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SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Ten takes on painterly abstraction

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Works by these California artists reflect a concern with the process of art-making

RICHMOND - As in Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, the slow, steady progress of abstract painting has pulled even, if not quite ahead, of the flash and speed of media-dependent work that has dominated the art world. The return of abstract painting, which, of course, never really went away, has been the subject of a number of solo and group exhibitions locally as well as internationally.

Ten artists, five from the Southland, five from hereabouts, who follow one variation or another on abstract expressionism, have been gathered together in the exhibition, "Practice and Process: New Painterly Abstraction in California," at the Richmond Art Center through Aug. 22. The show is co-curated by Jeff Nathanson from Richmond and Jay Belloli of the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, where it was seen earlier.

Experiencing the maturity of concept and expression behind the work of Bay Area monochromists David Simpson, John Meyer, Anne Appleby, Patsy Krebs and others has been one of the rewards of going regularly to the galleries here during the past decade. And "Abstraction Absolved: 10 Bay Area Painters," a 1996 exhibition at Mills College, did a fine job of representing the various approaches to abstraction among local painters.

The tendency toward reduction of material, color and image to the monochrome, painting's ground zero, is only one pole of contemporary abstraction. Painterly abstraction, an outgrowth of abstract expressionism, is another.

In their catalog essay, the curators of "Practice and Process" root the current work in the painterly abstraction that flourished in California after World War II, giving the state its artistic reputation. Richard Diebenkorn and Sam Francis are the two primary touchstones cited.

Looking for the best abstract painting they could find, the curators write that they gravitated toward artists whose work emphasized the practice of art-making. "The way in which these painters worked emphasized an additive, intuitive process of creating art rather than making art which is planned and visualized in advance," they state.

Following the path cut in the '50s through the dense undergrowth of abstract painting theory by Harold Rosenberg, they favor the authentic and the spiritual in art. "Abstraction may be the most poetic visual language because it is ultimately about the spirit," they write. Of course, the problem with that position is that authenticity and spirituality are matters of faith, not fact. One man's spirituality is another's hogwash.

The show itself is rather a mixed bag, and the artists in it I preferred seem to have little to do with the by-now hoary abstract expressionist tradition. John Zurier, for instance, whose work was shown in the 1996 Mills College exhibition, is a committed monochromist, and he is more interested in light and color than in process. For Zurier, getting the paint on the surface economically seems a paramount concern, but his process does result in a fortuitous, non-

hard-edged striation and an excavation of deeper layers of pigment that is central to the success of his work. His three "Assisi" pieces are little icons that glow from within.

Kim Anno, who was also included in the Mills College show, makes frontal, centered, shield-like images that are designed and conceptualized beforehand, if she does allow for chance effects and momentary inspirations.

"Sway," an oil on shaped wood, is one of the most handsome paintings in the show. It flirts with trompe-l'oeil effects: The two-tiered vertical stripes of deep, resonant color suggest at their right margin a depth the wood support does not possess.

Southlander Charles Fine also makes work with a deliberateness that would seem to preclude it from being included among works made through improvisatory processes. Using asphaltum and enamel along with oil and acrylic, Fine creates a viscous tarlike surface in which images appear as memories through layers of medium.

Layering, in fact, is a key to the show, and it is evident in the work of the painters closest to abstract expressionism's spontaneity and improvisation. Marie Thibeault and Gregory Wiley Edwards are the most loyal

"action painters" - to use Rosenberg's term - here, and beneath the looping lines, drips and blocks of color that mark their paintings' surfaces, you can look to see deeper layers of painterly activity.

Alan Treister bases his work in broad gestural strokes that suggest both his own expense of energy in making them and, imagistically, a primitive world of swirling energy fields. The contrast of dark and light colors he favors is based on the baroque practice of chiaroscuro that helps create a sense of depth on the painting's flat surface. Alone among the artists here, his work looks like a late contribution to color field painting, although Clement Greenberg, color field's leading promoter, would probably not like the work's implicit sturm und drang.

If there is a common problem it is the result of a fear of leaving something out. Paintings by Elizabeth Chandler, for instance, suffer from a horror vacui. They are too dense, too crowded with ideas and imagery to present a coherent image to the viewer. Several of the artists might look at Zurier and **Anno** for the always timely lesson that less is more.

Naomie Kremer, whose recent paintings are on view at Modernism, 685 Market St., through Saturday, could have added something to the Richmond show. Her densely packed paintings are also in the abstract expressionist or painterly abstraction traditions, but she brings a stylistic maturity and technical finesse to her work that is lacking in some of the painters on view in Richmond.

Kremer's paintings don't leave anything out, but if anything were removed, you'd lose the essence of her work. These compositions are dense for a reason, not out of fear. Each canvas is similar in technique and composition, but each is also different because of the thousands of small aesthetic decisions she has made.

Each of Kremer's paintings, which are distantly related in style and spirit to those of Joan Mitchell and Jean-Paul Riopelle, seem to be an unleashing of long pent-up energy. The small patches and strokes of pigment, in an all-inclusive palette of colors, create the impression of an explosion, a highly contained and controlled explosion to be sure. In some paintings, like

"Procession," there are figurative references, and in others, like "Strata," the calligraphic nature of much of her mark-making resolves itself into explicit, if blurred, words.<