

arts wednesday

A 21st-century ode to abstract expressionism

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Worlds of difference lie between a drip and a gouge. Consider Aaron Williams's audacious painting "Construction," which runs

GALLERIES more than 30 feet over two walls at LaMontagne Gallery. From a distance, it looks like an abstract expressionist piece: all black in the middle, warming through the color spectrum on either side, getting busy with pale drips, dabs, and smears.

But those pale runs, jittering like the signals on a sound engineer's monitor, aren't paint. Williams has taken a hand router to his latex-painted plywood panels and dug out those painterly flourishes, no doubt littering his studio floor with wood chips and sawdust. The marks quote stray drips, smears, and spatters he photographed in paintings by abstract expressionists such as Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell.

These New York School painters famously celebrated the heroic gesture — the messy stamp of the soul on canvas, right from the artist's hand. Williams reframes that gestalt, using construction materials, painstakingly copying marks, and violently tearing into his surface rather than dancing with paint upon it. (There are two smaller, similar paintings also on view, and a gimmicky series of photographs of blue sky, shot outside his studio and that of de Kooning and Jackson Pollock).

"Construction" bears not a scrap of spontaneous expressionism. Williams followed a map based on other men's marks. He turns the New York School ethos inside out. Abstract Expressionism anointed its artists as gods of the creative spirit (and the angst that could go hand in hand with that). With his handyman materials, his careful quotations, and his gouges, which tear color away, he challenges what the artists he honors held dear. Ironically,



Above: Aaron Williams's "Construction," currently on display at LaMontagne Gallery. Below: Scott Prior's "Winter Landscape," part of his show at Alpha Gallery.



COURTESY OF THE ALPHA GALLERY

there's one element of the genre he doesn't invert: its machismo.

This imposing, energetic painting succeeds visually because it's smart and a bit shocking. Williams may be asking if we can get the same satisfaction from his very 21st-century ode to abstract expressionism that we got from the real thing. The answer is no. His painting lacks the passion of that of the great New York School painters. They emoted; he conceptualizes. "Construction," despite its size, can't help but feel more pinched in. Even so, in today's terms, it's a gutsy piece of work.

Detailed paintings

Hyperrealist Scott Prior has a show of exquisitely detailed paintings and drawings at Alpha Gallery. He's masterful with color, but his canvases can be too perfect. He's especially skilled with light, and the way peachy tones fire up the evening dusk.

Hyperrealism can coalesce into its own sharp vision, but it can also feel too carefully orchestrated — as if the artist, not trusting his work or the viewer, has tweaked things to guarantee particular reactions. This show has examples of each.

"Winter Landscape," for in-

stance, is a twilight image of a suburban neighborhood. A mint green house stands at the center, with a single, warm light glowing in a window. The paint on the house peels, adding a touch of necessary grit. Pink fringes the clouds; holiday lights fringe the roofs. Prior frames it all with an oval of snow-covered branches in the foreground, turning it into a stock holiday card scene. All that's missing is glitter on the snow.

The best works here abandon the pyrotechnics of sunset and firelight. "Cows," an ambitious piece made with liquid graphite

on paper, depicts four cows near a brook. One grazes. Two regard us with placid eyes. The artist deploys his talent for down-to-the-grain detail, capturing leaves and blades of grass, and the sheen of a pale sun on the cows' backs. I love the triangular shape of a yield sign in the upper right and the suggestion of a road, and civilization. A viewer can open up, explore, and linger in this landscape. It doesn't pull as tautly at the heartstrings as Prior's colorful works, and that's a relief.

Urban landscapes

Former graffiti artist Jamie O'Neill now adorns the doorways and freight cars in his realist urban landscapes with street tags. O'Neill has a spotty show at Lot F Gallery. Among a few run-of-the-mill paintings of alleyways and buildings, the best works depict trains.

Three paintings function well as one piece. "Nickel Plate Road," "Burlington Northern," and "Santa Fe" display jaunty graffiti on the big metal doors of freight trains, scribbled over ads and logos and weather-streaked paint. Hanging side by side, they almost generate the brisk, lumbering passage of a train.

The vertical painting "Yard Freight" homes in on the connection between two motionless cars, all chains and beams and rust. The artist lovingly renders the rails in the foreground and the gravel beneath. This composition works because of tight cropping and attention to seemingly mundane detail — a knack O'Neill needs to further develop.

There's much less drama in the domino-drop of rail cars in "Pile Up," which looks like an image the artist chose for its improbable violence. That one fails in part because it substitutes narrative for intelligent composition. We don't need a story, when O'Neill clearly knows how to shape an image.

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