

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Reductive painting makes real art instead of creating theater effect
Michael Toenges/Peter Tollens: Abstract Paintings at Schmidt Contemporary Art

By David Bonetti, *Post-Dispatch* Visual Arts Critic



03-07-35-40 by Michael Toenges (2003), oil on board

Painting has been in crisis ever since 1839, when William Henry Fox Talbot initiated the age of photography by figuring out how to fix on a sheet of paper an image captured by light passing through an aperture. Its state has been terminal ever since 1919, when Marcel Duchamp penciled a mustache and goatee on a cheap reproduction of the Mona Lisa.

Yet, despite an endless parade of intentionally "last" paintings, painting endures, if just barely. Surely, in no medium of visual expression is such dreadful work produced as in painting today. Tired landscapes, academic still lifes, routine portraiture, tepid abstractions, all derived from models created decades ago, fill galleries from New York to Timbuktu. Still, painting vital to the historical moment is being made today. The question is, what does it look like and where can you find it?

You can find it in St. Louis, at least through the end of August, at Schmidt Contemporary Art. What it looks like is not what you might expect. It is not a "picture" -- photography made that function of painting unnecessary more than 150 years ago, although a lot of great "pictures" have been painted since then. It is not a yellow square balanced against a black rectangle, either. That kind of relational abstraction is old news, although, again, good examples of it are still being made.

Vital painting today is radical in nature, as radical as the most challenging video or installation art. Like those more trendy modes of expression, it explores the nature of its medium. Rejecting image, narrative and expression, it explores the essence of painting: color, material, texture, scale and support. If that sounds boring or esoteric, it is not. The result, in the hands of those who know what they are doing, is vivid and vivifying; it cleanses the eye as a sorbet after a heavy meal cleanses the palate.

There are many painters today practicing a reductive or radical form of painting based in color. They live in California, on the East Coast, in Europe and in many places in between. Many of them live in Germany, but they have little in common with the chest-thumping German painting favored locally. What the reductive painters produce is art, whereas what we have seen here for the most part is theater.

The two painters at Schmidt are **Peter Tollens** and Michael Toenges, both of whom are in their 50s and live in Cologne. There are only four paintings on view between them, three by Tollens and one by Toenges, and they are small -- but with such beautiful paintings, who needs more?

The key achievement of both artists is that they demonstrate that painting can still be beautiful without being easy. Their work causes the viewer to look closely and deeply. It is the aesthetic equivalent of slow food -- those in a hurry won't get it.

Tollens is a monochromist, creating paintings of a single color out of a mixture of egg tempera and oil. His three here are blue, green and white. The primary experience his paintings offer is the experience of color and its inevitable emotional impact. Each of his colors is specific -- there are many blues, greens and whites in the world. His green painting has a lot of yellow in it. It is upbeat, because of the yellow, but there is an immediate aftertaste caused by its overall acidic nature. Complicating the situation is a barely perceptible underlayer of green mixed with blue, tiny patches of which show through.

The second experience, nearly as strong as the first, is of the painting's surface and its texture. Tollens paints on both canvas stretched over wood, here the white and blue works, and directly on wood, here the green. If you look closely, you can see how differently the distinctive surfaces receive the pigment. The paint seems to sit on the surface as a separate object more in the painting on wood, and it seems to slightly penetrate the linen support in the others. The application of paint functions as the "act" of the painting. Tollens applies the pigment in small, rough but simultaneously delicate patches of paint, each one of which exists independently even as it fades away into the

greater color field of which it is part. The overall surface texture is highly tactile, and if you look from the side, it has an almost relief-like sense of dimension.

Toenges explores the materiality of his medium, its texture and tactility, more than color, although his use of color is vivid as well. His small oil -- less than 16 by 14 inches -- fills an entire gallery with luminous color. Relatively large, juicy brushloads of paint in which the parallel grooves of the individual brush bristles are evident are applied to a wood support as separate articulate statements so clear you can reconstruct in your imagination the process Toenges went through to make the work. Such work is a perfect demonstration of deconstructed painting, in which what is ordinarily de-emphasized to create the mystery or aura of the finished work is instead foregrounded, becoming the work's manifest subject.

Caption:

SCHMIDT CONTEMPORARY ART Photo - "03-07-35-40" by Michael Toenges (2003),
oil on board
photo