or imagine.

Las Vegas Weekly

Oct. 27 – Nov 2, 2005

Paintings pose questions about potential for soulful abstraction in an image-battered age

By Chuck Twardy



Michael Reafsnyder's abstract paintings beg the question of whether abstract painting is still viable.

In his first solo museum show, *More: Michael Reafsnyder, Painting and Sculpture, 2002-2005*, the Southern California artist fills two galleries of the Las Vegas Art Museum with paintings that prove it is possible to load prodigious volumes of oils or acrylics onto a surface

in nonrepresentational configurations. He scrapes pigment into cresting waves, scumbles it into complex passages and extrudes tubes of it into twisted ropes of solid color. Here is Pollock unbound, the apotheosis of the abstract expressionist ideal of the soul's direct expression. Except that Reafsnyder can't quite take that ideal seriously.

For one thing, Reafsnyder's undiluted cobalts and forest greens, and his rich mixtures of primary colors, are those of lively marketing, which gives the paintings a pop-art edge. And he paints a smiley face, sometimes more than one, on every painting.

Something about Reafsnyder's representational repertoire—whether building two eyes and a mouth with strands of pigment or slashing incisions in the paint surface—suggests Willem DeKooning more than Jackson Pollock. But instead of wraithlike figures of women, Reafsnyder draws bright, sun-ray lines in paintings such as "Black Hole Sun" (2003). A T of two broad swaths forms a stick figure for the smiley face in other paintings, such as "Grace" (2002). Some paintings have incised text, and sometimes the smiley face is inscribed instead of built, and partly scratched away. In this way, Reafsnyder recalls neither Pollock nor DeKooning but Jasper Johns, who has made the canceling of images a leitmotif of his long career.

Latent in that practice was the idea that Johns' groundbreaking work itself helped cancel abstract expression, or at least discredit its spiritual earnestness in a world already battered by images by mid-century. In this spirit, Reafsnyder even cancels his cancellations. Clearly, the smiley face undercuts any hint of sanctity in those swirls and scrapes, but in some cases, such as "In Bloom" (2005), the face is drawn into the paint and partly scratched away, as if Reafsnyder would do away with it.

More marks another first, that of LVAM's new Contemporaries Series, instituted by new Consulting Executive Director Libby Lumpkin, who also organized the show. That it should boldly outline a key tension of postmodernism—the tug between soul and skeptic, earnest and ironic—marks a welcome turn at the museum.



Michael Reafsnyder at
Galeria Marta Cervera
El Mundo, January 16, 2003

by Javier Hontoria

In his first exhibit in Spain, Californian Reafsnyder (1964) presents a series of paintings on wood that at first could be defined as violently gesture-like. A dozen small panels have one layer of paint applied at drastic angles that are the base for a plethora of paint applied

directly from the tube.

The artist does not want to be a part of the expressionist tradition despite of the nature of his works.

The fact is that this is not an excessive gesture-like practice but rather a slow and careful exercise.

Applying paint directly from the tube is a careful and slow endeavor that brings as a result a sense of energy without losing its dynamism. After long and logical drying process, the end result is a rough, three-dimensional landscape that sometimes sets itself free and floats over the wood.

Michael Reafsnyder at
Galeria Marta Cervera
ABC, January 16, 2003

by Maria Garcia Yelo

The first individual exhibit of Reafsnyder outside of the US surprises the local audience as much as it has surprised his countrymen. The artist who graduated in arts from the Art College of Design in Pasadena California presents seven Oils on wood in which the abundance of material is a major feature. A torrent of paint, spilled, dragged either applied in full or partial brush strokes directly from the tube and at first blushed in a frenetic process without an orderly fashion or purpose. The vibrant cascade of orange, electric blue, yellow, intense red, greens, fuchsia etc. overlap to create real perspective. Little by little in the tumult of color, small silly contagious faces emerge that smile and made the viewer smile back. However, those faces convey a fierce and macabre laugh. They look like extraterrestrial beings that surface and land among letters and numbers on the wooden surface.

At first sight this plastic carnival seems like a joke or an ingenious and improvised game that tries to involve the viewer. But if this is the case, why bother concentrating so many elements in such a reduced space? Why so much waste of energy? Some argue that this is a perverse and frivolous joke; however jokes do not come out of a fluke.

When looking at the work from this Californian, the concepts of North American abstract expressionism comes to mind. The creative process is certainly similar, but these exuberant works are not the result of an automatic, unconscious and emotional explosion, but rather a new approach to the conceptual tendency so much in fashion in Los Angeles, which are a reflection of the Greenwich Village geniuses.

**Michael Reafsnyder
at Mark Moore Gallery**

By Shana Nys Dambrot

Artweek, June 2003, p. 18



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 vermillion 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.

The Los Angeles Times

E26 Friday, April 18, 2003 Around The Galleries

Squeeze, Scrape, Squeeze

By Christopher Knight

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

At Mark 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.

Reafsnyder 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 modest 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. Reafsnyder gets an infectious rhythm going - squeezing, scarping, 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 abstractions 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. Reafsnyder's smears nod in that direction, but suggest 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.

