

Seth Kaufman at California State University Art Museum - Brief Article

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A restless experimenter, Seth Kaufman exploits the physical properties of ordinary materials to make mind-bending sculptures and reliefs. This exhibition brought together examples from three bodies of work that each defy easy definition. Betwixt and between the natural and artificial realms, his odd amalgamations operate as esthetic inventions that ingeniously address and expand traditional formal concerns.

Kaufman's best-known works are his fields of irregularly arranged eggshells encased in resin. The works have been sliced into square or rectangular slabs of varying thicknesses; the cut shells are exposed, with resin-free cavities open. Sometimes layered within each other, these concave eggshells read from a distance as swirls of paint.

A 23-inch-square work from 1996 hangs slightly away from the wall so that light permeates its translucent, amber-colored surface. A monumental, 8-by-4-foot diptych, *Eggshells Mixed with Resin, Halved* (1999), stands on the floor, with a gap of about a foot between its halves; it suggests a massive portal into a fossilized world.

Three other sculptural pieces were made from paint that has dried after being poured into the earth. Dirt, weeds and sawdust adhere to the paint, forming porous cavities and rough, spongelike surfaces. Placed on rod pedestals about a foot off the floor, the craggy red, yellow and blue pieces look like displaced fragments of floating moon rock or lichen. With volumes generated out of the earth's negative space, the sculptures give approximate geologic shape to paint itself: a substance that for some is the essence of pure color becomes rugged lumps which seem the very embodiment of impurity.

The third group of works consists of sculptural reliefs made from irregularly sized paint chips that look on the wall like spiky carbuncles or fraying strips of tree bark. Meticulously gluing them together piece by piece, Kaufman builds up feathered layers and leaflike clusters of paint. Although extremely delicate, the rock-crystal-like concoctions seem to have a scabrous strength. As with the eggshell pieces, the paint-chip clusters seem energized by the tension between the fragility of their secondhand materials and the clean-cut rigidity of their forms. Kaufman transmutes used surfaces, containers and fragments, refiguring their elements like a kind of cleanup man/chemist dedicated to giving detritus a handsome, mysterious second life.

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