

PAINTINGS POSE QUESTIONS ABOUT POTENTIAL FOR SOULFUL ABSTRACTION IN AN IMAGE-BATTERED AGE

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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 cobalt 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.