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ART: REVIEWS

Trees along North Avenue become a spare landscape

By Alan G. Artner

Tribune art critic

Published November 24, 2006

In the world of representational painting, where everything possible seems to have been done, what does a contemporary artist do with landscape?

Molly Briggs' visually arresting exhibition at I Space says she does what artists long have done: she respects a landscape's natural, verifiable order but is compelled to filter it through a system that turns it into an aesthetic construct.

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Briggs' system was to select a single tree on each block of North Avenue in Chicago from Harlem Avenue to the lakefront. She then painted the trees in order on eight abutting canvases that reduce several miles down to the gallery's single longest wall. The sequence of the trees is precisely rendered, but on three overlapping layers arranged according to color (blue-silver, blue and red)

in the fairly shallow space of the canvases.

Everything in between and around the trees has been eliminated, so the trees stand out from Briggs' paper like some of Harry Callahan's photographic images of trees in fog and snow. The interplay of the colors of the trees also suggests photographic negative images or solarizations, which helps lower the emotional temperature of the work to near freezing.

I cannot tell how important to the work are passages from writings by Michel Foucault and Simon Schama that Briggs quotes in a statement. They certainly are not necessary, whereas keeping the canvases together is, despite the artist's apparent decision to break them up after the present show.

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Jeremy Hobbs' photographs at the Schneider Gallery take Macbeth's "petty pace of time" and translate it into color abstractions that make much of everyday trivia--even as they constantly remind viewers of how the exalted whole has been constructed from images of many banalities.

Hobbs recorded his waking hours on a Sunday last May, using a video camera affixed to a helmet. Tapes had to be changed once an hour for the 16 hours he was awake. Each photograph breaks each hour into 10,000 images, using one image from the tape every three seconds. Hobbs then printed them in vertical strips, exercising no further control over their disposition or pattern.

Some of the prints, the ones as large as 60 by 90 inches, readily allow for macro/micro viewing. Others, those scarcely more than 12 by 17 inches, make spectators work harder at deciphering what went into the abstraction. That Hobbs wants us to see each picture both as an entirety and in its constituent parts is emphasized by the gallery providing a basket of magnifiers.

Among various possible readings, the most interesting is also the most self-reflexive, about the artist as a being, who creates grand designs from the dross of his personal life. But, of course, a lot of the fascination of the work comes from Hobbs wanting us to see precisely how he does it, using virtually everything from his day and seemingly hiding from us nothing.

At 230 W. Superior St., 312-988-4033.

The artistic emphasis of the 20th Century on innovation was so strong that our current, more conservative time sometimes offers delights from traditional work perhaps once overlooked. An example might be the textiles by **Frank Connet at the Douglas Dawson Gallery**.

Trained as both a conservator and artist, Connet works with natural dyes and a traditional Japanese stitching technique to create abstract tapestries of the greatest refinement in form and color. Several have compositions created from thin verticals in which one element, such as a circle or apparent frame from a film, is repeated, varying in softness, hardness or chromatic intensity. The layering of color achieved with dyes such as indigo, madder and cochineal is frequently as delicate as can be, providing a foil for bolder forms suggesting seed pods or elongated bark vessels. Most of the pieces hang flat, some achieving a radiance comparable to stained-glass windows. However, a smaller group twists and gathers geometric forms--squares and pentagons--into spirals that, despite their blue and white color, have shapes and textures suggesting at once rotary saw blades and elephant hide. They sound an entirely different note, strongly accented where the prevailing atmosphere is a tranquil legato.

At 400 N. Morgan St., 312-226-7975.

South Korean artist Kwang Jean Park's second solo exhibition in the United States--like the first, in 2002, at the Andrew Bae Gallery--is of paintings, collages and woodblock prints that soften and vary geometric motifs but are most concerned with something beyond the formal arrangements.

For a decade, the artist has been engaged in giving visual form to the Taoist concept of yin and yang, and several of these pieces bearing lavish textures are on view. However, new to the artist is a concern with sound that goes back to some of history's earliest painted abstractions, by Arthur Dove as well as Frantisek Kupka, Mikolajus Ciurlionis and, of course, Wassily Kandinsky.

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Several large woodblock prints with extensive handwork explore the theme most lyrically, with series of wavy lines that merge with densely textured areas, creating visual equivalents for the inter-penetration of sound and silence. The pieces are, to this viewer, as satisfying as the artist's larger, free-hanging paintings, and though they begin as prints, the many layered additions give each piece a subtle, insinuating uniqueness.

This sort of work, which is "about" something greater and deeper than its own construction, is nowadays in the West sometimes considered old-fashioned, given that such abstract, inward-looking art was created most powerfully by early moderns. Like theirs, the work shown here strives toward some inner truth beyond fashion in a universal geometric language that has been intensely, gratifyingly personalized.

At 300 W. Superior St., 312-335-8601.

Molly Briggs at I Space through Dec. 23.

Jeremy Hobbs at the Schneider Gallery through Nov. 28.

Frank Connet at the Douglas Dawson Gallery through Dec. 22.

Kwang Jean Park at the Andrew Bae Gallery through Dec. 16.

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