Michael Reafsnyder (selected reviews)

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Squeeze, scrape, squeeze

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

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Mark Moore Gallery

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

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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.

The Los Angeles Times 6/08/01, written by David Pagel



In the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, when the printing press made mass-produced books available to more readers than ever before, concerned citizens began to worry that the increase in readily accessible information would make people stupid. The capacity for thoughtful recollection might be replaced with an insatiable appetite for escapist diversion.

Now that the Information Age is upon us and our eyes are incessantly bombarded by an overwhelming volume of visual stimulation, worried observers continue to act as if diminished attention spans were the natural consequence of the image glut. Their argument appears to be logical: The more there is to look at, the less time we have to digest it. The only problem with this line of reasoning is that it doesn't hold up. To see why, visit **Michael Reafsnyder's** third solo show in Los Angeles, an over-the-top extravaganza that goes a long way to show that visual overload does not necessarily lead to shrinking attention spans.

At Mark Moore Gallery, each of Reafsnyder's 20 hefty yet modestly scaled oils on panel is nothing if not excessive. Some, like "Teutonic Bombshell," "Harumph" and "Mower" are hard to look at, their furious smears and whiplash swipes of juicy paint combining the aggressive, headache-inducing vibrancy of Op art with the meaty physicality of Expressionism. Others, like "Swishy," "What the . . . ?" and "Nyder-Michael-Reafs" are hard to stomach. Squeezed straight from the tube, fat worms of delicate lavender, murky burgundy, rusty pumpkin, frothy mint, baby-doll pink and cobalt blue clash against churning surfaces of primary colors.

In a sense, Reafsnyder is an anti-Expressionist. The madcap gestures that pile up like multi-vehicle wrecks on his paintings do not describe inner turmoil as much as they invite your eyes to metaphorically leap out of their sockets and careen around meticulously engineered arrangements of texture, gesture and shape.

To emphasize that his carnivalesque compositions belong in the visible world of shared public space, Reafsnyder has painted a smiley face on each--sometimes piling four or five atop one another. Their energy is infectious; if you don't take yourself too seriously, it's hard not to crack a smile before these embarrassingly generous images.

Imagine if a painting by Seurat were crossed with one by Pissarro and the offspring were fed a steady diet of steroids and methamphetamine. This gives you an idea of the physical wallop and optical sophistication of Reafsnyder's profoundly weird works. They get your attention in a split-second and then do something interesting with it.

Capturing your imagination, they slow you down long enough to begin to savor those moments when chaos and control dovetail, and everything falls into place with seemingly effortless ease. Once you get past their initially overwhelming impact, they allow your attention span to expand--often further than you'd expect, and sometimes more than you'd believe.

--DAVID PAGEL, Special To The Times

Art Issues

pg. 49

Michael Reafsnyder at Mark Moore, 11 December-22 January

By Christopher Knight



Michael Reafsnyder's philosophy of painting comes across as forthright and elemental:

Take a blob of oil paint.

Do something to it.

Do something else to it.

Etc., etc.

Reafsnyder's sixteen small wooden panels in this, his second solo show in Los Angeles, rarely get much larger than 12 or 16 inches on a side (one is a modest 20 by 27 inches, and by comparison to the rest feel immense). Yet, each one seems to have required tubes and tubes of paint to make. Bright and insistent, like eager children vying for attention, they together describe a full inventory of application techniques; oil paint is piled, smeared, scraped, dragged, combed, pressed, smudged, buttered, blotted, daubed, pounced, and run over with a squeegee or a spatula. A brush might also have been used but it's just about the only tool that doesn't make its presence clearly felt, with nary a slathered brushstroke left visible to the eye.

Sometimes the paint is left lying on the surface, just as it fell when squeezed directly from

the tube. Then the skinny, snaky cylinder or crimson, cobalt, lemon yellow, or uncorrupted white reads as a three dimensional line, somewhere between an element of traditional drawing and sculptural high relief. Elsewhere the paint has been scraped down so close to the bone that color is transformed from a blaring declaration into a whispered memory barely heard. Occasionally the pure pigments melt together into muddy puddles of brown *merde*, but more often they shriek in primary and secondary hues.

Here and there a word has been scratched into the surface of the painted panel, like a petroglyph on an ancient rock or a graffiti-style inscription on a neighborhood wall.

The artist's name, occasionally coupled with the initials of his country, seem to have been carved with a stick (the wrong end of that unseen brush). The charged territory of identity politics is thus signified - notably, by using only the most rudimentary of means - but it is casually regarded as simply inseparable from the stuff of the painting itself.

Reafsnyder's work has been considered in terms of the postwar European CoBrA group (in particular, the raucous easel pictures of Karel Appel and Asger Jorn come to mind). The chaotic surfaces, torrents of aggressive color, and childlike glee of his paintings certainly seem cognizant of that somewhat critically beleaguered precedent. While the vivid soup of CoBrA paintings frequently offer up images loosely associated with Northern European folklore, the corporate spirit of American consumer culture is embedded in the surface of Reafsnyder's art. Each painting turns out to be a visual essay on the Smiley Face, that bland symbol of vacant cheerfulness and empty satisfaction that has proliferated in the popular consciousness for more than thirty years.

