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Artist trio shares a simple love of painting

Forget frames or curators. At a new exhibition a 'painterly alliance' lets the canvases speak for themselves.

By **Gloria Goodale**, Arts and culture correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | FEBRUARY 15, 2002

SANTA MONICA, CALIF.

Paint, canvas, artist. Period.

If a question of the 21st-century art world is "Can painting survive as a pure art form in this postironic, technology-mad culture?" - then the answer delivered in "Cavepainting" is "yes."

The curatorless, unadorned (no displayed information about the pieces or painters) exhibition of nine new paintings by three well-established painters that just opened at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (through March 31) suggests that the paintings alone are enough.

Forget the curators, forget the frames, forget the idea of a highly designed museum space. Just enter these two large rooms and enjoy the nine painted canvases for what they are. Don't ask for references, don't expect narration, don't look for a grand thesis. Just ... experience them.

"This represents, for me, for us, a certain belief in or faith in what painting itself can do," says one of the three artists, Laura Owens.

"Many people today are more ironic. I have a belief that you can actually do something with painting." Ms. Owens created the exhibition along with British artists Chris Ofili and Peter Doig. The works of all three artists, here presented in oil, acrylic, and other materials, hang in major museums around the world.

The show is more than two years in the making and serves the added purpose of bringing "name" artists to the L.A. art scene. Owens, who also teaches art, says this kind of interaction among artists is rare, but important.

Artists, she says, usually work alone and can become insular. The title of the show comes from the acknowledgement that artists need to emerge from their "caves."

"This was an opportunity to do something different because it is new work straight from our studio," Mr. Doig says. Preparing for a show with two other artists spurred him to create what he says is some of his best work.

"We were all conscious of trying to create our best work," says Mr. Ofili, who garnered international attention when his controversial work made of elephant dung created a splash at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999.

"I see this as a painterly alliance," Ofili says. "This is our opportunity to show what we think is good painting."

While this concept may seem hardly revolutionary, it is clearly bucking a decades-long trend of highly conceptualized and packaged exhibitions. These, in some artists' minds, favor the curator and the dealer over the artist.

"We wanted to show the work of these artists without the intervention of a curator and see what would happen," says museum director Elsa Longhauser. All nine paintings were created for the exhibition. The artists were motivated by the knowledge that the paintings would be seen together.

"These paintings speak to each other," she says. Exactly how the works communicate with one another may be less important than that these artists felt the need to get back to basics.

"Their simple belief in the act of painting is perhaps the most important part of this show," says Paul Holdenraber, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Institute for Art and Cultures.

"It has become so important to get curators out of the picture so the artists can speak for themselves," Mr. Holdenraber says.

"There is an energy and a simplicity here. Yes, people have come for a certain *succés de scandale*," he says with a laugh and wave toward a large canvas with several clods of dung stuck to it. "But there is more here than that."

Audiences, he says, are hungry for art with the kind of directness and authenticity that these artists pursue.

The show speaks to artists of other mediums as well. "All of this inspires me," says Ani Kupelian, a sculptor who lives in Los Angeles.

"I see that their work is very beautiful and very different. It makes me see that all different kinds of art can be equally appreciated."

One of the artists, she says, pointing to Ofili, loves working with a bead-like quality (referring to the small points of paint that create lines in his work). She says Doig is emotional with his evocative portraits and dreamlike settings. Owens's work is private, yet expressive, full of beautiful images. "They are all very different," Ms. Kupelian adds, "but they clearly share a love of paint. They share the desire to speak directly to the audience with their painting."

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