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ARTifice: Fear and Loathing in DC

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Art Review | Cornelia Schulz at Project 4

By Kate Demong

The eleven new works in Project 4's exhibition of San Francisco-based artist Cornelia Schulz compel me to ask how this could be her first east-coast solo show. We east coasters have clearly missed out. I await Schulz's future recognition in a retrospective of her paintings from the 1960s to the present so that I can become acquainted with the development of her body of work, which I should not have missed.

Schulz interlocks five to seven small canvases of varying shapes to construct abstract, non-rectilinear, paintings. The component canvases — rectangles, trapezoids, ovals, ells and pie-wedges — fit together in odd-shaped puzzles. The painting styles on the individual canvases also vary, from expressionist pours of paint, to minimalist color fields, hard-edged geometries, and layerings of abstract shapes.

Schulz's achievement is that in each amalgamation of disparate forms, patterns, and textures, she somehow — improbably — creates a coherent whole. Perhaps this is due to the consistency in color. Pastels such as cotton-candy pink and 1930s-bathroom green meet white, black, and bold reds throughout the different elements. Or the unlikely unity may be due to Schulz's impressive control over her materials, whether she is using oil and alkyd resin to create a surface as smooth as glass or as crevassed as a raised-relief topographic map. Because of the mishmash of shapes and styles the works capture the viewer's attention and hold it in their clutch; when the dissimilar canvases rub up against each other, tension forms, and compelling relationships develop.

The works are small in scale (the largest measures 28" x 24"), but each offers the viewer a walk through 20th-century art history. They reference numerous artists, from Piet Mondrian to Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, Anne Truitt, Richard Diebenkorn, and Takashi Murakami. Schulz's interest in exploring non-rectilinear canvases hardly surprises, considering she graduated from art school in 1962. The painstakingly-stretched canvases remind us, however, of why the rectangular format is the norm. Evenly-spaced seams show evidence of the labor expended to pull the canvas taut against the edges of the rounded and odd-angled wood frames. Although non-rectilinear paintings can move into the realm of sculpture, and some of Schulz's canvases (particularly the black, gold and green columnar canvas in "Red Leaves") recall Truitt's totems, Schulz's works are two-dimensional and strike this viewer as paintings.

The segments layered with poured mixtures of oil and alkyd recall Pollock's action paintings. In contrast to the largely linear drips of Pollock's canvases, however, Schulz's paint pools in organic, biomorphic masses. In addition, Schulz's technique seems less spontaneous than Pollock's; although when poured the paint submits to chance and gravity, an attempt by Schulz to control the accident is evident.

In other segments, black lines and colored rectangles often meet at 90° angles, evoking Mondrian's compositions. And allusions to Murakami's paintings are many, from Schulz's weathered canvases, sanded to reveal layers of color below the surface, to the canvases with playful overlappings of curved shapes that bring to mind the round heads and ears of Mr. DOB, Kaikai and Kiki. Even though Schulz's works are steeped in historical references, they are strikingly fresh, unlike anything else I have seen.

One must experience Schulz's works in person to understand their construction, appreciate their craft, and respond to the tactility of their surfaces. When up close, I found myself desperately wanting to slide my fingers along the silken surfaces and the intricately ridged pours.

At the exhibition reception on January 16th, Cornelia Schulz — unassuming, with cropped, gray hair and a warm smile — generously described to me her process. The works seem so resolved and their pieces fit together so perfectly that one might think she first works out the compositions through drawing. This is not the case. Schulz explained that she uses drawing to brainstorm and explore potential, but the combinations of shapes come together in her mind. Visualization focuses her intention.

The process of exploring and realizing this intention then occurs over many weeks. After stretching the canvases, Schulz applies up to six layers of gesso, sanded smooth. Patience is particularly needed to make the poured canvases. Schulz must wait for each layer to dry before building depth with another pour and, ultimately, unifying the canvas with oil washes. As each pour dries it shrinks, forming organic patterning. Coral seascapes? Brains? Or an artist's studio floor? Because of the element of chance, Schulz says, the biomorphic canvases do not always satisfy. Achieving resolution can be a struggle. Many of the works' names reference her process of searching and surprise: "Some Conclusions Drawn," "Learning Curve," and "Inexplicable Events." After completing the individual canvases, Schulz moves on to their assembly. She took one of the works off the wall to show its underlying construction: an intriguing collage of wood, canvas folds, and bolts.

One arguable fault of this exhibition is that all of the works are very similar. When approaching a painting, there is little surprise due to the consistency in the basic shapes, painting styles, and palette of all eleven works in the show. Schulz said that she will eventually shift away from the palette used to create this body of work, as she can be interested in something for only so long. Her interest in this palette, however, outlasted that of some viewers. She may have kept some gallery-goers more engaged if she had made more perceptible shifts when creating these works. But it is this overall consistency that allows the subtle shifts to surface. It allows one to notice how a work that includes a canvas with a curved edge activates the surrounding space differently than a work with solely rectilinear components, or how a work with a flat black canvas has deeper space than one without.

Lily deSaussure (A.U. MFA, 2008), co-director of Project 4, first viewed Schulz's work in San Francisco and thought it would be a perfect fit in the stark, white-walled, light-filled interior of Project 4's new space on 14th and U. And deSaussure was right. Another of Schulz's successes, however, is that her works would be equally at home in a less austere space. I can see, for example, the jumbles of forms and patterns playing off the ornamentation of a Victorian interior. Schulz's elegant works, quiet yet complex, would command interest in any setting.