

Alexander and Bonin

Cohen, David. "Robert Bordo, the Heady Hedonist"
New York Sun (September 11, 2008)



Robert Bordo, the Heady Hedonist

By DAVID COHEN | September 11, 2008

In the title for his 2007 Venice Biennale, critic and curator Robert Storr exhorted the art world to "think with the senses, feel with the mind." One artist who has already staked a claim to what could be called the "concept-sualist" position is Robert Bordo. With his new show at Alexander and Bonin of 14 landscape canvases, the Montreal-born painter demonstrates himself to be more than ever the heady hedonist.



Robert Bordo, 'it's always raining' (2008)

He has an incredible touch, seducing the eye with lubricated surfaces as if his medium is butter and cream rather than oil and pigment. In paintings such as "Heatwave" and "Green Girl" (all of the works discussed in this review are dated 2008), the composition consists simply of free, casual-seeming, lyrical brushstrokes in monochrome mushes made of one blended color applied over another. He achieves this gorgeous succulence without giving way, however, to a sloppy-joe expressionism, as if an accumulation of gestures is inevitably linked to the "soul." And yet, the effect is anything but mechanical, for there is no soulless, clever-clever deconstruction

His painting is often suspended in a beautiful tension — between indulgence and restraint, depiction and form for its own sake. The two paintings mentioned already, which show him at his most abstract, maintain a strong connection with nature, whether in palette or in atmospherics, a sense of what it is like to be out in the landscape in different seasons. Their odd mix of purposiveness and nonchalance is another of those tensions that energize his work.

The diversity of this show, which finds its unity in values rather than effects, is another of its strengths. There is a wide divergence in terms of palette, texture, focus, and scale, but consistency in the depth of pleasure these canvases strike in the materiality of paint and the way its manipulations arbitrate the space between representation and experience.

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"Cold Shower" gives us raindrops as broad, hairy strokes of blue and white mixed on the brush and arranged as isolated signifiers against a pale blue ground. Random dots of pink offset an almost too easy all-overness.

"Buddy" and "Skunk Cabbage" both home in on a closely cropped leaf or vegetal form, animating the surfaces with specks of staccato marks that minutely vary in color, length, and direction as if following a randomly changing magnetic pull. "Buddy" juxtaposes mauve and turquoise, each of a dull pastel hue, in a jolie-laide combination that is subversively gorgeous.

Mr. Bordo's mode of picture making born of stylized abstractions from nature belongs firmly within an American tradition, and this show in particular has paintings that make no apology for their allegiances. "Creek," a painting of wet in wet shades of dark gray and black that evokes a nocturnal, or heavily shaded, reflective view of water, acknowledges the "Black Brook" series by Alex Katz, while "rut" appropriates a composition of Milton Avery's that Mr. Katz in turn was happy to repeat, of a compacted meeting of sea, sky, and sand at the edge of an open expanse of almost pure, blazing yellow. "Cabaña" is a dead ringer for a late Avery painting and an early Katz collage that schematizes the notion of landscape as layer cake.

But in joining this patriarchal succession from Avery through Mr. Katz to himself, Mr. Bordo is neither lacking in originality nor offering mere commentary on past masters: He works on his own terms. Where Avery was searching for significant, pregnant forms within nature, and Mr. Katz, in making similar reductions, was grappling with the relationship between perception and style, Mr. Bordo makes painterly experience itself the focus of his interest. Distinctions between form and style dissolve in his perplexingly pretty paintings.

Mr. Bordo's work is also, and rightly, compared with a strand of critically self-aware contemporary painting, whose luminaries include the Belgian Raoul De Keyser, the American Thomas Nozkowski, and the younger British artist Merlin James. But while, like Mr. Bordo, these are artists who confront the problematics of their activity with quiet, understated insouciance, Mr. Bordo is unbridled in the sheer delectation of his paint application, eschewing the gritty, chewy difficultness of these peers. He is reductive without ever being austere. In a sense, his charm is his way of being difficult, because he pulls it off without coming across as playing style games with cuteness per se.

Art historians (such as Svetlana Alpers and the late Michael Baxandall) have theorized very suggestively about "pictorial intelligence," a quality found in abundance in Mr. Katz and Mr. Bordo's peers. With Mr. Bordo, however, it feels more appropriate to talk about "painterly intelligence," as his thought process is so intimately bound up with the materiality of color, substance, and application. It could indeed be another of the pleasing tensions, the problematics, in Mr. Bordo's work that sometimes the intellectual quotient that is so satisfying about his work is caught between ideas about paint and ideas in paint, but the emphasis with him is always closer to the latter. Contrary to the impression a viewer of this new body of work might have if prejudiced by the picture-within-the-picture theme of his early work, Mr. Bordo is not a conceptual artist who has taken up paint as his inquiry; he is a painter who thinks in paint.

The joy of this at once cerebrally and viscerally engaging exhibition is that, without being programmatic about it, Mr. Bordo gently forces the viewer to confront the fundamental dichotomy of illusion and actuality that lies at the core of painting's magic.

Until October 11 (132 Tenth Ave. at 19th Street, 212-367-7474).