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Post-Boomers Spearhead the Boom

Provocative American painters have been coming to the fore just about everywhere recently.

April 04, 1999 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

This is a tale of two art generations: the boomers and the post-boomers.

American artists of the baby boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, arrived upon (and contributed to) an especially tumultuous art scene. From about 1966 to 1972, traditional artistic practices like painting and sculpture were regarded with extreme wariness, generating what insightful critic Lucy Lippard once aptly described as the wholesale "de-materialization of the art object" and Harold Rosenberg called the "de-definition of art."

Attention shifted away from discrete art objects and toward ephemeral ideas--toward art as a way of knowing, and how context shapes meaning. Video, performance, Conceptual art, Earthworks, installation, photo-based art and other fresh, new genres flourished. They set exciting standards for new art in the next two decades.

Today, though, a generation led by post-baby-boomers is just beginning to come into artistic focus--and things couldn't be more different. One inescapable sign: A painting boom is on. Provocative painters have been turning up everywhere in recent years, often bursting on the scene with remarkable gallery debuts.

The variety in their work is astounding.

Monique Prieto makes surprising abstract paintings with the lively vivacity of cartoons. Steven Criqui blends the conventions of High Modernism and Pop with old-fashioned Dutch mercantile art. Laura Owens assays subtle figure-ground ambiguities that play off the actual space of the room in which her paintings hang.

In vaguely ominous images of modern interiors, Kevin Appel adds a domestic Pop edge to L.A.'s otherwise mostly abstract tradition of Light and Space art. Michelle Fierro literally builds abstract paintings from studio flotsam, while Keith Sklar accomplishes a similar feat in figurative images of the Wild West.

Ingrid Calame finds her abstractions in parking lots and alleys, tracing errant stains on urban pavements. Sharon Ryan finds hers in the patterns of wood grain, which she highlights with delicate, oddly spooky tracery.

Like a carpenter, Carolee Toon builds sleek, obsessively well-groomed chunks of color. Adam Ross unfolds extraterrestrial landscapes of acrid (yet strangely appealing) hues, while Sharon Ellis' eye-popping landscapes put perceptual consciousness on vivid display.

Lusty paintings of marauding little girls roll out of Kim Dingle's brush. Jane Callister paints lurid confections, as if a Japanese pillow book or the Kama Sutra were being rendered by a suburban housewife wielding a sensual pastry tube. Monica Majoli labors over paintings at the rate of about one a year, creating ambiguous pictures of pleasure and pain.

And there are many more--not only in L.A., as are all of those mentioned above, but in New York as well. There, Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin are two of the more interesting painters in a city where exceptional home-grown painting hasn't been abundant for 30 years. In distinctly different ways, both Yuskavage and Currin are avidly rethinking what is perhaps the central icon of Western painting since the Renaissance (and a long-standing taboo): the female nude.

You may have noticed that this new crop of compelling painters is loaded with women. The cultural success of the feminist movement, which was itself instrumental in the "de-materialization of the art object" three decades ago, is one foundation on which painting today is re-materializing.

The arc of 44-year-old Tim Ebner's career also shows that the intuitive tide that can largely (but not exclusively) be identified with a post-baby-boom generation is going in both directions. Ebner, having enjoyed immediate success in the late 1980s with Conceptually oriented wall reliefs and exquisitely fabricated resin panels, abruptly switched gears around 1991.

Turning away from lovely work that, in part, meant to comment about modern painting without actually being painting, he gathered up canvas, brushes and oils and spent the next few years teaching himself how to paint--literally from scratch. The results, while not surprisingly uneven, have included some achingly poignant pictures in which tragicomic clowns and anthropomorphic animals wrestle with their world--a daunting place where wrenching conflicts between instinct and socialization always prevail.

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