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GALLERY-GOING

Painting With Gusto, to Very Different Ends

By JOHN GOODRICH

Pronounced dead a thousand times, painting never seems to oblige. Instead, it evolves into endlessly new formats and combinations with other media, and — in the postmodern era — into investigations of painting's own social roles. In Chelsea, exhibitions of "cutting edge" painting often hang a few doors down from ones of more traditional canvases, making for odd juxtapositions of philosophies. A case in point is the work of Anton Henning and Carl Plansky, who both tackle large, representational images with gusto, but to very different ends.

ANTON HENNING: CRANBERRY JUICE, VIRUS AND BAND-AID
Zach Feuer Gallery

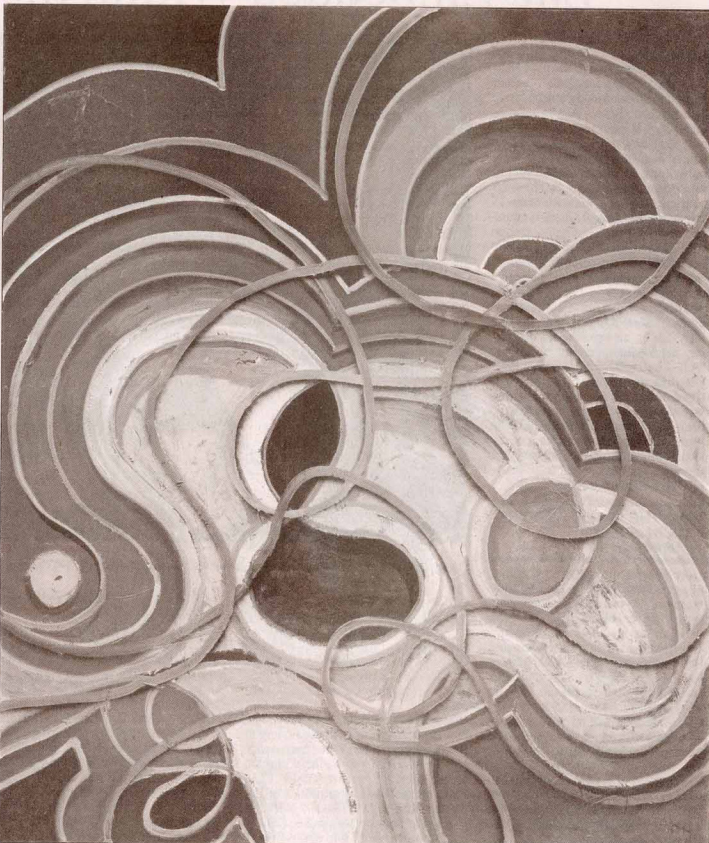
CARL PLANSKY: OIL PAINTINGS
Fischbach Gallery

Step into Zach Feuer Gallery, and you're engulfed by a three-dimensional cacophony of multicolored surfaces. German artist Anton Henning combines two current artistic preoccupations — environment-saturating installations and investigations of the presentation of art — in a floor-to-ceiling hanging of several dozen of his paintings. These canvases are all but swallowed up by racing lines and rectangles painted over every square inch of the walls in at least a dozen elegant hues. Geometric sculptures occupy the floor, along with some large, minimalistic wooden desks covered with similar patterns.

A second, more intimate space in the exhibition conjures — as much as the eye-popping walls allow — the aura of a connoisseur's parlor, with five massively framed canvases facing each other from opposite walls. In the middle sits a sleek, curving structure suggesting a receptionist's desk. The only illumination comes from lamps incorporated into the tops of the gold-stained frames.

In a small rear gallery, a video traces an art-eye journey along the winding lines of one of the artist's recently reworked abstractions. (The painting, "Cranberry Juice, Virus and Band-Aid," provides the exhibition's title.) The wall's designs run mischievously around electrical receptacles at a couple points, providing the most playful touches of an installation whose message tends to be more dogged than fleet-footed.

As for the paintings themselves — well, the setting doesn't exactly encourage a close examination, but when one makes the effort, they turn out to follow a wide-ranging assortment of familiar idioms. Two standing nude self-portraits recall the pose (but little of the resolute inquiry) of Cezanne's famous bather at the Museum of Modern Art; perhaps to enliven them, the artist has applied curious, looping shapes to them. Other figure paintings with curling designs look like revisitations of Picasso. Several competent, painterly still lifes round out the mix, along with generic abstractions that add little except texture to the jostle of the wall patterns. A bravura of technique is evident throughout, but colors and forms seem to be pushed only to the point of establishing a style, not actual compositional urgency. Like the desks, the canvases function mainly as fixtures.



ZACH FEUER GALLERY

Anton Henning, 'Cranberry Juice, Virus and Band-Aid' (1991/2006).

Of course, this may be the point; they are tokens of the traditional in a flamboyant, overarching statement about the marketing of art. And it can be said that the installation effectively, if rather relentlessly, satirizes the art world's conflicting appetites for street-level trendiness and elevated connoisseurship.

Still, it's dispiriting to watch, in so elaborate an installation, the dispatching of painting with these once-over-quickly canvases. Could they in fact be parodies of painting? This doesn't seem to be the case, but the most unsettling aspect of the exhibition is that one can't say for sure.

Walk a half block to experience the diametrical opposite: an uncontrollable enthusiasm for traditional, self-contained painting. At Fischbach, Carl Plansky's lush colors swirl through 12 large canvases of figures and still lifes. His strokes have the urgency of an Expressionist, but his faithfulness of modeling and atmosphere are closer in spirit to Monet: Picture Soutine with the heart of an Impressionist.

A close-up view of a giant tiger lily

fills the 5-foot-tall canvas "At Home With the Perrys" (dated 2006, like all the work here.) Deep scarlets, electric oranges and yellowish sap-greens lend weight to splaying petals and cantilevering leaves, as nuanced blues and off-whites provide the encompassing air. (One would look to sexual connotations except for the fact that the artist seems totally wrapped up in the pure, plastic adventure of painting.) In "Corner Roost," vivacious red, orange, and purple blossoms wheel across the 6-foot-tall canvas on precariously tilting stems. On another wall, several smaller mixed-media works on paper record landscape spaces in vivid lashes of blue, green, and violet.

Mr. Plansky's sure sense of color never fails, but the continuously swirling textures occasionally overwhelm his subjects' interior rhythms. Though the figure in "Leaning" is more than credibly rendered, the uniformity of attention to torso, limbs, and head forfeits some dramatic possibilities. One misses Soutine's pacing of events: the focusing at a point before slipping to another, the charging and

regrouping that gives a sense of measure to his images, whether of a dead rooster or a pastry chef.

The momentum of Mr. Plansky's attack, however, gathers poignantly in "On the Hoof," in which skeins and drips of color in a lower corner counter the upward surge of a huge stem. Atop, a large sunflower blossom presides like the sun. And best of all is "Vincennes," an evocation of a flower-filled vase in which every color marks an explicit event. Elusive gray-violets carve vivid shadows into a central massing of brilliant white petals. On one side of the vase, a series of yellow and orange blooms pace the fall to the tabletop; on the other, an abrupt shadow at the vase's foot sounds the same distance as a limpid freefall. Energy and discipline mesh wonderfully in this canvas, and the outcome is as self-possessed as nature herself.

Henning until November 11 (530 W. 24th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-989-7700);

Plansky until November 11 (210 Eleventh Ave., between 24th and 25th streets, 212-759-2345).