



Getting Physical:
New American Abstraction

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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As a group, the works in *Getting Physical: New American Abstraction* toss pretense and solemnity right out the window. Which isn't to say that these free-wheeling pieces by Polly Apfelbaum, Jody Lomborg, Carter Potter, Charles Spurrier and John Torreano dispense with ambition or seriousness. On the contrary, they go to great lengths to deliver the visual goods without getting caught up in their own self-importance. A snappy sense of humor keeps these witty works down-to-earth, as a deep sense of whimsy ensures their user-friendliness. With a sly wink (or two) toward art history, these crafty abstractions cultivate wide-eyed wonder in the present instead of paying excessive homage to the past's gravitas.

Unabashedly flashy, fun-loving and funky, these curious hybrids so exuberantly refuse to follow formalist abstraction's traditional rules that it's nearly impossible to resist their irreverent appeals to sensuous experience. Rather than trotting out tired ideals about a painting being a painting and only a painting – or a sculpture being entirely defined by mass, gravity and weight – the odd, indescribable things in this exhibition wreak havoc on conventional categories. Whether or not the individual pieces in *Getting Physical* can be properly identified as bona fide paintings, sculptures, collages, installations or architectural fragments, they all playfully demonstrate that knowing what something *is* is not the same as experiencing what it *does* – especially when it comes to contemporary art.

Often slinky, sometimes sleazy, and always slippery, the seductive works in this smart, sexy show begin by undermining one's expectations. Polly Apfelbaum's ravishing puddles of uncontainable color seem to dart around on the floor the moment you take your eyes off of them. *Eclipse* tempts you to swear that you see – out of the corner of your eye – innumerable circles swimming, squiggling and shimmying like animated organisms. It is as if the artist's high-keyed dots, blobs, ellipses and irregular patterns are bits of abstract paintings on the lam: escapees from absent canvases whose taut surfaces and



John Torreano, *Rococo View*, 1995, wood, paint, wooden balls, silicone glue, 96" x 12" x 6", courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, MI

fixed compositions are no match for the floor's fugitive – and festive – freedoms.

In a similar yet different vein, Jody Lomborg's handsome monochromes and minimalist-inspired stripe paintings have

the presence of fledgling cross-dressers. Loose-fitting fishnets, hand-knit shawls and crocheted fabrics partially cover the artist's otherwise austere geometric paintings. These adapted wraps and makeshift garments suggest that the paintings themselves have caught a chill while hanging in their cool, institutional setting, whose generic, stripped-down facilities are far from cozy, much less filled with the comforts of home. Lomborg's mix-and-match abstractions provide many of the unsettling intimacies of domestic life.

For their part, Carter Potter's monochromes, stripe paintings and criss-crossing grids – woven from leftover strips of exposed film – inhabit two worlds simultaneously. From across the gallery, each work appears to be a standard abstract canvas whose optical immediacy is jazzed up by the subtle, synthetic and semitranslucent quality of the celluloid. Up close, however, the L.A.-based artist's surrogate paintings manifest the timelessness promised by traditional abstractions as an unending nightmare. Time grinds to a halt in these pieces because it is impossible to distinguish juxtaposed frames of film from one another. Close scrutiny and an overall view of the whole yield incommensurate experiences as reality is shown to be far from simple.

Likewise, Charles Spurrier's paintless paintings defy the idea of good taste as they poke fun at works whose value resides in the artist's "touch." Made from hundreds of bubblegum-size lumps of sculpture-compound that have been bitten and chewed and stuck on various surfaces, these densely textured pieces resemble exaggerated versions of the undersides of tables in tacky roadside diners. Strangely beautiful, they draw your eyes toward their distasteful contours in the same way that Spurrier's inky fingerprints lure you into his other works, in which his singular, identifying "touch" is more closely associated with criminal activity than self-expression. The dirty traces of the artist's hand seem like they need to be cleaned up before these works are formally presented.

In contrast, John Torreano's eight-foot columns and compact crosses, studded with dozens of giant plastic gems, suggest that pain and beauty go hand-in-hand. Like totemic wall-reliefs with minds of their own, these decorative

segments of primitive architecture have been drilled, pierced, gouged and carved so that their open wounds could be plugged with industrial-strength costume jewelry. At once stunning and scrappy, these enigmatic icons that unite natural wood and synthetic decorations are something like 3-D tattoos: Imagine implanting diamonds and gems in your bones so that these decorative flourishes protrude through your flesh and you get a vivid idea of the spine-tingling physicality embodied by Torreano's dazzlingly dark art.

