

The Boston Globe

GALLERIES

An artist with breathtaking scope

Painter races from concept to caress

By Cate McQuaid

Globe Correspondent / January 17, 2008

You wouldn't guess from the painting hanging in the front window of the Judi Rotenberg Gallery - a postcard-perfect painting of Mount Shasta, its snowy caps bathed in warm, peachy light - that there's a conceptual art exhibit inside.

Don't let that scare you off from painter Sean Micka's show. There are plenty of lovely, if standard issue, mountainscapes, alongside some dizzying, Op Art-style abstractions and an array of nuanced, absorbing, largely monochromatic paintings. The exhibit careens breathlessly from representation to abstraction, from picture to concept to retinal caress. Micka pulls it off with wit and daring, making startling associations along the way.

The mountains came first. Micka borrows images from old natural history magazines, and reincarnates the picture in paint. The idea isn't to capture the majesty of the mountain, but to examine stereotypes of natural beauty. Micka's technique imbues these images with freshness.

Micka then painted a series of color grids from a 1978 textbook explanation of the four-color printing process, also on view here, and from there he dove into abstraction, color's effect on the eye, and issues of perception.

With a nod to Josef Albers and Ad Reinhardt, he painted "Greenscreen," a series of four bright canvases bordered in white, like a photograph. Light and shadow appear to wash over the surface of "Greenscreen," but that's paint, not gallery lighting, creating a delicious sheen.

If this seems a far cry from "Mt. Shasta, California (Reader's Digest Scenic Wonders of America 1973)," it is. And it isn't. Look at the way the warm sunlight plays over the snow. Both works suggest depth; "Greenscreen" feels as if you could tumble into it, whereas "Mt. Shasta" depicts it via landscape. Even the hint at undulation achieved with subtle shifts in shadow echoes the mountain's shape.

As do the black-and-white striped canvases in the Op-Arty "The Fold (Binocular Disparity)," a diptych in which the lines peak and crimp. He undertakes a stereoscopic experiment, offering two similar canvases, close to mirror images, but not quite. It's stunning to look at; it threatens to short-circuit the brain.

This show succeeds partly because Micka opens a gateway into abstraction through landscape. His work is conceptually rigorous, but he makes it fun.