

The Highlights - Rebecca Morris at Karyn Lovegrove Gallery

Rebecca Morris, 2007

The mental tumbling that Skyler Brickley self-consciously succumbed to in his March review of Wilhelm Sasnal with his dizzying list of questions followed by few answers is a testament to the anxiety and insecurities involved in making art today. It often feels as though writing about art as well as making art is akin to spinning with open eyes, stopping, then grabbing for the nearest object. Asking questions is the spinning. When that becomes too uncomfortable, we stop and grab for answers. There is no denying this necessary pattern we take part in, as there is no need to. For artists, this game of question and answer is best played by those who have discovered and actively maintain the magical mix of movement and stillness, inquiry and solution.

Rebecca Morris, 2007

L.A.-based artist Rebecca Morris, currently showing five abstract paintings at Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, seems to have developed one recipe; She makes paintings that are visually familiar yet totally unexpected at this moment in the art world. Lately it is popular to read her work as "ugly."

Last Friday, the gallerist and I debated over whether or not these paintings were actually ugly. Could Morris be making uglier paintings? Could these in fact be safe? Whether intentional or not, her work recalls the current trend in art schools of ugly or "bad" painting. This may be a trickle down effect of the accepted and institutionalized bad painting via Kippenberger or the art-savvy apathetic painting via Krebber. It may just be a result of painters running out of good ideas (therefore moving to bad ones). For Morris, these trends seem very much outside of her practice. It is not about how to paint something that has not yet been painted. It is how to paint something that you actually believe in. She has been making what some now see as ugly paintings for over a decade. If this were a tongue-in-cheek investigation into the abject, the joke would have died long ago. So there is something else. There must be something else.

Rebecca Morris, 2007

Morris' blobby forms, like magnified organisms, are reminiscent of Kandinsky's work from the thirties, then coated with thick layers of metallic paint. *Untitled (#04-07)*, from 2007, recalls a kind of reduction, first in form, then in content. Using opaque reflective paint, she edits the composition by blocking out, which paradoxically results in the look of highlighting or circling. The thick paint used to blanket portions of the painting leave these ambiguous forms connected by the same substance that separates them. In this sense, the painting's gestalt speaks to the idea of its whole being greater than the sum of its parts. That notion resonates only when standing in the face of Morris' eight-foot canvases, teetering from toe to heel, nearing the stained surface, sweeping your weight back to understand the whole again. When the work is good, the dance of looking at painting mimics that of creating painting; it always returns to the body because it came from the body.

Morris' work is not unfamiliar, but it is unforeseen in galleries in 2007. The more I look at her paintings, the more I delight in the relevance of her references. Her work resurrects the colors of Forrest Bess and the geometry of Hilma af Klint. It reminds us of the Barnett Newmans, the Ad Reinhardts, and the Malevichs that did not make it onto MOMA's walls perhaps because they were too spiritual or just too "weird". In Morris' words, "Make work that is so secret, so fantastic, so dramatically old school/new school that it looks like it was found in a shed, locked up since the 1940s." This may seem like a self-conscious strategy but all working artists today eventually have to come to terms with their need for guiding principles. The trick is to not abandon them.