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FINE ARTS

A color comeback in the Aspen show

By Kyle MacMillan

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Although it probably comes as something of a surprise to people far from the insider intellectualism of the art world, color was declared essentially passé by the end of the 20th century - a quaint anachronism.

Sure, it could still be found in design and what could be called decorator art (people still need something to match their sofas, after all), but any serious artist was engaged in sociopolitical polemics and conceptualism, where color essentially had no place.

In reality, of course, color never really went away, but it is impossible to deny that its presence did diminish, especially in the wake of the Sept. 11 disaster. At the same time, it's equally undeniable that color - in all its ROY G BIV (a mnemonic device for memorizing the optical spectrum) glory - has made an exciting comeback.

"Like Color in Pictures," a smart, sophisticated, and, let it be said, entertaining exhibition continuing through April 15 at the Aspen Art Museum, joyfully delves into this phenomenon.

It is accompanied by an 80-page catalog that will help give this exhibition the broader exposure it deserves, since, unfortunately, it is not touring.

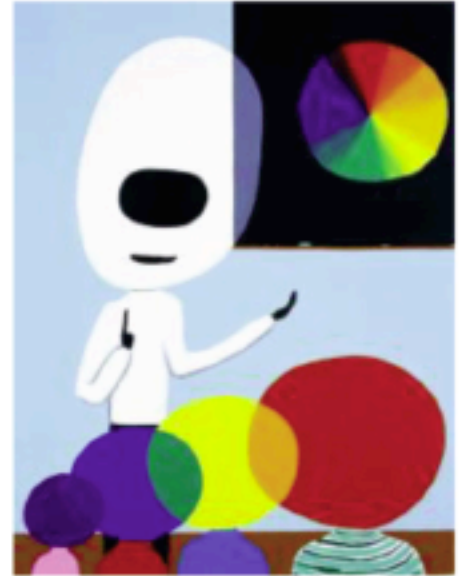
Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, the museum's director and chief curator, chose 41 often boisterous works by 20 artists worldwide - a good mix of established figures and up-and- comers.

Perhaps because our eyes are so attuned to the works of Mark Rothko or Morris Louis, a member of the color-field painters, it might have been expected that abstraction, especially the highly analytical variety, would dominate this show.

Instead, the exhibition takes off in a flurry of directions and includes several unexpected artists such as assemblagist Jessica Stockholder, typically known more for her unorthodox use of materials than her color sense.

The works have been divided into five sections - color as emotion, color as persona, color as décor, color as environment and color as humor. Of course, these categories blur into one another and most works fit more than label, and that diversity is part of the fun of it.

After all, eclecticism is one of the hallmarks of this current period in art history, with artists combining multiple media and approaches in one piece and working on multiple levels of meaning.



"Teaching," 2004, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 30 inches. (Peter McDonald/Kate MacGarry, London)

A notable example of this complexity is Sarah Cain's "like a willow bends" (2006), which appears at first to be a just a group of dried leaves that she has painted gold and, in a few cases, adorned with bright, colorful patterns. But upon close examination, it becomes clear it's much more than that.

Some of the leaves are in fact photocopies of leaves carefully cut out to look like real leaves, and, even trickier, some are photocopies of the leaves with the colorful patterns on their back.

So what might look at first as a kind of playful adornment of nature is much more subversive. While examining the tension between the natural and man-made, the piece repeatedly questions what is real and what is a lie, and what that means.

The abstraction that is included is never just abstraction for abstraction's sake. There are no monochromatic works, like those of David Simpson, which are what they appear to be and nothing more - solid fields of radiant color.

In very much a postmodernist spirit, the abstraction here is always in the service of some larger, often conceptual purpose. A good example are six largely monochromatic 2001 works on a panel by Byron Kim.

It is easy to wish that these pieces had some of Simpson's painterly refinement, but that's not the point. Kim calls the series "Sunday Paintings" and has written short texts for each, suddenly imbuing them with unexpected specificity and meaning.

The exhibition is divided into three galleries, and it is a testament to Jacobson how well the works fit together in each. Unlike so many group exhibitions, which seem more like conglomerations of objects, this show resonates with a strong sense of cohesiveness and purpose.

The largest of the three rooms is nothing short of a visual knockout. On the floor in the middle is "Townsville" (2000), lovely example of Polly Apfelbaum's now-familiar and popular abstractions, a series of hundreds of small, dyed velvet cutouts arranged in a circle like petals of a flower.

Other strong works in this room include Ernesto Caivano's "Arbor Axis (Body of Leaves)" (2006), a stunning 88-inch-tall diptych impeccably rendered in ink and watercolor, and two giant, bold abstractions by Torben Giehler, with a strong topographic geometricism.

If most of the selections in this show are bright and assertive, Jim Hodges' "Untitled (Border)" (2000), offers a gentle contrast. He has delicately adorned a 37-inch-tall sheet of tissue paper with a border of hushed colors and two paper flowers.

Jacobson brought a national curatorial reputation when she came to Aspen in 2005, and this small but ambitious show only enhances her national standing and that of the already well-respected Aspen Art Museum.

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