

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

April 13, 2013

The Object Is Not an Object: Cubism, Photons and Two by Fours

-Thomas Micchelli

This week's news of a major gift of Cubist works — possibly the most important in the world — from Leonard Lauder to the Metropolitan Museum of Art marks a landmark event for New York's cultural heritage, but it also redirects our attention, however fleeting, on what the movement was about and what it means for art today.

Cubism was a sublime paradox, a reboot of modern painting that granted unfettered freedom within sharply defined parameters. Riffing off of Cezanne's faceted brushstrokes, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso de-emphasized content — relying on such timeworn genres as portraiture, landscape and still life — in order to exaggerate art's geometric substructure. The impulse was as of-the-moment as it was archaic, a formal rejuvenation drawn from ancient Iberia, sub-Saharan Africa and the flickering simulacra on movie screens.

We keep returning to Cubism because it only makes sense to do so. It is a vessel that can accept any ingredient, take any form, because it implicitly recognizes the essence of art as an object in space — its material imperatives, planar compressions and optical disjunctions. Giotto was a Cubist, Manet was a Cubist, the relief carvers of Nineveh were Cubists, Hiroshige was a Cubist, and so on.

These thoughts ran through my mind as I walked through Cordy Ryman's solo at DODGEgallery, which is titled Adaptive Radiation. If you weren't able to make Ryman's exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, which I reviewed in January, this show matches it in quality and expansiveness.



Cordy Ryman, "ES Trim Hatch and Coil" (2013). Acrylic and enamel on wood, 35.5 x 35.5 x 3 inches.



Cordy Ryman, "7 at Hand" (2013). Acrylic, enamel, and shellac on wood, 17 x 16 x 1.5 inches.

There are some painted components in this show that recall the striped planes and cylinders in Ferdinand Leger's Cubist compositions of the mid-1910s, but that would be too facile a connection. And then there are the blocks of scrap wood that make up Ryman's stock-in-trade, some of which are in fact cubes, a link that would be not merely facile, but stupid.

Ryman's art can rub some viewers the wrong way, which I can appreciate. I've found it at times too rough-hewn or undercooked for my taste. But what is most intriguing about his work is that beneath its Dumpster aesthetic lies the unbridled freedom that Cubism awarded its participants.

In my January review I called Ryman "a rigorous formalist whose work gathers energy through its subversion of the rigors of formalism." He gathers up his delimited toolkit of colors and shapes and then goes at it. Anything can happen because each element is so thoroughly understood.

The question of whether these are paintings or sculptures is beside the point. They hang on the wall, lean against a corner or lie on the floor. They invariably bump out into real space, incorporating the effects of light (reflections, shadows) as integral to their concept, and often manipulate the architecture of the room. The variety of invention, channeled through a Cubist framework, remains surprising yet cogent, rarely straying into the eccentric or arbitrary.

The pieces in Adaptive Radiation, despite their common materials, seem to go out of their way to differ from one another. The lines of paint running down the face of "7 at Hand" have nothing to do with the lyrical blue blocks of "Pantastic" or the

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

April 13, 2013

crunched slats of “Grid Spot” or the bumptious zigzagging of “ES Trim Hatch and Coil” (all 2013). But even in such a richly layered show, there are two breakout works.



Cordy Ryman, “Rafterweb Scrapwall V2” (2012-2013). Acrylic, shellac, and enamel on wood, 30 x 10 feet

One is “Rafterweb Scrapwall V2” (2012-2013), a relief that begins as a floor sculpture then runs up a double-height wall to the ceiling of the gallery’s lower level. It is a grid made up of dozens of square modules, each animated by clusters of wood blocks, like a honeycomb alive with bees. Its constantly shifting textures and colors, which can evoke panoramic cities or silicon computer chips while refusing to be read as anything beyond its material components, erect a monument to the primacy of the visual.

The other is the astonishing “Case Study” (2013). When I came upon this two-part, open-frame work, resting in a corner opposite “Rafterweb Scrapwall V2,” I was certain that there was a pink mesh scrim stretched across the reverse side of its vertically slanted intervals of 2x4s. Then I looked again, and thought I was looking at a large sheet of Plexiglas — the negative space behind the wood studs seemed that solid.

When I was finally convinced I was looking at nothing but air, I figured the wall was spray-painted pink, but that also turned out to be an illusion. The color was in fact the ambient reflection of the fluorescent pink paint on the backsides of the wooden supports. In its current configuration (it is not necessarily a corner piece) “Case Study” is more about what is not there than what is there. Somewhere else, it will be entirely different, perhaps repressing its light-induced aura in favor of its skeletal material presence.

If Cubism, taking its cues from African masks, was the first Western style to incorporate scraps of the real world (newspaper headlines, chair caning, wallpaper) into the illusionistic realm of painting, Ryman’s art, which is resolutely fixated on real-world scraps, seems to be asking what’s real anyway?

If what we experience when we see something is not the object itself but photons bouncing off the object, Ryman underscores the point by painting the backs, sides and tops of his artworks with intense colors that visibly scatter the light hitting them.

An art such as Ryman’s, which is so focused on the texture, size and shape of its structures and the interaction of light with its colors, doesn’t dispel reality’s ambiguities but compounds them. And that, in turn, makes his objects all the more convincing, wrapping them in the enigma of vision even as they display their inner workings for inspection.

Cordy Ryman: Adaptive Radiation continues at DODGEgallery through May 12.



Cordy Ryman, “Case Study” (2013). Acrylic, shellac, and pencil on wood, 116 x 178 x 26.5 inches.