As employed by Reafsnyder, though, the Smiley Face seems utterly without irony. There's nothing snide or smirking in these paintings, nor do they appear as escapist admonitions of the "don't worry / be happy" variety. In fact, there's something fierce and creepy about the button eyes and toothless grins that deniably emerge into view from his sloshing seas of colorful paint. "Dialectical materialism has taught us that conscience depends on social circumstances," the CoBrA group asserted in 1949m "and when these prevent us from being satisfied, our needs impel us to discover our desires." The social circumstances of American painting today are engorged with Puritan reticence and rebukes, which not only forestalls contentment but also makes a mockery of the very ambition. Reafsnyder has found a way to sharply criticize that morbid, smothering tendency without giving up on spontaneity and pleasure. His small and darkly sunny paintings stand as little tantrums of defiant joy.

Michael Real Snyder (selected reviews)

issues.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Best of the '90s

A SPECIAL ISSUE

Dave Hickey



Dave Hickey is an art writer who lives in Las Vegas. His essays have most recently been collected in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues, 1997).

LA Spring (as in Prague Spring):
Part I In recent years, the art world has been admitting young artists one at a time, cutting them out from the herd and quickly transforming them into high-dollar Vanity Fare. The dam broke this spring in Los Angeles. Dozens of bright young things mounted so many bright young shows that one actually moved from gallery to gallery, from month to month, with heady anticipation. Among the standouts: Kevin Appel, Philip Argent, Linda Besemer, Ingrid Calame, Jane Callister, Fandra Chang, Steven Criquei, Sharon Ellis, Jeff Elrod, Jason Eoff, Jack Hallberg, Jim Isermann, Kurt Kauper, Penelope Krebs, Laura Owens, Aaron Parazette, Monique Prieto, Michael Reafsnyder, Adam Ross, Brad Spence, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Yek.

Michael Reafsnyder, *Untitled (L)*, 1997, Oil on panel,
20 7/8 x 20 3/4". Courtesy the artist.



If you think that art and fun have too little to do with one another, you've probably never seen a painting by Michael Reafsnyder. With only one solo show behind him, this recent graduate of Art Center's M.F.A. program has already distinguished himself among a generation of L.A.-based artists who have begun to put happiness back into painting. That's an old-fashioned idea, dating back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century, yet Reafsnyder's works couldn't be more contemporary. Comprised almost entirely of aggressive smears of screaming yellow, electric blue, fire-engine red, and pure white paint squeezed straight from the tube, these whiplash images make Impressionism's rapidly dabbed surfaces look like fussy, Old Master compositions. Jazzed up by an

occasional skid of purple or black, they also recall Willem de Kooning's classic canvases, whose furious surfaces look as if they've been chiseled or carved in some kind of transformative frenzy. Plus, Reafsnyder's compact panels look as if they're the dimwitted second cousins of Gerhard Richter's exquisitely refined images. Every one of the young painter's new works includes the face of a stick figure who smiles at you. Goofy, to be sure, these fiercely civilized abstractions are also deadly serious about putting painting's repressed pleasures back into the picture. For viewers, this simply means that Reafsnyder's art is a pleasure—even a joy—to behold. After all, it causes you to smile, and then returns the favor by smiling right back at you.

DAVID PAGEL

FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 1997

ART REVIEWS

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Inside Out: Michael Reafsnyder's compact paintings at Blum & Poe Gallery are some of the strangest of the season. After the sneers, guffaws and snickers they initially elicit subside, it's clear that this young abstract painter's solo debut ranks among the best of recent memory.

His modestly scaled oils on panel hit your visual system like a punch in the eye. Viewers don't respond

to these exceptional images as much as they react to them. Involuntary and extreme, such physical interaction demonstrates that something like instinct takes over in the presence of Reafsnyder's art.

That's no mean feat. Especially since Reafsnyder's panels are painted in a loose, gestural style that recalls the gut-wrenching, soul-searching flourishes of much Abstract Expressionism.

In pointed contrast to that style, which meant to plumb the depths of the artist's psyche in a quest for authenticity, Reafsnyder's paintings put the instincts of viewers front and center. Profoundly contemporary, these loaded works turn the old-fashioned idea of art as self-expression inside out. Like Rorschach blots, they tell more about viewers than whoever made them.

Plus, Reafsnyder's panels wreak havoc on conventional wisdom about abstract painting. Painted primarily in reds, yellows and blues squeezed straight from the tube, his furiously worked surfaces look as if they're the dimwitted second cousins of Gerhard Richter's exquisitely refined paintings.

Nevertheless, Reafsnyder's pictures do not rely on any sort of "aw shucks," country bumpkin charm. Cuteness has no place in these fiercely civilized paintings. Although many include stick-figure faces staring straight at you, these goofy components only intensify the jittery edginess generated by Reafsnyder's weirdly electrifying art.

■ *Blum & Poe Gallery, 2042 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 453-8311, through May 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*