

The Power of Pigment á la Mode (Gallery)

Written by Steve Banks

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This Friday is the grand-opening reception for the area's newest art experience, the remodeled Mode Art Gallery located in the Bayer Building at 226 West Third Street in downtown Davenport. The opening reception, starting at 5 p. m., is an excellent opportunity to see the dynamic power of (mostly) painting and to meet gallery director Nicole Miller. The show features established artists such as Les Bell and Teresa Mesich and some scrappy newcomers (a younger group of artists known under the umbrella name ArtCon) such as Seth Sprott, John Burns, Emily Stout, and Justin Elvidge.

Done traditionally, painting is very much like the conversation throughout a party over the course of the night, in which the artist applies one color and then, based on what that particular color has to "say," applies the next color to the surface in a response. The outcome is not known until the end of this dialogue process between the colors, as one affects the other colors involved.

At the other end of the spectrum is painting in almost a checklist fashion, in which, for example, a table will be blue regardless of the demands of the colors around it, so things are painted one at a time and never adjusted. The outcome is essentially known at the beginning of the process.

In a physical sense, the paint can be applied thickly or thinly, smoothed out or still showing tool marks (brush, palette knife, fingerprints, etc.), dripping, dull, shiny, scraped on, sprayed on, and more. All of this helps to convey movement, feeling, and interest. It is this rich variety found within "painting" coupled with the retinal sensation of colors that makes painting shows – including this upcoming exhibit at the Mode Gallery – so rewarding to see.

Les Bell contributed three larger paintings and six smaller portraits to the Mode show. His newer paintings have evolved from his signature works that often included delicate figures in a some kind of visually fantastic setting to also include signs, glyphs, symbols, drips, and disjointed narratives. They have the exciting feel of being the love child of Les Bell, Robert Rauschenberg, and the Surrealists, while embracing the color sensibilities of the Impressionist.

In his piece *A Big Board/A Little Bored*, we are presented with three female figures over an

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active background of pinks and oranges that are energized by the flatter patch of underlying cyan. The figure on the left is a curvaceous nude adolescent with her arm cocked upward and her hand cupped, partially obscured under a veil of pungent orange drips. Her gaze directs our eyes to the scarlet figure in the center, who is by comparison a young woman, wearing a skirt and vest with knee-high boots. Her curly hair is pulled back with a red ribbon, which accentuates her face and her confident stare. She has a slight lean in her pose to accommodate the diagonal thrust of a board over her head, which delivers our attention to the third figure: a young girl slumped in her chair in a potentially provocative pose playing with her cat, which is under the chair batting at the ball in the little girl's hand.

Off to the lower right of the piece is a grouping of words and objects that aren't part of any sense of illusionary depth, but are presented more like a road sign. We find a derby resting above the words "Stay" and "On," which flank the form of a top or a plumb bob with the word "Top" painted inside. All of this sits over a bird clenching a branch-like stroke of paint. Nearby, in the mix, are also brush strokes that form a "4" and a "0," as if they are part of an equation fragment. The strong reds and gestural orange that dominate the base of the work redirect our attention once again to the scarlet figure in the center. I was reminded of a quote from famed photographer Jerry Uelsman, who referred to his own pieces as "obviously symbolic, but not symbolically obvious."

John Burns' work is reminiscent of the drawings of Ben Shahn (1898-1969), an American social artist and author of the "The Shape of Content." They also recall the "art brut" work of Jean Dubuffet, which tried to capture the honesty and straightforwardness of the visual representations made by children, the mentally ill, and untrained artists. Burns approaches painting as a function to get color on the piece. His works utilize color, but they are not interested in exploring the process of applying color. In his flatly painted work *A Buffalo's Revenge on Will Cody*

, we are presented with a buffalo form floating over a representation of Buffalo Bill Cody (his eyes are hidden behind a black bar) with a rhythmic rat-a-tat-tat cascade of feces landing on Cody's shoulder. While this does deliver an initial snicker, it is not as satisfying as Burns' smaller drawings, which rely more on quirky line quality, isolated color, and outright personality.

In *Reporters Gawk*, Burns shows us a none-too-flattering line drawing of a tubby and balding reporter blathering on about something of minimal consequence. The drawing technique is far from DaVinci-like, but it is dead-on appropriate to convey the head-shaking sighs this reporter must generate from all whom he meets in nearly every aspect of his life.

Seth Sprott brings to the show dynamic and intuitive uses of color. In an untitled piece, we are treated to pure visual magic created with the juxtaposition of cool aquamarine hues and hot pinks (a visual equivalent to the sweet and spicy combinations found in Thai food). Roughly the top third is bursting with dense, bubbly, spherical exclamations of color with writhing energetic squiggles and splatters, condensed and funneled by a hot-pink cloud (complete with a bird) and a calmer pale-brown cloud. What helps to set the top section on fire is the large expanse of cool greenish-teal tones on the bottom two-thirds capped by crisp black waves. In the midst of this "ocean" of green is a piggish body with a fish head, wisely anchored in place by two circles that

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pinch the pig/fish form with an hourglass-type tension.

In the piece *T.V. Dinner*, Sprott brings into play a smart compositional device by using the front panel of a television to contain the action of his painting. The stark brown veneer contrasts nicely with the undulating tempest of oranges, reds, pinks, lemon yellows, and muted greens. The old stove just off center and the strong downward thrust of its black stovepipe – along with repeating the bubbly, cartoonish cloud-like outline that we saw in the untitled piece – give us enough structure to organize the tumultuous color stew.

Teresa Mesich contributes her renowned wit and playful approach to painting in her dynamically composed piece *Buffalo Gals*. Almost instantly your attention is captured by the dialogue between the woman on the left, who is seated in a cushy chair dreamily playing her violin, and the woman on the right, who is wearing a light-blue camisole while standing and holding her violin and bow out in front of her. Both of their heads are accentuated in a near halo-like fashion by the square forms on the wall behind them. Soon it becomes obvious that your eye is going to take quite a journey between the dueling call-and-response elements ranging from the squares in the background to the women's pink skirts and pale shirts to the foreground and background to the violins themselves. The angular feel of the chair, the rug, and the wall squares contrasts the softer forms of the women and their violins.

I have already started collecting the work of Justin Elvidge, who makes bold and irreverent paintings that oscillate between complex and detailed to simplified and brash. In his more simplified *Homicidal Teens*, Elvidge presents us with three spindly cartoonish females wearing stylized mitres and gawking outward with bugged-out eyes and legions of teeth lining their open maws. In the center band of their test-tube-like bodies we can see inquisitive sperm leisurely exploring their guts. Their elongated arms help to weave the three forms together in a loose and disconcerting tapestry. To gild the lily, Elvidge has added a band of white lace and pink fur to the perimeter of this imposing work. His work uses sweet and safe bright colors in a bold and jarring way to evoke questions and responses from his viewers from a position of unease and visual discomfort.

God & Trailerparks is a 20-foot-plus long, 11-panel assembled panorama of a nondescript trailer park by printmaker Emily Stout. The image is made up of enlarged half-tone dots that serve to break down the individual identities, reorganize the visual groupings, and re-create more of a color-field sensation of soft and splotchy blues, kelly greens, butterscotches, and browns. Stout's work re-organizes and re-perceives the banal to find the sublime.