

# Adam Ross' Venturesome and Intricate Works Reward Contemplation

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The nine new paintings by Adam Ross at Shoshana Wayne Gallery have a distinctly metallic flavor, like the taste that comes when a molar with a filling bites down on aluminum foil. For art (if not for eating) this is not at all a bad thing--though it does make for an initially discomfiting visual experience. These paintings venture out into an imaginative territory that demands acute concentration, and that pale little jolt is a heads-up signal.

The four large canvases in the gallery's front room are each 4 feet high and 6 feet wide. Ross mixes oil paint with alkyd to create slick, shiny surfaces, which both trap and reflect ambient light. The paint is brushed across the horizontal expanse in hazy atmospheres of blue mixed liberally with white, from top to bottom, while tinges of violet, gray, green or rust lend a sulfurous, otherworldly glow. Not unlike the Surrealist landscapes of Yves Tanguy, a horizonless infinity oscillates against an apparently shallow field, where ethereal space and concrete place somehow merge.

But this is definitely not the sequential, literary space (or place) of Surrealist psychology. Smaller rectangles of hard-edge color interrupt Ross' horizontal fields, like software windows that have popped into view on a computer screen. Tall, skinny, crisply attenuated lozenges cluster together in groups, suggesting an abstract sort of topiary, while machine-like fragments hover like optical floaters in your eye.

These inexplicable objects, painted in a range of lush hues whose dense and varied richness reveals itself only slowly, after prolonged observation, are not randomly arrayed. An unseen grid functions as a compositional scaffold, and nothing escapes its order.

Ten large pencil drawings all have the look of drafting diagrams for galactic outposts, even though closer inspection reveals the big white sheets of paper to be populated with nothing more than arrangements of razor-sharp arcs, lines, circles and grids, over which big smudges of graphite occasionally roll like thunderclouds. Titled "The Misleading Nature of Atmospheric Events," the drawings warn against trusting your immediate perception, while simultaneously they indulge the pleasures of the eye.

Simple yet sophisticated, confounding yet seductive, these are paintings that reward contemplative looking. Without employing illustration techniques or established devices from science fiction fantasy, Ross unfolds a metaphorical landscape of technological wonderment that seems ineluctably of the moment.

\* Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-7535, through June 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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Imagined Journeys: For several years Jacci Den Hartog has been making strange and unusually compelling sculptures extrapolated from landscapes familiar to traditional Chinese painting. It's as if the artist had accepted the common visual invitation made by many Asian paintings, which is to enter the depicted landscape and take an imaginative journey across vast distances, and then made a model of where she had been and the sights she had seen.

The four new sculptures Den Hartog is showing at Christopher Grimes Gallery continue down that road, but something slightly different also seems to be afoot. The works, all made this year, feel somewhat awkward and labored--not fully confident. But there's also an eccentric quality to these pieces, and it bears watching.

Standing on a square, rectangular or round pedestal table, each sculpture is apparently made from white plaster (or Hydrocal) that has been thickly slathered over a linear armature. One sculpture grows upward in jagged zigzags, two others rise up and swirl in and around themselves, a fourth breaks out into exuberant ornamental scrolls. Unlike her earlier landscape sculptures, which typically plunged out from the wall or pedestal base to probe surrounding space, these works remain contained within precise volumes determined by the size and shape of the table tops on which they stand.

The surface of each table is composed from mirror and colored plexiglass--red, blue, green or white--which has been cut like a jigsaw puzzle into decorative mosaic patterns. Four ink-and-watercolor drawings on an adjacent wall likewise show dramatic, Chinese-style mountains in black and white, rising up from fields of color. Pink and violet flowers, dense tangles of autumnal leaves and a rushing, streaming tide of cool blue water are platforms above which mountains climb.

Den Hartog calls her four sculptures "viewing pavilions." I'm not quite sure what that means, except to say that abstract armatures rising above colored mosaics do in fact function as places for the imagination to rest, refresh and amuse itself. These are strange and quirky sculptures, unlike anything else around, and it will be curious to see what comes next.

Also at Christopher Grimes, in the small rear gallery, Bay Area artist Dean Smith is having his local debut with a solo show of 10 abstract linear drawings, all dating from 1999. Intimate and organic, they offer simple pleasures.

Imagine a close-up view of close-cropped hair spiraling out from the crown of a man's head, or perhaps little iron filings standing at attention as a magnet swoops by, and you'll have some idea of the dense, intricate patterns that enliven the three drawings in black graphite. The negative spaces between the short, staccato pencil marks assume a contradictory material presence, which gives these flat drawings visual heft.

Other drawings are made from tiny loops of hot pink or pinkish orange, which cluster in tight, concentric circles like minute cells or a microscopic view of skin. Elsewhere dense, parallel, undulating lines ripple across the surface of the page, filling the sheet, or else establishing an internal bodily shape (the largest drawing carries the subtitle "portrait of my father's brain"). Smith uses metallic or fluorescent ink for these EKG-like works, which gives them a subtle evanescence.

The most curious drawing is a narrow triangular form, like a pie wedge, that begins at the topmost point with a small fleck of ink. As the line is repeated at progressively increasing widths across the triangle, it begins to get wavy. By the time the final line crosses the bottom of the triangle, it's a veritable ruffle, like the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil and causing a hurricane in Texas. Neat.

\* Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 587-3373, both through June 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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Going, Going . . . : Walt Walker is a retired commercial artist who has also made Realist easel paintings--landscapes, genre scenes and figures, mostly--since he was a child. (He's 81 now.) He is also credited with having opened and operated (with his wife, Jane) the LeJan Gallery, the first L.A. gallery designed expressly to show African American artists, at Crenshaw Boulevard and 48th Street in the 1950s.

A tribute exhibition of 50 Walker paintings from the past 30 years is currently at the William Grant Still Art Center. Walker paints in oil in a straightforward, unshowy manner, sometimes working from life, sometimes from photographs and sometimes--judging from several nocturnes whose heavens are dotted with brightly colored planets--from his imagination.

The most compelling image is a small, bust-length painting of a Masai woman adorned with great clusters of beads around her neck and cascading from her hair. At once iconic and casual, part venerated heroine and part everyday snapshot, the image is an invented composite, generated from poring over bookplates at the library.

On one level, Walker's paintings are not unlike those made during leisure time by many people who work at other jobs to make a living. On another level, though, they're significantly different. A tradition descended from Western culture (easel painting in oils on canvas) and traditions with roots in Africa (the daily life of the African American diaspora) are brought together in an effort to valorize each other.

It's an often lively artistic strategy, traced to the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance into the 1930s and beyond, that--judging from the very different work of the most interesting young black artists today--is about to disappear with the century that give it birth.

\* William Grant Still Art Center, 2520 West View St., (323) 734-1164, through May 28. Closed Mondays.