

Fresh Paint

Nancy Evans and
Yek at POST, Steve
Hurd at Dan Bernier

BY MICHAEL DARLING

Even an avowed believer in the potential of contemporary painting like myself gets a little tired of defending the beleaguered medium. Luckily, though, the sheer abundance of good painting going on out there speaks more eloquently than any critic about the vitality of the current scene. Three new shows provide a glimpse of the variety of viable approaches available to painters today, and indicate a field as wide-open as anytime in history.

One of the most fearless and original painters working in L.A. is Nancy Evans, and with her exhibition "Mix It Up" at Post downtown, her continuously evolving project advances another step (or even a leap). Only four works fill a small gallery space, but what they lack in quantity is made up for by the possibilities they suggest. Especially promising is *Big Screen* (1998-99), a large painting on burlap that has been affixed to a concave onetime TV screen. The painting

follows the smooth curves of its high-tech, injection-molded backing as it subtly wraps a funky grid of kid's-room colors around the viewer's field of vision. Interspersed throughout this wonky grid are airbrushed porcelain objects that plug into a series of holes on the surface of the work. A few porcelain extras lie on a wooden ledge of the giant easel that holds up the painting, suggesting the possibility of reordering *Big Screen's* compositional structure.

A similar interactivity is proffered in two other works, albeit with a change in format. *Arrangement Games: Tray 1* and *Arrangement Games: Tray 2* (both 1999) are made up of what appear to be prosaic oak hostess trays, held up on collapsible scissor-legged stands. The interiors of each tray have been lined with burlap and painted with colors and geometric patterns that recall 1930s-era provincial modernist abstractions. Arranged atop each ground are strange painted objects, some recognizable as fruit, leaves and vegetables, others more ominously suggestive of animal bones. Part game pieces for an as-yet-undiscovered parlor game, part painterly figures to their colorful grounds and part shamanistic tools for a suburban medium, Evans' objects straddle kitsch and the "higher" calling of progressive art making.

Pushing this dichotomy even further is the "painting" *Sweet Birds of Youth* (1999), which would look just about right hanging above the couch in a suburban ranch house still inhabited by its original owners, even though its *Better Homes and Gardens* craftsiness looks a bit out of place amidst the pure white confines of the gallery space. Once beyond the dingy brown tones of the raw burlap that hangs like a sheet from the wall

and the autumnal tones of the molded Plexiglas birds that congregate on its surface, one notices the sly reversal of painterly expectations Evans has orchestrated. In conventional pictorial logic, figures usually lie or float against a stable, sturdy ground that holds the composition together. Here, the burlap sags and slinks and would puddle on the floor if it weren't invisibly held to the wall by the helpful sparrows, industrious hummingbirds and stalwart vulture, making for a truly dynamic and entertaining viewing experience.

At Post's Wilshire space, the artist formally known as Yek takes the glitzy route to tantalizing the eyes, relying on the emotive and spatial potential of searing colors to grab the viewer's attention. Like Evans in *Big Screen*, Yek favors a concave format for his paintings, which works especially well in sucking one into his chromatic mists. Utilizing such commercial-arts staples as the airbrush, the color fade and the car-culture pinstripe, Yek manufactures luminous atmospheric effects that mesmerize with a paradoxical Zen glamour.

Typically, the artist will fade a range of colors vertically up the face of his bowl-like paintings (which seem to hug the contours of the eyeballs) and then make the field drop away from the surface by adding hot fluorescent pinstripes to stake out a near ground. As a technique, it goes back at least to Rome, and Yek's works cuddle up to progenitors as varied as Jules Olitski, Craig Kauffman, Robert Irwin and Ed Ruscha, yet he somehow avoids blatant derivation and makes something of bona fide contemporaneity.

Old Devil (1999) verges on the limited pleasures of the monochrome, but the subtle gradation of hot pink to orange sherbet from bottom to top pulses with tangible supernatural energy. The Baroque flourishes at the ends of the streaking green pin-stripes on either side of the field look like the markings of talented skywriters toying with the light at the end of the day. *Rio Alive* (1998) tackles the dawn's early light with a tropical twist, blending a supersaturated carnary yellow at the bottom of the painting up to an emerald green at its uppermost edge to form a Brazilian soccer fan's ideal sunrise. Rocketing strands in contrasting orange-pink shoot through the sky and erupt in the cool, green ozone with fireworkslike arabesques. Sometimes reminiscent of the fantastical nature paintings of Agnes Pelton, who also found inspiration in the desert, Yek comes across as a romanticist of the neon era.

One would be hard-pressed to label Steve Hurd a romanticist, what with his acidic humor and satirical painting style; even when he sidles up to the most romantic of all subject matter, as he does in his current show at Dan Bernier, he takes every opportunity to subvert easy notions of beauty and comfort. Titled "Paintings From the Aesthetic Recovery Project," the exhibition can be seen both as an archaeological recovery of aesthetics of yore and as part of a 12-step program to regain aesthetic integrity. Hurd is definitely a chronic anti-aesthetician, and even when he tries to bring obviously beautiful subject matter into his paintings, he just can't help but revert back to his habit of messing it up with a drippy painting method and a degrading irony. Half the show is made up of bright, colorful rose paintings — not observed *en plein air*, but stolen from a catalog of commercial hybrid flowers. Each bears a label in blocky white text, and the labels, or christened names, of the roses are springboards

NANCY EVANS

At POST
1904 E. Seventh
Place, downtown
Through February 6

YEK

At POST
6130 Wilshire Blvd.
Through February 6

STEVE HURD

At DAN BERNIER
6150 Wilshire Blvd.
Through February 6