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Abstract Excessivism

Intensely enjoyable art at the J-Schnitz

by Suzi Steffen

Art is very, very Serious. Especially Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, which have Extremely Intense conferences (hi, Juddcon!), art history classes, theory discussions and ... wait a second.

All of that theory I'm not going to lie, as a former theoryhead can feel perfectly enjoyable, a cocoon of deep understanding and heady, almost spiritual brainpower in the pursuit of understanding what artists wanted. But in the Lawrence Fong-curated *Excessively Obsessive* show at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, the art and the artists sneak in a moment, or 12, of just plain fun.

The show's anchor is an Ellsworth Kelly, whose dancing, tumbling, monumental color shapes almost seem like a wink at preschool or kindergarten, where learning comes in the guise of woodblocks. The Kelly lithograph, *Purple/Red/Gray/Orange*, unfortunately blends in at the same level of the other art on the wall; I'd love to see it hung higher or even, gasp! from the ceiling, suspended, someday. You know, for fun.



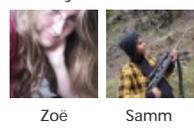
"Excessive Obsession" at the J-Schnitz, with pieces by Shida Kuo, Gay Outlaw, Bean Finneran and Frank Okada

Two gorgeous pieces, Megan Murphy's recent *Prophet* and Florence Pierce's *Untitled* of 2000, speak to each other across the room, the Agnes Martin-like laminated glass of Murphy's piece reflecting back the serenity and calm of Pierce's resin squares. Their cool colors play off of Gay Outlaw's *For Sale By Owner*, a large sculpture whose orange figures suggests baking molds, bugs, pipes, polka dots and a variety of other associations, some quite playful (I hear the kids love it during education tours).

Out of literal origins comes Chris McCaw's stunning *Sunburned #390 (Puget Sound, WA)* of 2009, a negative truly burned by the sun but also representing that body of water's contemplative, half-threatening and half-comforting nature. On the floor near McCaw's work is Shida Kuo's *Untitled* clay piece, a large dark ball split by a white crack, with a cross-hatched hinting at depth and complexity

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Donald Judd's work, always devoted to beauty and balance and precision in material, also seems sometimes like a large joke (on curators and museum employees in particular), with its aluminum perfection to maintain. The small square wall piece (*Untitled* like almost all of Judd's work) in this show might well be the source of Fong's show title. Its near-Platonic ideal rectangles of shiny metal make up a striped square.

Martin Puryear's print, *Untitled V*, and Bean Finneran's I-dare-you-not-to-smile-at-it *Variations of Gray* add to the lightness and joy in this exhibit.

If you prefer your abstract work super-serious, you can always contemplate the 1948 Mark Rothko piece, its early color fields bleeding all over each other and the canvas in a Kandinskyesque palette, or try to figure out the plan for Sol LeWitt's 1976 *Geometric Figures within Geometric Figures (Composite): White on Black* (though that one might bring in the pleasure as well).

Fong, the curator of American and regional art for the J-Schnitz, has serious academic chops and knows his theory-speak as well as the next person who studies these artists. But the show demonstrates that direct engagement with abstraction can lead both through emotions and through the intellect to satisfaction, sometimes shading over into delight.



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