

SCULPTOR DAVID RYAN MAKES A STIRRING SHIFT ON CANVAS AT MCQ FINE ART

Dawn-Michelle Baude Wed, Jan 7, 2015 (3 p.m.)

David Ryan’s new body of work offers a revelation: Ryan can paint. The sculptor known for large, hard-edged wall constructions reveals a softer, more intimate side in the 17 small-scale works on view at MCQ Fine Art. The effect is almost shocking for two reasons: 1. Most artists have a hard time expressing themselves convincingly in more than one genre. 2. Once artists create a successful style, they usually keep it in order to retain galleries and collectors. Yet Ryan has made a leap—not by abandoning his artistic language of abstraction, but by extending it into fresh, vigorous terrain. He does it, in part, by rebooting his nesting technique.

Nesting—how things fit snugly together or slightly skew—has long been a defining feature of Ryan’s signature style. In his classic sculptures, pieces fit inside or beside one another in wacky combinations resembling subatomic models scaled up and materialized in jigsaws of foam, felt and PVC. In the recent series, the nesting technique transitions into framing, with one Sintra frame fitting inside the next and the next and so on. Together, the tiers of Sintra function like interlocking stencils, their nervy contour lines looping, jutting and skidding around each other and the artwork at the center.

The base layer of the “(Untitled), 2014” works is an abstract painting. Thin, superimposed washes and strong brush strokes create semi-transparent blocks of color. Their loose gestures sometimes recall patterns in Jackson Pollock paintings; the spare brush strokes are reminiscent of early David Reed. Ryan is a master colorist, and his knowledge of bold, in-your-face color comes to fruition here. One of the artworks features contrasting aqua and crimson tamed by slate gray; another is an edgy mix of blue-gray, fuchsia, tangerine, crimson and black.

And it is just at this point that Ryan makes a virtuoso move by expanding the paintings into three dimensions. The colors, lines and shapes reverberate in slim, incremental layers of Sintra. The center becomes the frame, the frame becomes the center, linked in an algorithm of color and contour. It’s as if Ryan had misgivings about compressing his sculptures into flat, almost wholly two-dimensional works and so built out the paintings, embodying them in colorful strata of texture and form.

The MCQ Fine Art exhibition also has three Ryan sculptures (properly speaking) on display, including “Los Alamos,” a kind of whirling atomic profile with clean, almost calligraphic lines. All in all, it’s a delightful show, full of more organic, less controlled works. In making a shift toward painting in his practice, Ryan extends his talent with color and line into a new, more emotional, dimension.

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David Ryan Through January 30; Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; weekends by appointment. Michele C. Quinn Fine Art, 620 S. Seventh St., 702-366-9339.