

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

Laura Berman and James Brinsfield have impressive exhibitions at Haw Contemporary

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A commitment to abstraction, the layering of color, and spontaneous creation link two impressive exhibitions at Haw Contemporary, “Pulsar” by Laura Berman and “Self-Titled” by James Brinsfield.

Both artists teach at the Kansas City Art Institute, where Berman is a professor of printmaking, and Brinsfield is a lecturer in painting.

Employing an abstract vocabulary inspired by natural forms ranging from small rocks to exploding supernovae, Berman makes unique relief prints by applying translucent oil-based inks in a variety of vivid colors to cutout plates that she combines to produce multipart compositions.



Her creative process involves intuitively rearranging the plates between runs through the press to develop her compositions in layers, while also layering her inks to create new hues in the areas where the shapes overlap. The results are visually captivating.

At Haw Contemporary, Berman offers buoyant compositions created by oddly curved shapes derived from rocks she has collected (“Impact 4,” “Impact 5” and “Quasar”), as well as dynamic geometric abstractions built from trapezoids (“Umbra RL”) and from triangles (“Starburst 1-9”) of varying shapes and dimensions.

Most distinctive are her recent “Coronae” prints, inspired by the outer atmosphere of stars and made from several rectangular plates, each with an eccentrically shaped ovoid excised from its lower center.

Using six plates and six colors for each print, Berman generated compositions that present an expanse of white paper circumscribed by overlapping bands of discrete hues that ultimately merge into a dense field of rich color mixed from all the inks. By surrounding the bare paper with color rather than doing the opposite, Berman here reverses the conventional figure-ground relationship seen in her other works, opening up a promising new direction in her art.

Unlike most printmakers, Berman rarely makes multiples, preferring to create unique monoprints through a spontaneous process that generates unexpected results.

James Brinsfield takes the same approach in his stunning exhibition in Haw Contemporary's back

gallery, which features some of the best paintings of his long career.

In most of these new pictures Brinsfield engages with two conventions of mid-20th-century abstract expressionism: all-over painting and the gestural brushstroke. All-over painting, defined in 1948 by influential critic Clement Greenberg, is a decentralized form of abstraction knit from similar, repeated elements that spread from one edge of the canvas to the other, dissolving pictorial space into a textural totality that asserts the flatness of the picture plane.

While the best known all-over paintings are the weblike linear abstractions that Jackson Pollock made by pouring liquid paint, his peers, such as Willem de Kooning, created them through sweeping gestural brushstrokes. Greenberg assessed the art of Pollock, de Kooning and company in purely formal terms, but the artists understood their art as driven by emotional and psychological urgency — not simply abstract but genuinely expressionist.



The 6 1/2-foot tall “Fever Ray” of 2012, the earliest painting in Brinsfield’s exhibition, could hang comfortably alongside the work of Pollock and de Kooning, with its background of yellowish white smothered by rough patches of chestnut red and cold white that merge in a thickly textured all-over composition restless with swarming energy.

While the red and white appear to have been actively laid onto the canvas with emotion-laden de Kooning-style brushstrokes, Brinsfield in fact achieved them by casually applying thick paint to sheets of heavy paper that he then pressed to the canvas to transfer the colors.

In his artist’s statement, Brinsfield refers to this technique, which he used for all of his new pictures, as a “fragmented and indeterminate way of laying down gestural marks” that provides him with “psychological distance” from the work. He likens his creative process to “a task or an arithmetical equation with a beginning, middle and end. What may look

like emotion is a break with emotion ... a succession of facades.”

Brinsfield’s signal accomplishment in “Fever Ray” and his other new pictures, then, is to create all-over quasi gestural abstractions equal in their aesthetic rewards to the masterpieces of Pollock, de Kooning and company, while at the same time standing as original, conceptually driven statements rather than

retrograde attempts to revive abstract expressionist techniques and attitudes.

Several of Brinsfield's paintings feature an elemental palette of black and white, such as "FBI Jesus" and "I Can Feel the Heat Closing In," which complement each other magnificently in their side-by-side presentation at Haw.

"FBI Jesus" seethes with congested, muscular energy as its surging, brawny blacks jostle against the neighboring whites. By contrast, "I Can Feel the Heat Closing In" is more refined, its teeming fragments of black clambering through a predominantly white terrain punctuated by spots of bright color.

Exceptional among the paintings is "Dust Off," which, rather than a dense all-over composition, presents an open array of vertical streaks and gobs of sticky black and white that seem to rise against a thinly brushed background of dusky violet, conjuring an ascending host of unidentified life forms. This ravishing picture is among Brinsfield's finest creations and a highlight of this exhilarating exhibition, which no one in Kansas City who cares about contemporary painting should miss.