

BRENT SOMMERHAUSER'S SCULPTURAL DRAWINGS AT MCQ

Dawn-Michelle Baude

Wed, Oct 8, 2014 (8 p.m.)

In Brent Sommerhauser's show of sculptural drawings at Michele C. Quinn Fine Art, materials don't just matter. They are matter—the stuff from which not only art, but the physical universe, is born. From the aggressive, even violent conditions of their making to their graceful evolution over time, Sommerhauser's works-on-paper physically manifest the creative process. They're as mysterious as they are exacting.

Creation begins with elements. Sommerhauser uses lead, copper, silver and gold. The compositional space is a sandwich of Plexi and compressed watercolor board with five layers of Silverpoint Ground gesso. The materials are then situated (or propelled) in a "vacuum," literally a mechanical device similar to a vacuum cleaner. In the clashing, clattery, whirling air chamber the ingots of metals slam, collide, crash and launch. Each time the pellets bash into the abrasive Silverpoint Ground, they shed metal, leaving behind a visual trace of the collision. The result is a spectrum of circular layers and forms.

Part alchemist, part engineer, Sommerhauser controls, to some degree, the placement and quality of the marks. The weight of the gray-scale stippling and skids vary from piece to piece, depending on the metal, the duration in the chamber and the cropping. The product of both accretion (the residue of contact on Silverpoint Ground) and accumulation (tens of thousands of marks over several hours), the finished medium-format pieces have an intriguing, tactile warmth and visual density.

But what's really striking in these 14 untitled drawings is the odd behavior of the simple geometric forms in the composition. At first, the images of circles and curves seem to represent cell division, ocular diagrams or astronomical events. In their woozy atmosphere, they recall Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs; in their bubbly propagation, Sonia Delaunay's watercolors. Some drawings resemble photographs from the Large Hadron Collider dramatizing the elusive moment in which particles pop in and out of existence.

Upon closer inspection, Sommerhauser's drawings do something unexpected: The surface of the works pulses, recedes, domes and dips depending on the light, perspective and attention of the viewer. The pieces don't stay still. It's almost as if the process of their making requires an experiential process of viewing, not just once, but for the long term. Over time, the metals oxidize, changing their color and density in response to light, temperature and humidity. The copper becomes greener, the lead a bit blue.

"The Well," Sommerhauser's glass sculpture, extends the emergent quality of the drawings into hand-blown glass. Installed on the wooden floor of the gallery, the circular forms catch, reflect and shadow light, almost as if they were wrecked cargo cast up by the space-time continuum. Once again, Sommerhauser's fastidious craftsmanship is in evidence; once again, yielding to wonder.

Brent Sommerhauser: New Sculpture and Works on Paper *Through October 31; Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; weekends by appointment. Michele C. Quinn Fine Art, 702-366-9339.*