

SOFT ABS



“**Soft Abs**” is an exhibition of abstract painting, and its title is meant to give a slightly humorous spin on the nature by which abstraction defies definition and evades the hard-bodied hyper-realism of much contemporary and mostly computer-generated imagery.

The works in the show deploy varying strategies that examine the tradition of painting, offering an expansive definition of abstraction to Modern Fuel’s visitors. Aschenbrenner paints on shards of doorskin, hybridizing painting with sculpture; Authier, through abstraction, expresses an idea of landscape or nature that is mediated; Ristvedt suggests the possibility of infinite variation that is literally realized in Baigent’s work, a series of shaped magnets adhering to metallic paint on the gallery’s wall. A visit to “Soft Abs” will loosen your boundaries.

Soft Abs Photos

Reception: Saturday 8 November 2008 @7pm

Miranda Aschenbrenner (Westbank, BC) earned her Fine Arts Diploma from Okanagan University College and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia Okanagan in 2006. She has shown at the Arnica Gallery in Kamloops, the Up Front Gallery in Vernon’s Public Art Gallery, and the Laughing Moon Gallery in Kelowna. She was a nominee for the BMO 1st Art! Invitational Student Competition in 2006.

Melanie Authier (Toronto, ON) received a BFA from Concordia University, Montreal in 2002 and completed her MFA at the University of Guelph in 2006. Among numerous scholarships and awards, she recently received the Honourable Mention prize for the 9th Annual RBC Painting Competition 2007. She is represented by the Michael Gibson Gallery.

Christine Baigent (Toronto, ON) makes work that is highly personal and conceptual in nature. She has exhibited her work in Toronto, Cambridge, Halifax, and now Kingston. For many years she has been interested in the idea of producing multiples, in both limited and unlimited editions, to make art more available to a broader audience.

Milly Ristvedt (Tamworth, ON) is an artist with a lengthy exhibition record in Canada and elsewhere. She is also a teacher, community activist, gardener, tai-chi practitioner, former vice-president of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, and a member (beyond redemption) of the modernist project.

Essay by Matthew Hills

Soft Abs makes me think of pudgy and flabby bellies. This is not entirely inconsistent with my associations of painting as a sensual bodily practice, removed from language, experienced and initiated through visceral physical reaction. And perhaps this falls not far from the positioning of this exhibition by curator Michael Davidge, in contrast to the hardedge and hard-bodied hyperrealism of contemporary visual culture. Where computer generated imagery and digital production can make painting seem antiquated and romantically moored in the physical. Abstraction in particular would seem to defy the codification inherent in technology-laden production of imagery. This evasiveness often takes sly and humorous forms, and in some aspects this is embodied in the works presented in *Soft Abs*. All four women artists, Miranda Aschenbrenner, Melanie Authier, Christine Baigent, and Milly Ristvedt, provide works for the exhibition that reflect on and push at the boundaries of abstract painting. Consistently refuting the self-referential autonomy ascribed abstraction, these artists offer dynamic and diverse models for the production of contemporary abstract art. A practice that it could be argued has been resuscitated of late and is increasingly engaged by emerging artists in contemporary art. The predominantly female artists currently at the forefront of producing abstract painting are a notable departure from the traditionally male associations of modernism and painting, a reality that is reflected in this exhibition.

Miranda Aschenbrenner's works are a synthesis of sculpture and painting that verge on assemblage, painting layers of thin door skin—a veneer material for constructing and refurbishing doors—in vivid colour and layering them in a pseudo-grid to create works with deceptive depth. The grid is a sort of leitmotif in the structural and geometric strains of abstraction and Aschenbrenner has rendered its confines elastic. The concentric composition draws in the eye of the viewer and in conjunction with the rough texture of the door skin create a sense of composition that hovers between construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. The vibrant colours balanced against the right angles of the door skin patches create an oscillation that is energetic, while vexing to the traditional flatness of the picture plane. The thick wood structural support of the paintings distances the textured surface from the wall casting a shadow and reinforcing the consciousness of depth cultivated by the layered surface.

In contrast to Aschenbrenner's assemblages, Melanie Authier's works seem fanciful. Troubling conventions of beauty and the sublime, Authier's paintings explore the notion of the mediated landscape. The painterly tradition of landscape inherently depicts a romanticized natural world that is fleeting or vanquished. Utilizing the rhetoric of abstraction to trouble binaries constructed by this traditional artistic and human experiences of nature, Authier creates canvases with compelling internal depth and narrative. The canvases rely on a somatic reference coupled with boisterous titles to evoke notions of a contemporary sublime.

In contrast, Christine Baigent's work elicits physical engagement, tapping into childhood associations and the ever-present compulsion to touch art. Baigent has applied several coats of magnetic paint to the surface of the gallery wall, creating two bands. The lower of the two bands accommodates young viewers. Positioned on the bands are

numerous magnets in four base geometric shapes each colored blue, turquoise, brown, and pink. The color and accessibility of the installation encourage the viewer to create their own abstraction with magnetic shapes, a conceptual work with an insouciant air, Baigent's piece rebuffs the refrain murmured before so many abstract canvases: "That's not art, I could do that myself." Engaged in a creative process the work necessitates the consideration of space and shape in dynamic relation, eschewing this notion in the process. While this work represents a slight departure from Baigent's more text based conceptual works, its wonderful humour and playfulness remain consistent with her larger body of work.

Milly Ristvedt's work returns to the grid probed in Miranda Aschenbrenner's work. As with Aschenbrenner's sculptural paintings, Ristvedt utilizes ready made material, in this case paint chips from the Ralph Lauren Lifestyles series. Each square canvas, constructed as large paint chips with hokey brand monikers, such as Sport and Thoroughbred, labeled bottom center, present various grid formations of actual paint chips balanced against one another. Ristvedt has utilized the blocks of commercial domestic colour and design, branded and retailed as high culture to present works that are both humorous and compelling in their inter-play of contrasting colour and tone.

The dynamic and diverse works presented in *Soft Abs* reflect a lively critical engagement with the tradition of painting. Neither appeasing nor ignoring the tenets of painting and abstraction the artist and works render these boundaries soft. Instead of engaging painting as an analytical and esoteric exercise these works return an element of experimentation, joy and fun to the canvas.

Matthew Hills is 6'3" and 215 lbs, soft abs included. As of this writing he has lived and worked in Kingston for 14 months and 15 days. He has degrees and has worked in public galleries in Vancouver and Kingston.