

Anne Appleby's paintings link to environment

Kenneth Baker

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For some years, former Bay Area painter Anne Appleby has tried to link her abstract painting perceptibly to her concern for the fate of the Earth.

In the 1960s heyday of color field painting, such a project might have seemed like conceptual art, pure and simple. But in recent decades, countless people around the world, even policymakers, have come to share the ecological anxiety that Appleby feels. So she needs no excuse for minimizing the invitation to escapism that many viewers still think they detect in pure abstraction.

Her challenge in the recent work at Paule Anglim lies in getting us to connect the immediacy of concern for future life on the planet with the immediacy of her paintings as we experience them.

In past works, she has let her own observations of the colors characteristic of a specific place and season, usually in the Western wilderness, cue the complexion of her monochrome canvases. "Monochrome" merely describes the first impression these encaustic paintings make: They nearly always blush with nuances.

Satellite photographs served as sources for her most recent series, all of which she has titled by latitude and longitude. In a sense, the extreme detachment of satellite imagery suits Appleby's project. Satellites, unaided by interpretation, do not register politics, merely terrestrial conditions, and the stakes of climate crisis transcend even international conflict. But the pleasure of dwelling on Appleby's paintings inevitably remains local, rooted in observation of the work's material and tonal subtleties.

Even with the viewer's complicity, her abstractions do not serve as levers for conscience. Their conceptual force and their sensuous power remain unintegrated.

In the small room at Anglim, Tomas Nakada offers a satisfying variety of Sumi ink drawings on timeworn Japanese hotel stationery ruled with vertical lines.

In some pieces, he adapts patterns from antique Okinawan textiles. Some have affinities with drawings by Brice Marden or Agnes Martin, even with bar codes. As a series, they have a restless modesty, but it is the only painting on view by Nakada that will make you want to see more.

Higgins at Hosfelt: Bay Area artist Andrea Higgins presents another case of an artist trying to get

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"literary" content into abstract painting.

In an earlier series, Higgins took the germs of her compositions from the ceremonial attire of first ladies. It was enough to know this, or believe it, to see the paintings as imbued with attitudinal content: They served as oblique portraits, hinting at temperaments by way of taste in the costumes of political theater.

Higgins' recent series springs from her imagination of fabrics described or evoked in works of fiction.

We might never guess merely by looking that the triptych "Babbitt" (2004) refers to Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel. But the show list quotes a corresponding passage that describes the title character's feelings about changing from a brown to a gray suit, leading the viewer to "recognize" the flanking panels as imagined swatches of the respective fabrics.

Higgins composes her paintings inch by inch to replicate in relief the warp and weft of textiles. The process also acknowledges continually the woven nature of her linen support.

Higgins' paintings are materially rich but not seductive. Their appeal lies less in aesthetics than in their triangulation - especially in the current series - among her sources, the fabricated object and the viewer's imagination.

Higgins has the main room at Hosfelt, but she nearly gets upstaged by the dazzling, handmade, though strictly rule-bound abstract drawings of Gerhard Mayer and the altered prints of Ruth Marten.

In "Side-Saddle" (2009), Marten intervened in a 19th century botanical - or was it entomological? - lithograph in a way that might have amused Salvador Dali, even on a sane day.

Marten's unique, altered found graphics yield a satisfying sense of an artist comically worming her way into art history. Unfortunately, she dilutes their impact by making enlarged, too-clean editions from scans of her prototypes.

Anne Appleby: The Blue Planet: Paintings; **Tomas Nakada:** Sumi ink drawings. Through next Sat. Gallery Paule Anglim, 14 Geary St., S.F. (415) 433-2710. www.gallerypauleanglim.com.

Andrea Higgins: Appearance: Paintings; **Ruth Marten: Side-Saddle:** Prints and altered graphics; **Gerhard Mayer: Organic Virtual Aseptic Lines:** drawings. Through Dec. 5. Hosfelt Gallery, 430 Clementina St., S.F. (415) 495-5454. www.hosfeltgallery.com.

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