

SONCE ALEXANDER GALLERY

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Breathing Life into An Empty Space

2-D and 3-D work by 4-D artists in Manhattan Beach

Paintings and sculptures aren't usually called upon to go head-to-head with one another, but that seems to be an underlying focus for "Post-Medium," a four-person exhibition that opens tomorrow evening at the Manhattan Beach Art Center.



"In the Shade," by Rema Ghuloum

The work of Walpa D'Mark, David Festa, Rema Ghuloum, and Ana Rodriguez varies from one artist to the next, but all of them are pushing the margins of contemporary artistic exploration. The gallery should be rife with dialogue and confrontation between one piece and the next, not to mention provoking each viewer to go beyond the safety net of easily accessible or digestible art. This stuff, in short, looks like a refreshing challenge.

If memory serves

Rema Ghuloum keeps her eyes open. She's a California native with lots of art degrees who most recently has been fusing her interest in the artistic process of Giorgio Morandi with the spatial concerns of Edouard Vuillard. Hearing this, I think of the stillness of Giorgio de Chirico. At any rate, there's a simplicity to Morandi's work and a stillness to the Intimist or post-impressionism of Vuillard; is it this that Ghuloum has tapped into?

She also creates painted constructions, sort of like little Morandis in 3-D (Lyonel Feininger did something of this sort as well). In her own words Ghuloum is more concise: "I arrange still lifes of my painted constructions into different configurations that suggest landscape, which I then examine from different vantage points. Unconsciously, the still lifes mimic the makeshift structures that I observe around my LA studio."



“Building Relationships” (a work in progress), by Rema Ghuloum

“Subsequently, I paint aspects of these arrangements from observation and memory. I imagine zooming into the painted construction(s) – close enough to create a world that exists in between form and space, oscillating between abstraction and representation. I attempt to unify forms and apply more stress on spatial contrasts by layering and excavating each painted surface. Color and material constraints control this process and arriving at a painting is as important as the finished product.”

As a painter, whether in two dimensions or three, Ghuloum’s aim is to express visual experiences and convey the function of memory (her words). Also, “I make work that responds to my external and internal environment. I find myself examining things that I detect around my Los Angeles studio that usually may go unnoticed such as the way cardboard and foam can be found stacked precariously on the sides of streets or the way in which old bed frames are left leaning against buildings. I often find inspiration in the way graffiti on the facades of buildings is painted out in shades that differ slightly from the original hue, creating subtle shifts of color. I enjoy how this tendency reflects traces of history through a canceling out of pre-existing marks and how the colors of those walls shift with the light throughout the day. I consider how these types of observations can be translated into my work.”

As I said, Rema Ghuloum keeps her eyes open.

Walpa D’Mark was born in Managua, Nicaragua, in 1977. He paints with oil on canvas and resorts to sculpture as a means of complementing his painting. He also approaches sculpture “as a practice of discovery.”

The painting immediately catches the eye, and the first artist that came to mind for this writer was Tarsila do Amaral, a Brazilian modernist from early in the last century.

“My colors are saturated and bright,” D’Mark says. “Some have called them psychedelic.

Others think that it is very Latino, others refer to my palette as Fauvist, and some find something spiritual in it. I appreciate and agree with all these readings.”

How he approaches the canvas will vary. “My paint application is smooth at times, and thick and visceral at others.” The same goes for the markings – orderly or haphazard. “My narrative is idiosyncratic, and I don’t necessarily need the work to teach lessons or give moral guidance to the viewer. But,” D’Mark adds, “it does, sometimes, reveal to me a thing or two about my own beliefs and doubts.”

Walpa D’Mark and David Festa (see below) have formed a collaboration they call Plymouth Clay. It explores the duality of the selfish and the self-less, and it involves the artists with the audience. Instructions will be waiting at the front desk.

Jump to it

The picture I’m looking at by Ana Rodriguez reminds me of a slice of birthday cake. Her works are color indulgent, and they are also “scent and tactile manifestations of rhythms and toxic desserts.” But here she is in her own words:

“My work deals a lot with toxicity and food,” she writes. “I love playing with the sense of smell by using color where we associate it with food or chemicals. Images like how Chicken McNuggets are made that are posted on the Internet where we see a pink dough-like blob. I grew up in Maywood, where I was surrounded by the City of Commerce and Vernon. The smell in the air fascinated me: The spices, Sara Lee bakery, Farmer John, the refineries. The smell in the air was both disgusting and wonderful.

“The usage of flowers,” Rodriguez adds, “started as a joke when I was with my sister at Target and we were in the air freshener aisle. I held up a Vanilla Febreze and told my sister, Why in the hell would anyone want to spray a flower-, vanilla-, ocean-, sweet-scent after they have taken a major dump? That’s how that series began.

“It’s a play of the senses. I have fun playing with the domestic floral pattern against the gesture of the paint.”

And now to a different part of the gallery...

“I’ve been called a ‘bad boy’ and I am,” says David Festa (an *enfant terrible*, to put a French spin on it). He’s also someone who has found art in music and music in art. More to the point, hip-hop and graffiti-styled art, circa Orange County and Los Angeles in the mid-’90s.

“I’ve been around versions of art since high school,” he says: “Had kind of a colored past growing up.

“After a stint with a tagging crew turned bangers I met a small group of guys who just did graffiti art and hung out – which was more of what I was looking for... The guys I met really put me on to hip-hop coming out of New York. I was a West Coast kid and the Chronic had just come out so I had to really listen to the music for a while to get it.”

Festa was swept into the energy of free-styling rap. “Loved the agency of getting a message out there immediately,” he says. The New York emcees or rappers he listened to included Guru, Tribe, De La Soul, KRS, MC Lyte, and Jeru the Damaja. They spoke, Festa adds, “about life in a very clear way with less narrative.”

One senses that his immersion in hip-hop fuels his visual art. He calls hip-hop a living art, and that sounds about right.

“Art should be accessible when produced and critical in execution. I believe in art, hip-hop, and democracy. Neither are dead.

“Instead of quoting the Energizer bunny I am him,” Festa says, his words now coming alive and certainly jumping off the page. “I am HIPHOP. Salvador Dali was my step-father. Jeff Koons is my mother’s son. Before Jeff Koons I AM.”

I can’t improve upon that.

Post-Medium opens tomorrow, Friday, March 6, with a reception from 6 to 9 p.m. in the Manhattan Beach Art Center, 1560 Manhattan Beach Blvd., M.B. Through April 8. Gallery hours, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m., and Thursday from 1 to 8 p.m. Call (310) 802-5440 or go to citymb.info.