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Entertainment & Life

Wexner Center Exhibit: 'Inherent Structure' stretches the conventional view of a painting

By Nancy Gilson / For The Columbus Dispatch

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If you think you know abstract painting — or just painting, for that matter — the Wexner Center for the Arts' current exhibition might compel you to reconsider your definitions.

"Inherent Structure," a selection of 60-plus works by 16 contemporary artists, challenges traditional notions of painting with gorgeously colored and imaginatively composed pieces spread throughout the Ohio State University venue. Viewers can study the concepts of these works in depth (with assistance from a helpful gallery guide) or simply glide through the galleries and appreciate the visual splendor.

Michael Goodson, senior curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center, chose the artists — most of them American, including several with connections to Ohio — and originally determined the show's concept to be a gallery-by-gallery pairing of two artists and their works.

The artists are paired off, but that notion, Goodson said, is less important than the show's overarching theme: a profound questioning of what a painting can be.

Materials such as marble, stone, wool, do-rags, resin and wallpaper aren't often found in painting exhibitions. But they are found in "Inherent Structure."

The site-specific installation hanging on a wall outside the galleries is Dayton artist Zachary Armstrong's "Noah," two huge murals of earth-toned squiggles set against wallpaper repeating the imagery. Armstrong based his work on a drawing made of him as a newborn by his brother, Noah, who was then 4. Armstrong has studied, improvised and, in this mesmerizing work, flipped the classic stick figure.

The exhibit's most senior artist is 84-year-old Sam Gilliam of Washington, D.C., who in the late 1960s began to hang his unstretched, draped canvases directly on walls.

Goodson, who grew up in Dayton, recalled his love of the 1970 Gilliam work "3 Point," owned and displayed by the Dayton Art Institute. The beautiful, flowing drape in olive, rose, yellow, blue and red is included in the Wexner exhibit.

In the same gallery are the paintings of Brooklyn, New York, artist Angel Otero, who uses dried paints scraped from Plexiglas and assembled into collagelike works of contrasting, vibrant colors and hard-edged shapes.

Sam Moyer, also of Brooklyn, composes herirregular-shaped paintings from hand-painted canvases and slabs of marble and stone.

The airily titled "Cherry blossoms fall on half eaten bun" is one of the largest — and certainly the heaviest — work in the show. It consists of a large, cream-colored marble disc and a dozen angular, flat gray stones, assembled against a coral-colored canvas to create an appealing color-field painting.

Across from Moyer's works are the captivating constructions by Kevin Beasley, a New York artist who considers himself more sculptor than painter. Yet his pieces, including "In my other dream, I imagined a landscape," have the painterly presence of murals.

In a clothing store in his neighborhood, Beasley finds house dresses, T-shirts, socks, bed sheets, do-rags and more — all of which he swirls into his compositions and then covers with resin, creating large, imposing, thick panels.

"In my other dream ..." measures roughly 7 feet by 15 feet and is 4½ inches deep.

The color-block paintings of Philadelphia artist Stanley Whitney, bold and surprising meditations on the grid structure, are positioned near the equally colorful dyed and knitted wool hangings of Los Angeles artist Channing Hansen. Hansen uses his own genetic sequencing and an algorithm of variables to determine what colors, patterns and knit types he will use in his lovely paintings without paint.

The dense and expressionistic paintings of Brooklyn, New York artist Richard Aldrich, a graduate of Ohio State, are juxtaposed with seven untitled works by Los Angeles artist Laura Owens, a native of Euclid.

Owens' series — rectangles of screen-printed and hand-drawn wallpaper — was taken from the artist's 2016 exhibition at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco.

The works include digital brushstrokes, scraps of newspaper and documents, and even phone numbers, including one to which viewers can text questions — although the answers can be odd. (I texted: “What are all the dots for?” and the answer was: “How many people did you just send that text to?”)

Also part of the exhibit are works by Thomas Scheibitz and Arturo Herrera, both of Berlin, Germany; Amy Sillman of Frankfurt am Main, Germany; Ruth Root of New York; Rebecca Morris of Los Angeles; Eric N. Mack of New York; and Carrie Moyer (no relation to Sam Moyer) of Brooklyn. All of their works, Goodsen said, are edifices that “work on a purely optical level while also operating as a framework for information, systems and beliefs.”

If you let it, “Inherent Structure” can mess with your mind. It can also make you realize and appreciate the depth of thinking and purpose of these abstract artists who have built on, expanded or departed from 20th-century notions of abstraction.

Or, you can simply stroll through the galleries and marvel at the color, texture and sheer beauty of the art.

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