

BEN WEINER ALI SMITH by Leslie Markle

Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles CA May 19 · July 7, 2007

The recent pairing of Ben Weiner and Ali Smith at Mark Moore juxtaposed contrasting work that seemed to resonate with oddly similar themes despite taking very different approaches to painting. Weiner's latest series of meticulously realist paintings has departed somewhat from his earlier glam-rock reverie on fetish, fashion, and frivolity, and now seems headed toward a more reflective mode of art making. Ali Smith, on the other hand, pursues a much more direct or visceral approach, in an attempt to rescue expressionist painting from the archival bin of history.

Weiner's "GlamTrance," in the main gallery space, presents glassy, microscopic views of the surfaces of pearls, makeup, perfume, and paint, all done in a pristinely detached style. Weiner relishes every detail of these opulent yet disorienting terrains, casting the soaring peaks and valleys in shimmering halation patterns and atmospheric depths of field. These familiar, everyday materials, rendered otherworldly through extreme proximity, throw the accepted distinctions between object, subject, and medium into stark confusion, highlighting the inherently figurative nature of abstraction. In *Transformation Based on Context* (all work 2007), intensely colored blobs of red, yellow, white, and blue paint appear in fuzzy, shallow focus, miraculously transformed into Jack In The Box antenna ball look-alikes. Similarly immersed in topsy-turvy media revelation is *Dream of the Centerless Universe*, in which confectionary piles of white paint tower effortlessly above as a monumental alpine mountain chain.

Seemingly light years apart, Smith's no-holds-barred approach to creating richly textured mosaics of color belies Weiner's much cooler, conceptual tone. Yet in close proximity, some benign similitude of philosophy appears to conspire behind both agendas. In Smith's abstract compositions, liquid webs of linear patterns are juxtaposed with rough, Soutine-esque passages of thick, impasto color that, at times, resemble freshly filleted flesh. In *Siren Crown*, a salmon-pink floral shape, squeezed as if straight from the tube, sprouts forth from a red, meaty boar's snout. *Valley of Atomies* looks as if a whole Lilliputian banquet had slid down a verdant hillock into goeey annihilation, whereas only an imaginative pileup of garish forms prevents *Red Sea* from dissolving into a lake of red pigment. Overall, a canny knack for whimsy permits a delicate balance to exist between purely decorative gestures and those of grotesque vulgarity. Sometimes these paintings evoke the bountiful decay of seventeenth-century Dutch still lives, while at other times they are like Rorschach references to the surrealism underpinning all abstraction.

For all their proximate differences and similarities, however, both artists are as one in avoiding clearly discernible punch lines in favor of allowing visual surfaces to carry the day in painting—and, in the process, of drawing lessons from the medium itself. In contemplating such works, one is again reminded of Lacan's fable about the sardine can, thanks to which he theorized the gaze as something akin to a mirror—always reflecting yet never actually seeing. "In the depths of my eye the picture is painted, but the subject is not in the picture (...) if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen (...) the stain, the spot."



(TOP TO BOTTOM) INSTALLATION VIEW, "DEGREE ZERO," (LEFT TO RIGHT: WADE GUYTON, UNTITLED, 2005; MICHAEL KREBBER, CARTER RATCLIFF, 2004; CHRISTOPHER WOOL, UNTITLED 0359, 2007). NATHAN HYLDEN, UNTITLED, 2007, ACRYLIC & COLLAGE ON CANVAS, 11 x 8.5 IN. COURTESY RICHARD TELLES FINE ARTS, LOS ANGELES. BEN WEINER, TRANSFORMATION BASED ON CONTEXT, 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 48 x 72 IN. (RIGHT) ALI SMITH, VALLEY OF ATOMIES, 2007, OIL & ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 80 x 100 IN. COURTESY MARK MOORE GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.