

Cordy Ryman: Fluent in abstract art

Kimberly Chun, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, November 10, 2011



Cordy Ryman grew up steeped in art-making, so it's no surprise that it's second nature to the New York City artist.

"I grew up around a lot of painting," Ryman says by phone. He's the son of painters Robert Ryman and Merrill Wagner, brother of sculptor Will Ryman and half-brother to artist Ethan Ryman (also known for his engineering work with the Wu-Tang Clan and other hip-hop artists). "Everyone in my family is an artist, strangely enough."

And to Cordy Ryman's credit, his work bears little resemblance to his father's minimalist white-on-white masterworks, his mother's abstractions on steel or sibling Will's whimsical figurative pieces. Consider the 39-year-old artist's works, often combining painting and three-dimensional elements, as both a response and reaction to his family's explorations.

"I feel like the language of abstract painting is a separate language unto itself," Ryman says. "There's definitely a dialogue that goes on with that world."

His own contribution to the conversation will be on view at his first show in the Bay Area - a snapshot of work from the past six months. "It's a record of that time, and it has personal relevance to me," Ryman says. "Each piece has its own sort of history or story for me."

A site-specific installation of about 100 acrylic- and enamel-dabbed triangles, made of wood recycled from other works, is set to tumble down the wall of the gallery - at press time it was called "Factory Deathtrap." "The space activates things - it's a starting point," Ryman offers, going on to explain the difficulty of scoping out the gallery while using only photographs.

Similarly, pieces like "Luca" - which juxtaposes a boxy 3D maze with a radiant sunburst of yellows, browns and oranges - and "Yellow Hatchet" - which thrusts from the wall like a small, sunny hatch door - play off the space surrounding them. The latter, Ryman says, "was once a flat painting that I wasn't happy with so I built it out."

"They're all sort of about the process of making things," he adds, "and the decisions that take place in the studio."

It's a mode Ryman has been working in for about 18 years, one that's remote from his first stabs at art-making as a preteen cartoonist and then a youngster intrigued by figurative sculpture.

"I didn't think I would do the type of work I'm doing now," observes the artist, whose next project is a large commission for Michigan State. "But I always felt like I was going to make things. It didn't matter what I made, but I had the need."

Opens Sat. Through Dec. 22. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tues.-Sat. Eli Ridgway Gallery, 172 Minna St., S.F. (415) 777-1366. www.eliridgway.com.