

Art in America

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Geoff Hippenstiel

Houston,

at Devin Borden

Nearly all the paintings in this show of recent work by Geoff Hippenstiel, a Houston-based painter in his late 30s, feature a single massive shape occupying most of the available space. Depending on their contours, these forms, which are made up of countless painterly events, can read as mounds, tilted irregular planes or rough-hewn ovals suggestive of heads or stones. In each painting Hippenstiel finds a different way to play off the massive shape against the delimiting edges of the support. Sometimes he slices off the top and upper corners of the shape with a solid color; in other instances he surrounds the entire shape with a framing color. In one large, typically untitled, work, he uses gray to carve triangles into the left and right sides of an otherwise dense scumbled field of greens, pinks and blacks. This unusual pictorial device opens the central shape up to multiple readings: as a chalice, two spheres touching, or a Monetlike exploration of landscape and its upside-down reflection.

Although brushwork is evident on close inspection—something these paintings brazenly solicit—Hippenstiel's tool of choice is the palette knife, supplemented to great effect with the unlikely method of spray gun. I say "unlikely" because spray paint isn't often favored by artists who revel in the materiality of oil paint the way Hippenstiel does when he lays on heavy impasto, scrapes through to rich underpainting, or generously distributes dollops of brightly colored pigment as if the canvas were a palette. Generally, painters who work like this eschew spray paint, with its disembodied presence and industrial associations.



Although I suspect that Hippenstiel is attracted to spray paint largely for pictorial reasons (because it delivers shapes, colors and surfaces he can't achieve any other way), the frequent appearance of sprayed areas in his paintings effectively inoculates them from the self-indulgent, romantic and often reactionary attitudes that can plague painterly painting. There's something almost perverse about spraying paint atop passages of artful scumbling and impasto, as if one were trying to cover up rusted areas of a car body. It isn't all that different from David Hammons's practice of draping plastic sheeting over his paintings.

Reflectivity was extremely important in this show, especially in the paintings where gold

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and silver predominate. In one canvas, a giant gold bulb form adorned with suturelike lines of silver seems to burst from a tangle of green and red. In a smaller, vertically oriented painting, a central silver oval form sits within an aura of gold. The entire composition is overlaid with concentrically arranged patches of silver paint flattened out like extra-large pieces of chewing gum on a sidewalk. The mosaiclike painting has the opulent richness of a Byzantine icon, or a Klimt. From certain angles in the gallery, the metallic paintings bounced back the Texas sunlight until the brightness of the reflection was the only thing you could see of them. Not the least of Hippenstiel's achievements is his brilliant orchestration of movement from paint to light.