

Shane Walsh explores the symbolic power of painting

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Shane Walsh's current show, "Xpressor," at the new [Alice Wilds](#) gallery in Walker's Point gives us a look at two artists in one: an artist who maintains a bird's eye view of the history and methods of painting and mark-making, and another one who toils away in the trenches tearing, masking, drawing, spraying, and composing art work. That bird's-eye perspective has had a contentious history among modern painters. Barnett Newman famously said that "aesthetics is to artists what ornithology is to birds." But visual culture has radically transformed and painting has been declared obsolete dozens of times since Newman made that blunt statement.

So what's a painter to do 60 years on?

Well, get *extra*-involved with esthetics, if you're Walsh. And linguistics, and pop-culture, and mechanical mark-making – all fodder for his generous paintings. Walsh sifts through the history of abstraction, identifies tendencies and positions – including "ziplike" forms similar to Newman's – and redeploys them as new, mediated languages. His omnivorous appetite for synthetic construction can be seen in 6 large paintings in Wilds' spacious main gallery and several smaller, idiosyncratic gems around the corner in the more intimate side space.

The larger paintings are well-kempt, handsome black-and-white objects. They greet viewers like a room full of tuxedoed gentlemen. The interlocking forms, dynamic gestures, snaking linear passages, and asymmetrical balance will seduce any viewer at a formal level.

However, Walsh is aiming deeper. One stunning untitled painting on the gallery's west wall features bold black brushstrokes sidewinding down the left side of the canvas, eclipsed by a white rectangle and a series of wide, gray, horizontal, and

ambiguous brushstrokes. It is unclear whether these marks are painted, photocopied, or transferred, or some of each. They were gestural, but what are they now? Does it matter? Does it change how they should be received?

The painting continues to build under subsequent layers of collaged brushwork into something like a Frankenpainting, maybe extra-alive, maybe extra-dead, living in ambiguity in order to deliver a larger message about existence in between states.



(Photo: Shane Walsh / Alice Wilds)

The other large paintings open similar discussions about the language of art making but do so through their own unique arrangements of marks and gestures. Several smaller paintings in the south gallery feel eccentric and modest by comparison to the larger work, with less focus on the grand narrative of painting taxonomy and a more

on the sensual process of dragging a wet brush against the weave of a stretched canvas.

Two 14- by 11-inch paintings above the flat files have an especially luscious, direct quality, the gray tones on the off-white raw canvas bring the slightest sense of color to the show. The immediacy of their scrawls and loops bring a playfulness that serve as a perfect counterpoint to the more analytical work in the show.

Makers of all sorts have always had to adjust to changing times. Walsh's work adjusts to his by reminding everyone that the medium of painting may no longer be its only message, as Newman and other Action Painters would have held. His canny compositions demonstrate how painting's function has migrated over the years from a subjective physical act to a more concrete form of symbolic communication. And most importantly, that the understanding of that idea isn't simply an art historian's parlor game, it's a topical therapy for living in our current funhouse of a society, where truth and meaning are relative and the status of images fluid and fugitive.

A basic graphic smiling face, for instance.

When Harvey Ross Ball invented the standard yellow happy face symbol in 1963 for a Massachusetts insurance company, he couldn't have known it would end up as a universally recognized symbol of affirmation a half-century later. Nor did Barnett Newman have any idea that artists like Walsh would appropriate and remix his moves like hip-hop artists would basslines and drumbeats. Given how times have changed, Walsh seems to forgive Newman for his overdetermined prohibition simply by continuing to advance the possibilities of their shared language of painterly abstraction in the face of all who might deem it an ineffective agent of social intervention.

"Shane Walsh: Expressor" can be viewed through Sept. 3 at The Alice Wilds gallery, 900 S. 5th St. Info: www.thealicewilds.com/current/.

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