

Painter gets conceptual with latest exhibition

By Nancy Tousley, Calgary Herald March 28, 2009

Review

Christopher Willard: It Isn't what you think, on view at Herringer Kiss gallery until today.

Christopher Willard is a smart, busy man who wears several hats. He is an expert on colour theory, an artist, a teacher, head of the painting department at the Alberta College of Art&Design, and a writer,

The combined influences of these pursuits show up in 11 new paintings and one silkscreen print on view at Herringer Kiss Gallery, but not quite in the way one might expect. Willard's new work reads as an academic exercise executed with a touch of playfulness that cannot deflect attention from the thinness of the idea.

In the immediate past, Willard was making diamond-shaped colour abstractions that recall the American painter Richard Anuszkiewicz, a prominent founding member of the Op Art movement of the late 1960s and early '70s. The optically vibrant diamonds combine hues with glowing results, through the use of complementary colours and compositions of long, tapering lines overlaying a grid.

In the new work, it looks as if Willard is trying to break the hold of formalism with a stab at the conceptual. He has changed his format from an overall geometric composition on a diamond to a long rectangle upon which he puts the colour bar to work as a compositional element and adds words to the painted surface.

The paintings and print, all made this year, display beautifully controlled colour and precisely graded colour bars. The compositions of most of the paintings are variations on a diagrammatic serial theme. A white-on-black grid runs across the top of the rectangle, while below it the geometric composition opens up into larger areas of solid colour juxtaposed with a colour bar.

In *Read Between the Lines*, two colour bars are stacked one above the other. one bar beginning with blue, the other with orange, and both grading out into the same hard-to-name colour, presumably by mixing the two colours together. The simpler image of *A Sign of the Times* comprises two colour bars, laid one on top of the other. The top bar goes from white, through shades of grey, to black; the bottom bar reverses the same colour sequence.

Then there are the words. These works bear legends that say things like *It Isn't What You Think*, or *Let That Be A Lesson*, or *Not An Afterthought But A Before Thought*. The acrylic paint is laid down on Plexiglas into which the words are engraved by laser.

The legends, which are also the titles of the works, are directions to the viewer that seem to want to strike up a relationship. Like most pickup lines, though, they are either too clever or not clever enough. And they do not sit well on these paintings, but instead call attention to their kinship with

graphic design, the kind seen in glossy advertisements for pharmaceuticals in which a white-on-black grid is involved.

Willard tones down the optical action that can get going in the interstices of grids by painting a white dot in the centre of each intersection. The flash of an after-image brought on by looking into an intense colour occurs only in *Something To Look Into*. The white dots are animated by optical flashes of turquoise blue, which is the complementary after-image of this painting's saturated red.

The most promising of the new paintings are *Something To Look Into* and *Not A Lot But More Than Enough*, which are pop-flavoured abstractions sans colour bars. Willard, who is a novelist whose sophomore book will be out in a month, does not need to put words in his paintings.

What he does need is clean edges in his paintings and perfect colour registration in his prints. Geometric abstraction, which proposes precision, begs for immaculate execution. Willard might also think about making the paintings bigger and pushing them harder in the image department, so that they look less like lessons or colour demonstrations and more like art.

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