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Art Review

Catching the 'Next Wave' of Painters

A core of Southern California artists gets a nimble introduction in a somewhat unfocused collection at the California Center for the Arts.

June 20, 2000 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

ESCONDIDO — The deep interest in painting that has continued to grow among artists in Los Angeles in the last several years meant that it was only a matter of time before an area museum would gather up a sizable selection for an overview, in order to see what might be taking larger shape. The California Center for the Arts is first out of the gate with such a show.

Organized by guest curator Noriko Gamblin, "The Next Wave: New Painting in Southern California" has several things going for it. One is that, even though nearly 70 paintings fill the four galleries, it feels light on its feet, which is appropriate for an initial pass at an emerging body of work. The show has no catalog—and that's fine too; a catalog might have overloaded things with too much self-important heft for a burgeoning phenomenon. Instead there's a handsome eight-page brochure, free for the taking, to introduce the artists. And among those artists are 10 of the most engaging and provocative new painters to have lately emerged.

The main problem with "The Next Wave" is that there are 20 painters in the show, not 10. Its focus wanders. A strong, potentially eye-opening exhibition lurks inside the larger presentation, which diverts attention down too many cul-de-sacs.

The submerged core of "The Next Wave" is composed from paintings that begin by doing two things: They assert themselves as physical objects, rather than as simply referents to absent things; and, they likewise address viewers in body-conscious ways. Pop is a common leitmotif, primarily for the way it courts pleasure and shuns moralizing. So is sophistication with color, which gets under your skin before your brain has a chance to act or intrude.

Linda Besemer, Ingrid Calame and Yunhee Min make distinctly different kinds of abstract paintings, but the play of color is critical to all of them. Besemer's vivid stripes of acrylic paint, which hang like towels over rods without benefit of a canvas or wood support, make ephemeral color something tangible and weighty. Calame's intricately interwoven splotches of vibrant hues are grounded in the world of chance, their shapes having been traced from random stains found on the street, but the final composition and palette are meticulously reorganized. And Min's penchant for in-between, impossible-to-name colors in wide vertical bands on slightly irregular shaped-canvas shows there's something potent left to be explored in territory opened 25 years ago by Robert Mangold and other Minimalists.

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Salomon Huerta is the only straightforward figurative painter among the 10, but his hypnotic "Untitled Figure" is perhaps the most powerful, conceptually disconcerting work on view. Against an uninflected field of bright blue oil paint, a life-size standing figure of a man—head shaved, feet apart, arms at his side, clothing casual—is rendered in a manner both precise and simplified. Unlike ordinary figure paintings, the man in this one is shown from behind, so that a viewer scrutinizes his back.

Huerta objectifies the painting to establish a parallel experience: It's as if you're standing in line behind an Everyman, who gazes ahead into a painted field—which is of course exactly what you are doing too. The usual split between mind and body gets fused together, as an acute consciousness of simultaneous perception and physicality wells up inside. The painting kicks over into a wholly unexpected, profoundly spiritual dimension.

Laura Owens makes spare, disjointed landscape paintings that also engage actual space, the way a sculpture or installation might, albeit in a far more casual, off-handed way (her style is doodle-y). The schematic space in Adam Ross' smoggy canvases feels technological and brittle, as if warped between past visions of a science-fiction future and a present world circumscribed by scientific reality.

Sharon Ellis comes at landscape painting with a high-keyed, visionary zeal, in which a drop of imagined rainwater is a universe of unending wonder. In a wholly different way, Philip Argent concocts glittery, brightly colored theatrical visions perhaps best thought of as mass-media-scapes. In Steven Crique's still lifes and landscapes, Old Master painting, shaped by the optics of lenses, is disarmingly put at the service of our newly digital way of assembling what we see. And Jane Callister mixes food, sex and painting into one hypersensual stew.

Together, these 10 very distinct, stylistically different painters might be said to be exploring a loosely shared, overlapping territory. It's one that befits the exhibition's declaration of identifying "The Next Wave." That title is polemical. It suggests a curatorial argument is being made in favor of a particular angle of approach to painting—one that leaves other possibilities out.

Polemical exhibitions of new art are too few and far between these days, a time when museums seem more inclined to affirm established taste. This one is to be commended for heading in that direction. Almost immediately, though, the focused argument dissipates, becoming a series of "on the other hand" propositions.

It turns out "The Next Wave" is not championing a particular attitude toward painting at all. It's applauding the general activity of painting instead.

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Painting per se is neither good nor bad, but there most certainly are good and bad paintings--or else, where's the argument? Being thrilled by a Huerta or Calame doesn't mean you have to accept the reactionary smugness of, say, Ruprecht von Kaufman, whose well-painted illustration of a hospital room centers on the withered body of an aged corpse surrounded by learned doctors, their medical charts displaying a mechanistic image from Duchamp's "The Large Glass." The painting, titled "The Oath of Hippocrates," whines about Duchamp's iconoclasm as if it had broken some artistic pledge to first do no harm to figure painting.

In championing painting as an activity, "The Next Wave" gathers up a good bit of current work that's a holdover from painting's last major incarnation, '80s Neo-Expressionism (Enrique Martinez Celaya, Stephen P. Curry, Lezley Saar), and that's sometimes way too derivative of more famous practitioners (Darren Waterston's riffs on Ross Bleckner's magic-lantern style, for example, or the pastel versions of Howard Hodgkin's brightly colored spatial abstractions, by Dan Connally).

And some is just weak. Scott Reeder is interested in paintings as physical objects, but his free-standing sleeping bag, tunnel entrance, pile of rocks and August moon simply make up an inert stage set. Gail Roberts' eccentric "portraits" of tree trunks are flattened by routine execution.

The show surveys painters working in the coastal corridor from Santa Barbara to San Diego, but it appears overly anxious to represent as many ZIP Codes as possible. How else to explain the inclusion of Encinitas' Jean Lowe, an interesting artist whose witty, post-Oldenburg buffet table of meat, fruits and vegetables made from painted papier-mâché looks wholly out of place here? The simple fact--no surprise--is that almost all the interesting new Southern California painting is being done in L.A.

And speaking of new--an appropriate conversation for a show positioned as "The Next Wave"--the inclusion of Richard Allen Morris, a gifted painter who has been making gestural abstractions for at least 40 years, is puzzling here, especially as any number of other gifted painters of his generation are still at work. Ironically, his vividly colored, nearly sculptural painted bars might make good sense as ancestors to a more tightly focused version of this too lax overview.

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* "The Next Wave: New Painting in Southern California," California Center for the Arts, 340 N. Escondido Blvd., Escondido, (760) 839-4138, through Sept. 10. Closed Monday.