

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Transforming a cheap medium

By DAVID PAGEL
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David Ryan does for medium-density fiberboard what Einstein did for physics: turn its principles inside-out to describe a world far more fascinating than the one that preceded it.

At first it's tempting to think of the young artist's abstract paintings in terms of custom paint jobs on hot cars. Both are slick, flashy and impeccable in the perfectionism of their subtly understated color combinations or screamingly high-keyed finishes. But Ryan uses such accessible references only as vehicles to get to the complexities of what he's really interested in — the ways line, shape and shadow interact to create perceptual conundrums a viewer can't get enough of. That has been art's job for a lot longer than cars have been around.

And painting's formal components haven't looked this sexy since the mid-1960s, well before Ryan was born. At the Mark Moore Gallery, his second solo show begins with the most ordinary things: mass-produced sheets of the wood-like material that has replaced plywood as the medium of choice for the construction of inexpensive furniture. Think of medium-density fiberboard — MDF — as the woodworking equivalent of processed cheese food. Although both get the job done, you don't need to be a connoisseur to know that they're nothing like the real thing — a sturdy plank of oak or

a gooey wedge of brie.

Ryan transforms MDF into paintings that look as if they're as light as clouds, as playful as cartoons and as free-floating as dreams. He does it by using digitally driven lasers to cut big 1/2-inch-thick sheets into loosely circular shapes that are gorgeously spray-painted. Some of these shapes lock together, like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Others leave gaps between their deftly doodled borders.

Together they form loopy planes made up of irregularly concentric rings, which recall those of Saturn, trees that have undergone genetic mutations or a bird's-eye view of fried eggs sizzling in a pan. Ryan then repeats the process, stacking two or three additional layers of similarly worked sections atop the first one.

Sometimes, only tiny slices of underlying layers can be glimpsed at the outmost edges. At others, the frontal panels part just enough to give viewers a peek of what lies beneath. It's a lot like catching a glimpse of skin between two articles of clothing meant to overlap — all the more risqué for being unexpected.

As a painter, Ryan is no ingenue. To think seriously about his fun-loving works is to see their links to an undervalued tradition of Los Angeles abstraction. There's a touch of Arthur Dove's late works in Ryan's crisp paintings, but their heart and soul belongs to California.

Without getting stuck in the past, they pay homage to John



Mark Moore Gallery

CONUNDRUM: David Ryan's "DC3FAN834," acrylic on medium-density fiberboard, utilizes line, shape and shadow.

McLaughlin's early works, draw knowingly on Karl Benjamin's kinky tertiary colors and learn a thing or two from Tony De Lap's gracefully asymmetrical hybrids. More recent precedents include Monique Prieto, Philip Argent, Bart Exposito and Stephen Heer. But no list of artists with similar commitments explains the magic at work in Ryan's refreshingly sophisticated paintings.

Mark Moore Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-3031, through July 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.