

POP ABSTRACTION in LAS VEGAS

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Why are there so many exceptionally fine artists in Las Vegas these days? Is it the thriving market in contemporary art in California and Nevada? The low cost of realty and life in Nevada and the state's attractive tax system? A good art university enlivened by the charismatic critic Dave Hickey? The feeling that "anything's possible" in the American city with the fastest growth rate where entertainment is serious business? The particular atmosphere created by a very dry climate and exceptional light and color spectrum? The unique effects of sunsets on neon signs lit 24 hours a day? I little of all those things, no doubt. If there is now an internationally recognized figurative school in Leipzig, then we can safely talk of an abstract school in Las Vegas that deserves to be better known. This school is made up of four young artists, Tim Bavington, Thomas Burke, David Ryan and Yek, all of them former students of Dave Hickey's.

The vertical colored rhythms in Tim Bavington's paintings may be seen as the ultimate attempt to treat verticality in painting. The viewer feels these musical rhythms without even knowing that they are visual representations of musical scores. Bavington observes all the vertical motifs in his daily life, from neon lights to wallpaper, from shirts to sets of tableware. His recent pictures are directly inspired by his favorite music. The transition from music to image is achieved by computer technology. Moreover he has devised a mechanical aid that enables him to paint his vertical spaces perfectly using an airbrush. Bavington's colors are subtly graded shades arranged with precision, particularly in the way he juxtaposes warm and cold tones. The artist superimposes his sections of vertical structures in horizontal layers. By controlling variations in the breadth and clarity of the verticals, and by using repetitions of them to create new forms of frameworks, Bavington resorts to a wide variety of methods to surprise us from one work to the next.

Thomas Burke is a young abstract painter who works in three dimensions. His geometrically twisted optical constructions take us into a Matrix cyberspace. Anyone looking at his works may be carried away in an undulating trip through psychedelic territory. Burke was trained as an engineer. He designs his works on a computer and materializes them in a lengthy process using acrylic sprays and masks on metal sheets. The "initial" composition fits standard ideas of abstraction in 20th century painting, using a horizontal and vertical composition with uniformly colored areas, in other words a grid of colored pixels. Taking these designs, he then deforms them, folds, twists, swells, vibrates the picture, perturbing the viewer and tricking him into clever optical illusions. In landscape formats he offers us visual experiences that are as physical as they are mental. The titles of his works are drawn from underground music groups or rock-and-roll icons, cult films or fashion designer labels. By this he means to position his art in the entertaining, sensual world of consumerism.

David Ryan's bas-relief paintings, composed of superimposed offset layers of mainly white surfaces with rounded contours are also visually identifiable creations. One could imagine that each of his rounded shapes could be turned on its axis, like those little marquetry boxes with hidden opening mechanisms. Ryan observes the contours of surfaces, and more precisely the links and interstices between closely fitting surfaces, like a door on its frame. He finds his junctions in technological products of our daily lives. He begins by drawing directly using a computer mouse. He then draws the junction lines which he later manipulates to alter the organization of the surfaces. He then transcribes them into careful laser cutouts of several sheets of a medium that are superimposed irregularly. Ryan's work is that of a painter as well as of a sculptor and architect. The visual effects are created by the interplay of superimposed curves, by what is shown or concealed, by the colors squeezed between two panels, and by the play of light and shadow created by volume.

Yek is the one whose mastery of color, or more precisely of light, is the most amazing. From 1998 to 2004 he concentrated on paintings in square formats that draw the viewer's eye into an infinite atmospheric space. He achieves this almost hypnotic effect in part through the extremely fine gradations of color, by creating a curved, hollow frame, and by the convergence of a line that seems to enter and leave near the center of the picture. His recent works are inspired by visual experiences of landscapes, as their sub-titles suggest – "Dusk reflections on glass, Mandalay casino"; "Dawn, Red Rock Canyon"; "Spring Valley National Park, spring, noon". Now his frames are flat and outlined in a few long straight or curved lines. Yek makes his own frames. He goes so far as to bevel the edges of the frame so that the picture appears to stand out from the wall. Each panel breaks down into two or three airbrushed, flat or shaded tints. The effects of the perspectives of the new compositions combined with the long slender shapes of the frames and the shaded colors brilliantly convey the sense of space and light in landscapes of the American West.

The works of these four artists, shown together for a while in Las Vegas, have this in common – an immediate visual impact produced by bright color, the size and shapes of frames, and their rhythmical and dynamic compositions. These painters all maximize bodily effects linked to color, space, rhythm and movement.

While their paintings have an immediate, strong impact, we have seen that they reveal great subtlety. These artists are all great masters of technique. The meticulous craftsmanship that goes into the finishing touches of their works adds the presence of a sculptural object to their paintings. These paintings are always clean and pure, done in uniform flat tints with no impasto, paint runs, spots or brush marks. This reinforces the sense of color and space.

Finally, these four artists seek their inspiration in popular culture, and do not make any judgments about the relative value of their subjects. They are wholeheartedly part of a fun-loving society in which everyone is free to seek pleasure in his own way. Tim Bavington, Thomas Burke, David Ryan and Yek give us a younger, fresher and broader view of abstract painting, making it accessible to all by total immersion in today's popular culture.