

## From Nature to Nudes Art Scenes from Dallas Art Galleries Opening Night April 5

Once again the first stop during the art walk was Conduit Gallery. Here Billy Hassell's new exhibition *Illumination* at Conduit Gallery challenges whether a decorative tradition, once in full bloom, can be perceived beyond its decorative nature. Whimsical and cheery, flora and fauna are flattened into opaque shapes interlocking within giant canvases.



Its maniac nature-inspired primitivism meets with an air of detachment, recalling Parisian Japanese wallpapers. Texans are fond of nature's wonders. The artist just had his solo show at the Tyler Museum of Art. However, their popularity should not come as a detriment to his sincerity in pursuing an individualized eclectic language. On the opening night, many took a photo opportunity with a painting featuring an owl (*Spring in East Texas*). Here he manages to construct a semi narrative angle out of simplified patterns. No one is fooled. Neither the nature in East Texas, nor the artwork itself, could maintain that level of naïve serenity, without a fight to strip down to underlying orderliness. Also at Conduit, Reinhard Ziegler's installation of photos and paintings is a visual statement that both representation and abstraction stem from the nature. While such a statement is not new, it is rare to see that the two styles actually merge into one. Myriad winter branches, when overexposed in black and white photos, look almost like the negation of his brushstroke paintings. In those succinct paintings, he leaves dry ink on a gessoed surface through hard bristle brush strokes. We call it chaotic when seeing the patterns of leafless trees, and we think it poetic in reading those brushstrokes; but what we really meant is to recognize that an idealized landscape could look as chaotic as an abstract painting, and abstract brushstrokes dance just as elegantly as nature itself. In a show of black and white, Ziegler unites representational and abstract in one rhapsodic rhythm. The galleries seemed more full this month than

they have in some time. Perhaps its cabin fever, as much as that can exist in Dallas, or perhaps the artists are a bigger draw.

At Holly Johnson Gallery, Michelle Mackey's *Afterglow* is a big hit. Her paintings involve memory and emotion in their physical presentation as light movement through natural and architectural spaces. Often, the indoor light looks ghostly pure, amid muddied background. Sharp lineation gives hints of architecture elements where the light or souls have once passed. There is an insurmountable degree of quietitude in those paintings. I am drawn into that radiating light, with the same kind of excitement as seeing a dark interior suddenly become partially illuminated from passing by vehicles, momentarily. Then the dark resumes, as I move to see the ghostly layers of gray and black. Anyone who has walked around in the decaying structures of Detroit or Buffalo knows how beauty lurks amidst decay. Like Ziegler's installation, Mackey demonstrate an evocative haunting beauty that looks both representational and abstract.

Kelly Vance's new exhibition *Myth Maker* at Cris Worley could inspire Pedro Almodóvar for a few new movies. According to Worley, the artist lives in a four-plex apartment she shares with three other single women of similar ages. The connected space and all female identity enable the artist to create a body of works that looks like a psychological thriller.

*Fugue State*, a self-portrait with the setting and pose based on an old porn photo, features a high angle and suspended tension. The perspective reminds me of Philip Pearlstein, except Vance is much warmer and relent in rendering bodies. Of course, Pearlstein's models always look like models, while here the viewers are left to confront directly with mysterious seductive look.

This was one of the strongest openings for Dallas galleries in recent months. I am sure these artists will have careers we can follow far from here.