

Painting against pleasure

BY JOHN EWING

On a First Friday mad dash or a weekend stroll through the McNay, what do we hope to see when we visit our city's galleries and museums? Do we seek familiar encounters with older art, or are we looking for fresh insights from new work? This month at Joan Grona Gallery, two long-standing San Antonio artists offer a visual workout that challenges both expectations. Larry Graeber and Robert Tiemann create paintings in dissimilar ways, but the pairing invites discussion of how paintings work, visually and

This tension is frequently interesting, if not always successful. In *Rural Figure*, for example, a dappled field of alternating light and darker blue rectangles is the background for a yellow figure and a loose scene with vegetation, a house and boat. As with many of the works in the show, the representational imagery is stylized, moving toward abstraction. Even so, the figures and other images are curiously at odds with the free-floating, abstract patches of color that threaten to envelope them. More interesting, and even less pleasant, are the works on paper, in which quickly drawn figure studies are aggressively subordinated to an overlay of brightly-hued

patches of smeared oil pastel. Figures, pleasant colors and pastoral scenes have a historical place among the notions of beauty in art, but in Graeber's work they host a deep, formal conflict. Similarly, the small sculptures suggest machine-like representations but, in fact, are abstract and unresolved, formal experiments.

On the face of it, Robert Tiemann's dark, pegboard formalism could be difficult, off-putting, and contrary to pleasure. "On the face of it," however, is exactly where the artist achieves an unlikely beauty. The complicated surfaces of his paintings organize materials, composition and emotional effect into an overall



Larry Graeber, *Rural Figure*, 58 x 48"

within art history, as well as a consideration of the way we, the viewers, take it all in.

Looking at art involves as much predetermined reaction as it does spontaneity. It's impossible, and perhaps undesirable, to separate our responses from the values our culture has already assigned to artists and particular works. Providing us with some insight, 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that "satisfaction in the pleasant is bound up with interest and all satisfaction is itself sensation (of a pleasure)." But pleasure in the experience of viewing art is difficult to anticipate, because conventional definitions of art dissolve into postmodern obsolescence. To varying degrees, both Graeber and Tiemann appeal to our interests by challenging what we've come to sense is pleasurable (or have been educated to believe is beautiful) in a painting. Viewing the work of these artists, pleasure, or the lack of it, turns up in surprising ways.

With a selection of paintings, works on paper, and sculpture, Larry Graeber revisits the uneasy middle ground between representation and abstraction. For many viewers over the last century, the transition from one to the other caused a split between pleasure and interest. Graeber refuses to resolve the tension here. Just as Cézanne's initial audiences found little pleasure in his patchwork landscapes of alternating color, Graeber's figures and landscapes frustrate an easy road to pleasant viewing.

coherence for the viewer. This tricky balance is achieved through a careful contrast of "light" and "heavy" qualities, an enduring strategy that reaches back through Minimalist sculpture and beyond.

Pegboard is a non-traditional medium with a coarse history, but it is also thin and visually refined by ordered rows of tiny, dot-like openings. Tiemann's large, square paintings break this regularized pattern into two or more rectangles, contrasting black-painted sections with other dark colors or the pegboard's raw surface. In places, the tiny holes are plugged with bright Spackle, in white, yellow or red, which activates subtle differences in the panels. The dark paint is applied in thin, horizontal or vertical washes and, like the neat spackling, is sanded to a smooth, crisp surface. Synthesized, these contrasting qualities (i.e. crude/smooth, dark/light, whole/segmented) generate a surprising, visual gestalt.

To our contemporary mind, it is pleasurable to see dramatic contrasts organized with such grace. As Graeber and Tiemann demonstrate, the challenge and fun of looking at contemporary art is finding pleasure where you don't expect it, and the surprise of its absence where history tells us it should be. ■

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