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Toenges, Tollens test viewers' penchant for excessive pigment

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At this point in art history, love of painting may come down to love of paint itself - for viewers as well as practitioners.

The very different works of German artists Michael Toenges and Peter Tollens at Sweetow invite us to test this proposition.

Many of Toenges' recent paintings, like those he has shown here before, investigate overload, while Tollens' hover close to the zero degree of the art.

Toenges heaps his paintings on wood, even those that are only a foot square, with so much succulent pigment that, viewed frontally, they look like billows of paint levitating by sheer surplus of aesthetic richness.

We might take them for mute wonderings about whether too much of a good thing is possible in abstract painting. But enough of Toenges' work appears here to clarify the art's more rigorous purpose.

At what point, the more congested pictures ask, does the medium itself bog down until it precludes expressive gesture? And in what remains - color and matter - how do we distinguish objective properties from expressive ones?

Toenges' paintings on canvas, such as "24-07-100-80" (2007), seem to work their way back from the impacted extremes of the smaller works on wood, though he works concurrently on both types of support.

The brush and trowel strokes in "24-07-100-80" travel just enough to turn loose the expressive energy of gesture, without compromising the painting's abstractness or causing us to see it as diaristic.

Some viewers will find frustration in this kind of arrest. Others will see it bringing to a focus the sense of abstraction as a counterpoint of adjustments: of hues and their proximities, of marks' amplitude in relation to one another and the canvas as a whole, of the evidence of layering.

Occasionally references to other artists' works emerge from Toenges' process, apparently without his contrivance. The two largest works on canvas can bring to mind works of Wassily Kandinsky's "Blue Rider" period, which Toenges surely must know well.

In contrast, Tollens' work goes to extremes of asperity.

He offers a few pieces treated in so spare and deadpan a manner as to make us wonder whether he picked them off the studio floor. Rather than work on panels or canvas, he applies paint to bits of scrap wood. They tend to be small, almost pocket-size, but vary considerably in

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dimensions and shape.

These found supports have the effect of seeming to take Tollens' painting process back to some originating point of abstraction. A number of his pieces, touching a postmodern fear, suggest relics unearthed long after the obsolescence of painting.

Sweetow has scattered Tollens' pieces over several walls to make the eye toy with seeing them now as discrete, now in ensembles, as small works by Richard Tuttle can. Tuttle came to mind more than once as I looked at Tollens' show.

Like Toenges' paintings, most of Tollens' presuppose a kind of primal appeal of the medium itself and what it can do. In a few, Tollens' deft hand shows. Others looked less painted than besmirched with oil colors, often with colors of low or indefinite emotional temperature.

Tollens' work stands out for how it tests its viewers' attachment to pleasures unique to painting on an almost neurological wavelength.

A series of small wall sculptures at Sweetow by Philadelphia artist Bill Walton keeps good company with Tollens' bare-bones abstractions.

Walton makes little conjunctions of found wood and metal bits that seem to dial up the attentive viewer's sensitivity by their very subtlety. In one, a sliver of a metal wedge widens the grooves in the grain of a block of wood. In another, a metal cylinder rests atop what looks at first like a shallow, square block, revealing a slight indentation in its top edge.

Call Walton's sculptures abstract if you like; they function as little remembrances of moments in which some detail of reality has obtruded itself and stirred a faint, unnameable emotion.