



R.M. Vaughan: The Exhibitionist

What's hot? Loads of colour

R.M. VAUGHAN |From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Last week, I had the privilege of speaking to the Don Valley Art Club. Comprised of mid-career and senior artists, the audience asked me to speak about the current state of visual art, in all its glory and disrepute. I made with the chat, and then it was cookie and question time.

To my surprise, many of the artists wanted to know what was “hot”, “No. 1” and “most important.”

While I understand the root of such questions, I sincerely hope that when I hit my golden (okay, bronze) years, I will not give a flying squirrel's droppings about the “hot” and the “now.” I am aiming for stately and serene.

But to answer the question, fellow travellers: colour, by the bucket load. I saw six exhibitions this week, and all but one of them were saturated in vivid hues. Who needs a Seasonal Affective Disorder lamp?

Sarah Cale at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects

Until Feb. 19, 1450 Dundas St. W., Toronto; www.jessicabradleyartprojects.com

Sarah Cale's work is nothing if not exacting, even finicky. In her first solo exhibition at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Cale presents a selection of large, muted but multicolored “paintings” on varnished mahogany. I'm using quotation marks around the word painting because what Cale actually does is apply acrylic paint to plastic, waits till the strokes dry, then gently peels off the dried swipes and glues them onto the mahogany.

The results are wonderfully alienating. The eye recognizes paint in motion, but also gradually begins to recognize that the brush strokes do not quite flow, are halting and hesitant. There are burps and cracks in the places where the glue and the skin of acrylic have not perfectly matched.

Cale's repainting challenges criticism's blustery vaunting, to the point of fetishization, of the brush stroke: a trumpeting that has a long history of being attached to masculinist and chauvinistic ideas of strength, aggression, and bravado.

Sometimes a brush is just a brush.



The Genius That Was Lily Yung: Ahead of Her Time at Ontario Craft Council Gallery

Until Feb. 6, 990 Queen St. W., Toronto; www.craft.on.ca

The late Lily Yung left behind a treasure trove of beautiful, exactingly made objects. A pioneer in the use of industrial plastics and felts, and in the application of tool-grade cutting for the manufacturing of jewellery (to name but one of her interests), Yung will likely be best remembered by non-craftspeople for (and her work worn because of) her joyful approach to colour.

In a commemorative exhibition on display at the Ontario Craft Council Gallery, scarlet red and pumpkin orange translucent rings flare up beside a sea-blue felt cut-out vest and hot white, coral inspired eye-and-hook necklaces. Delicate gold and blood red beads twinkle next to dinner table-bright silver rings, and a glare-inducing white felt snowstorm falls from the ceiling.

Viewing this small assortment of Yung's considerable output is like visiting a high-end candy shop, only better. Plastic lasts forever.



Francine Savard at Diaz Contemporary

Until Feb. 12, 100 Niagara St., Toronto; www.diazcontemporary.ca

I wonder if Montreal-based conceptualist painter Francine Savard is blessed with synesthesia, the neurological phenomenon that allows people to see colours in texts and music?

For her third exhibition at Diaz Contemporary, Savard has taken the opening sentences of novels and translated each word into a bar of paint, with the length of the bar dependent on the length of the word. The resulting rectangular paintings, all 10 centimetres wide but of varying lengths, remind me of children's blocks, Atari video games, and mah-jong spreads. Dish-soap-mauve squares collide (very quietly and tidily) with powder blue blocks, flat black blocks with squares of fawn brown and ivy green.

Despite the arch minimalism, and the brainy transliteration of words to colours to centimetres of space, this exhibition has an unexpectedly friendly, homey feel. Perhaps it is all the soft, domestic appliance hues, or Savard's manner-free painting style (the surfaces of the canvases look like they've been pressed with a warm iron). Or perhaps I am finally getting over my fear of minimalism?



John Kissick at Leo Kamen Gallery

Until Feb. 12, 80 Spadina Ave. Suite 406, Toronto; www.leokamengallery.com

While Sarah Cale takes a poke at the manly cult of brushwork, John Kissick puts up his dukes and takes on all comers.

Kissick's latest selection of non-objective paintings at Leo Kamen Gallery feel like one big backyard wrasslin' match between painter and paint. Great, cascading gobs of mixed oils and acrylics lap and overlap raised dots in hot neon tones. Slithering rivers of oily green criss-cross lakes of rust, butter, and orange Popsicle. Textures, from patent leather smooth to unshaven chin to molten lava, furiously fight for space and attention, often and rudely interrupted by pretty, dainty spots of x/o patterning.

Kinetic and a bit unhinged, Kissick's new works are aiming, his artist statement notes, for "a somewhat disorienting opticality." Somewhat? How about utter and total?

If you're going to do the whole muscular, chest-thumping painting routine, why not do it with flair, with winged feet? If John Kissick were a movie star, he'd be Gene Kelly.

Liz Menard at Open Studio

Until Feb. 12, 401 Richmond St. W., Toronto; www.openstudio.on.ca

Autofunction at G Gallery

Until Jan. 29, 234 Queen St. E., Toronto; www.sidecentre.com

Finally, two small (but no less likeable) shows that use colour more sparingly but to great effect.

Liz Menard's hair-fine, etched prints, depicting the airborne wildlife taking over the Leslie Street Spit wastelands, are dappled with just the right amount of hazed over, cold lake blue and smoggy charcoal black. Her images of majestic but goofy, pear-shaped cormorants – stout yet dignified squawkers who lord over their creaky perches like Conrad Black in a prison mess hall – are certain crowd pleasers. Ravens would be jealous of their midnight lustre.

Autofunction, a group show that collects unique bits of furniture by artists, is, as one might expect, generally woody and white, an Ikea wonderland. But colour will have its way. Note James Carl's nursery blue Styrofoam lounge chairs, Katie Bethune-Leaman's simple white plinth topped off with a cherry-highlighted Louis Vuitton antimacassar, and Miles Stemp's desk lamp/planter mash-up, a mix and match of primary red, glaze cream and under-watered houseplant green.