

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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New York artists bring a flair for color and drama to the Nerman Museum

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Shared values make for a potent pairing of New York abstractionists Jackie Saccoccio and Joanne Greenbaum in the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art's summer exhibition, "Polychrome Fiction."

The exhibit's title picks up on the unrepentant eye-candy dimension of both artists' work. They put color through its paces, deploying it in veils and rainbows, blobby shapes and backlighted webs. Color glimmers through darkness, hovers, floats, flickers, seeps and spreads.

Both artists have achieved international exposure. Saccoccio spent the past year as an artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome; Greenbaum has had multiple shows in Europe, most recently at Greengrassi gallery in London.

Beyond alluring color and dramatic handling, both artist's paintings attract for their freedom and lack of self-consciousness. Each borrows from past styles and movements, notably abstract expressionism and stain painting, to achieve highly individualistic results.

Saccoccio's large and colorful paintings, each dominated by an explosive central mass, are made by pouring from 10 to 50 layers of paint on the canvas, and rotating it between pours.

Greenbaum's approach also involves layering, but she relies more heavily on the use of the brush, as well as pens, markers and crayons. Her compositions frequently incorporate scaffolding and stairstep structures that anchor and counterpoint brushy colored shapes, radial designs, drips and stains.

There is barely a straight line to be found in either artist's work: amorphous shapes bleed and overlap, soft webs prevail over grids, cascades and whorls create a dynamic of motion and change.

At a time when a threatened environment seems to be fighting back, political intransigence has deadlocked social progress, women's bodies are still seen as subjects for regulation, and the virtual is eclipsing the real, Saccoccio and Greenbaum weigh in on the same side.

The works of both artists offer an argument against rigidity, not just in painting, but by extension, in the larger cultural mindset, beginning with their rejection of rules.

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“I rarely edit or wipe off. I want the canvas to record the entire passage of the painting experience,” Saccoccio told writer Ridley Howard in correspondence last May from Rome.

“I just go,” Greenbaum said in an interview at the Nerman. “I feel like there’s nothing off-limits or sacrosanct that I can’t take on. I don’t operate within rules.”

Bruce Hartman, Nerman Museum executive director, conceived “Polychrome Fiction” as a follow-up to the 2010-11 “Ecstatic Structure” exhibit of new abstractions by Bart Exposito, Warren Isensee and Stanley Whitney.

Those artists, he said, “were dealing with structure and control and rigidity. Joanne and Jackie’s work is much more about the materiality of paint and improvisation.” Hartman added that he liked the idea of featuring the work of two women.

A preponderance of organic forms — drips, pools, lines that curve and meander — align their works with the forces of nature rather than the structures of man.

Evoking storms, clouds, rising vapor and rushing water, Saccoccio’s bursts overwhelm the mark making that often appears at the edges of her canvases.

In works such as “Portrait (Genovese)” (2013), which the Nerman recently acquired, the marks suggest architectural structures and cities at night. In “Portrait (Sweetie)” (2012), dominated by a large purple and pink bloom bleached by a white flash, the edge markings suggest a map.

Critic Jennifer Coates has compared Saccoccio’s paintings to “windows onto worlds being destroyed.”

Greenbaum’s paintings frequently include architectural references as well as allusions to maps and machines. But she snarls them in a welter of visual information that confounds their function. Her layering frequently suggests a God’s-eye view of Earthly goings on, which she laces with unpredictability and a playful spirit.

Both artists’ paintings are distinctly human-centered. Saccoccio conceives her abstractions as portraits, and one way to read them is as heads or visages.

The stains and whorls in Greenbaum’s works invite equation with the female body. A breast-like form created from concentric circles of blue ink attains a near-cosmic insistence in an “Untitled” 2013 painting, where it looms over a stairstep structure tangled with color.

Both Greenbaum and Saccoccio are clearly in love with paint — how it looks, what it can do, its varied textures and consistencies. Both capitalize on paint’s capacity to deliver an immediate sensory charge — in a world we increasingly experience at a cool digital remove.

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