

SFGate

David Gibson's vision goes beyond the ocular

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Seldom do I enter an exhibition and wonder how masterly work by a Bay Area artist - in this case David Gibson, who is in his 60s - has escaped my notice.

Most of Gibson's pastel on paper pictures at Shadravan's in Oakland depict studio interiors, disheveled but aquiver with potential energy. They display the sort of confidence and relaxed yet relentless scrutiny that typically emerge only after long experience has incubated a native gift.

Looking at Gibson's images I thought repeatedly of Avigdor Arikha (1929-2010), another painter, much more widely admired, who favored pastel and whose still lifes and interiors, like Gibson's, tend to pay as much attention to spaces as to whatever they contain.

And like Arikha, who renounced abstract painting to work from observation, Gibson transcribes not just the visible, but the process by which an image enriches the reality it reports. With that sort of traction, Gibson can elide or import details freely and still appear to practice realism.

Both men's works - like those of Arikha's hero, Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) - convey the sense that they register not only appearances, but life as it strikes a nervous system, not merely an eye. ("The William S. Paley Collection: A Taste for Modernism" at the de Young Museum includes a representative Giacometti picture.)

Gibson's "Floating Brushes" (2008) depicts a worktable and its surroundings, cluttered with containers and tools, flanked by a window and another work on an easel. The picture's own sinew of lines and fascia of smeared marks and color supplement creative equipment it catalogs.

Gibson no doubt has his own reasons for working in the ways he does, but his manner has a cultural pertinence that he might not even claim for it. As digital media deepen our credulous dependence on eyes alone and mediated views available only to them, Gibson tenders a full-bodied vision of situations, not merely an ocular one.

Feher at Meier: If we locate Gibson at one end of a creative spectrum, representing manual and visual skill, New Yorker Tony Feher at Anthony Meier's would stand somewhere near the opposite end.

But neither man's work can be fairly judged in terms set by the other's. The contemporary art world draws energy from such disparate registers of ambition and appreciation and the grating of market forces upon them.

While Gibson's art reports a working life from within, Feher's renders a condition of culture from within, summoning facts that remain invisible because they reside in the memories of viewers or in an unvoiced common culture of assumptions and linkages.

Feher's work opens itself to dismissal as thin conceptual art, but it has more presence than that would suggest and profounder social intuition.

Philosopher and critic Arthur Danto has argued forcefully that it takes an art world to make art in the post-Warhol era: the corroboration, if not outright collaboration, of diverse authorities well beyond any individual artist's control.

In this framework, Feher works comfortably. His scavenged materials, altered slightly or merely repositioned, show as what they are. Yet they expose something in us - a yearning to participate, a spiteful resistance to the terms of enjoyment offered, an anxious inhibition - that much contemporary art never touches.

In "GMP" (2012), Feher has strung pieces of colorful cheap glassware, evenly spaced, on eight chromed chains hanging from the ceiling.

Focus on any individual goblet or vase and its defects or nullity of design obtrude. But in a longer view, the chains of translucent color ping as innocently as notes struck on a toy piano. Backlighting here by an expansive bay window, the glass gewgaws create a pleasing color array that winks with reminiscence of the antique stained glass found in some San Francisco houses a century old or so.

Can we let ourselves enjoy this work without aggrandizing it disingenuously, accept it as trash *and* treasure?

Can we admire unillusioned the grain of the found, off-square plywood panels that Feher has stained with oil and presented as paintings?

The contradictions that Feher asks us to test, tolerate and even enjoy are just those of art in our time and place. His gift is for unmasking them, giving us permission to relax a little more into the cultural situation we inhabit.

David Gibson: Pastel Paintings: 3-8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 1-6 p.m. Saturday. Through Saturday Shadravan's Gallery, 2435 Telegraph Ave., Oakland. (518) 796-3587. www.gibson-art.com.

Tony Feher: Sculpture. Through Oct. 19. Anthony Meier Fine Arts, 1969 California St., S.F. (415) 351-1400. www.anthonymeierfinearts.com.