

It's Not What It Looks Like

By Jennifer Riley

Susan Scott mixes sophisticated visual play, with a range of carefully considered responses to issues of modernist painterly abstraction. For this show, "Corporeality and Other Things of Grace and Beauty", Scott's constructed paintings frame the idea of corporeality in her own particular context. The theme of this work, says Scott, "comes out of feelings of having a body ... this universal experience is the commonality between us. Understanding the way things meet, join and work such as shoulder to arm has a kind of logic that we all share." The overriding narrative, albeit subtle and abstract, is emphasized by the work's often comic state of dishevel and informality and it suggests that we are all compromised in some manner but the show must go on, so we'd better pull ourselves together and put our best foot forward.

Scott often sounds like a traditional painter at times explaining, "I want these paintings to feel open, spatially..." but then she betrays her natural impulse to destabilize the received definition of painting when she continues, "by using an object to specifically address image I've concluded that in these works form is more important than image. I'm intrigued by the way image and objecthood speak to each other in a painting, as if negotiating roles." She will use canvas but it may bulge, be torn, stapled, painted or not painted. She might use a piece of wood to replace the rectangular plane of the painting, leaving it with no formal boundaries but yet sustained, as if by an umbilical to the wall.

Like most painters, Scott uses many of the traditional materials; paint, cloth, wood, staples, hooks, wire and so on, to imagine new ways of structuring an image, however, here they are combined to foreground unique relationships between the elements themselves and subsequently their potential relation to broader arenas such as those of architecture, sculpture and installation.

Some of Scott's works are attached to the wall like a painting but the similarities rather abruptly end there. These unassuming objects usually take the form of painted canvas that has been folded, formed, often starched, stuffed and attached in some way or another to a piece of wood, then hung or leaned against a wall, set upon a shelf and more recently placed on the floor or upon a neutral pedestal. In some cases the support wall has been painted to further extend the works reach into the room. She relies on found fabrics that recall the thick weave of traditional heavy linen or canvas, cast-off wood and packaging materials as much as she does pristine new products bought from the art store.

Process is key to the genesis of these constructions. Each one is a result of re-structuring and re-finding formal relationships through a series of actions and reactions in her studio workshop full of dismantled paintings, boxes, Styrofoam, tools and hardware. It is a site for experiments and the drama of surprise, joy and disappointments of working without a script. Responding initially to her own feeling that 'painting' was "too loaded to deal with" she began taking her own conventionally mounted paintings apart, reassembling some, discarding bits of others to subsequently find that there is a delightful irreverence in the resultant informal appearing works. But, it isn't merely this irreverence that intrigues Scott it is the expansion of possibility that comes with the discovery for herself that art is more about what you do with materials and how we experience it than what it looks like. Attitude.

Scott admires the work of artists such as Robert Ryman for his focus on the aesthetic value of materials, Ellsworth Kelly for his discrete use of color and form, Ree Morton for her post-minimal irreverence and Richard Tuttle for his use of humble materials doing ordinary things as art within a practice that continually seeks to combine and resolve incompatibilities among dramatically separate sources such as calligraphy and architecture. Her work reflects her personal experiences, influences, and wry wit in a language developed out of a process of inquiry, improvisation, experiment and chance. There's a sense at times that the work has been caught in a provisional state while at other times they appear to have been treated to fantastically careful repairs, realignments or readjustments.

Scott's free-association titles like "Turtle Shirt" occur mainly after the fact, and often as a response to the combination of colors, textures and form. This one is a small wall mounted work whose shape is like that of a child's shirt whose front reveals a gooey green underbelly. This painterly passage recalls Frank Auerbach's thickly impastoed, aggressively rendered abstract portraits and like much of Scott's paint handling, it is full of the residue of the artist making the painting.

To take in each of the various sides and angles one has to move around, bend down and look up to see these works. By requiring such active participation from the viewers she effectively highlights the relationships embedded in her forms, especially at the edges, and brings us to the philosophical heart of her project which poises us to consider where art ends and reality begins.

As with many of Scott's pieces, "Long Boy", is attached vertically flat to the wall. It is a six-foot length of a floorboard-like wooden board, with canvas shaped into two narrow cones, a long nose nestled into a smaller cone with white, red, yellow, blue and wood colored paints distinguishing their surfaces as well as acting like a glue. The cone-like attachment starts at the top on the face and migrates down along the narrow edge, where the canvas gets thinner and finally peters out. Drawn to the bright colors collected at the edge, we notice other random pieces of paper, wood, staples and graphite lines, and as well as various textures and types of paint. With so much interest in this hot spot, the remainder of the plank begins to share more with the environment than art and we sense a pull between the created reality of art and the reality in which we are standing.

Relationships that appear to be born of precise aesthetic decisions turn out to be like us, often cobbled together out of one necessity or another. Here, an abject timbre of carnality collides with the long reach of rationality which we feel in our stomachs as we grasp it in our minds. These humble and unassuming works express sometimes with wit and a small dose of dark humor, a knowingness of our earthly existence, the universal fact of corporeality, as a kind of fragility of our own body's architecture.