Upon immediately confounding one's expectations, the works in *Getting Physical* continue to resonate, usually by layering typically unartistic materials over a framework established by recent art history. For example, Carter Potter's *Polyester Super-Highway (Pink)* and *Polyester Super-Highway (Green)* explicitly refer to Barnett Newman's magisterial zip paintings, in which the mystery of cosmic oneness and division is given powerfully physical form. Using bits of film salvaged from the cutting room floor and leftover "leader" that's fed through projectors before films begin, Potter's potentially glib renditions of Newman's daunting works are more than studios, art historical footnotes because they subtly nudge conventional wisdom about Newman's art away from mindless veneration and toward more accessible interpretations. In other words, Potter's film-paintings do not function as know-it-all critiques of vaunted masterpieces. On the contrary, they strive to strip false piety away from earlier works so that contemporary viewers may have a chance to see art with fresh eyes.

A similar, democratic impulse animates Jody Lomberg's self-conscious dressing up of Minimalism's stripped-bare simplicity and Charles Spurrier's tongue-in-cheek meditations on taste and touch. These bold, multi-layered works seem to say, "We know what aesthetic rigor delivered in the past, but let's not mistake art's means for its ends. What counts now is a viewer's physical response to an object. And what better way of getting a response (and widening one's audience) than by letting viewers have it, right between the eyes, with ordinary substances and mundane materials?" Whether you find Spurrier's gummy paintings to be attractive or repulsive (or both); and whether you feel that Lomberg's clashing fabrics, patterns and surfaces are garish or gorgeous (or both), each artist's oeuvre insists that art doesn't really mean anything until someone responds to it.



Charles Spurrier, *Untitled*, 1996, tape, pigment, vinyl, steel, 51" x 51", courtesy Feigen Inc., Chicago



Jody Lomberg, *Gioconda Smile*, 1992, acrylic, wool on canvas, 70" x 30", courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, NY



Polly Apfelbaum, *Eclipse*, 1996, dye on crushed velvet, dimensions variable, courtesy of the artist and Boesky and Gallery Fine Arts, NY

This risky realism takes even more dramatic shape in Polly Apfelbaum's impermanent installation and John Torreano's lengths of raw lumber excessively bedecked with fake gems and plastic spheres. Neither artist's works explicitly refer to art historical precedents – either individuals or movements – or to such salient conventions as taste, touch and self-expression. Instead, Apfelbaum and Torreano take their chances with obliqueness and indirection, preferring the open-ended possibilities of loopy readings to the clear-cut specificity of logical propositions or rational arguments.

Part of the power of Apfelbaum's *Eclipse* derives from its seemingly foolhardy attempt to use supersaturated color as a sculptural element. This sumptuous installation has a sculptural presence not because its myriad elements rest on the floor, but because

these bits of crushed stretched velvet possess so much visual density that they fill the gallery to the point of overflowing, impressively occupying its three dimensions by using less than a quarter-inch of its depth. Titled after a film by Michelangelo Antonioni, in which slices of life are abstracted as the narrative begins at the end and moves back toward the beginning, Apfelbaum's *Eclipse* eventually calls to mind Claude Monet's splendid paintings of waterlilies, though seen through a mod, comic lens. Her discombobulated painting also echoes Larry Poons' ethereal canvases interspersed with dancing ellipses, and suggests a fantastic, cartoon rainbow that has melted, like a giant ice cream cone, leaving running puddles of rich, sensuous color.

After confounding a viewer's expectations, and putting a high priority on bodily experience, all of the works in

Getting Physical go on to suggest that what we usually think of as knowledge often gets in the way of actually seeing what's right in front of our eyes. Although rigid expectations and brainy conceptualizations regularly filter life's messy complexities out of the picture, this show makes a prominent place for these uncertainties. Its beauty belongs to its confidence that viewers want more from art than the authority of rational comprehension. Dismantling dull habits, its works invite viewers to catch a glimpse of something unknown and wonderful, wherever it might be seen.

David Pagel, contributing art critic
The Los Angeles Times

Cover:
Carter Potter, *Polyester Super-Highway (Pink)*, 1996,
70 mm polyester film, 35 mm factory-painted
leader, 96" x 48", courtesy Angles Gallery,
Santa Monica, CA