

Planet S

August 18-31

VOL.14 ISSUE. 26

Of Form And Friction

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Published Thursday July 24, 2014 05:36 pm

WEISGERBER'S WORKS CHALLENGE THE NORMAL IDEA OF PAINTING

When Jeremy Hof won the RBC Painting Competition several years ago, some damned his work as sculpture, and thus “ineligible.” But the history of art is often the friction between that which is currently “endorsed,” and that which fractures those endorsements: when something becomes the mandate in art schools and academia, it can become banal taupe. Real art acknowledges the past, with an uneasy confrontation of its failings.

This applies to the works of Sean Weisgerber, titled Ricochet, in the latest Artists by Artists exhibition at the Mendel. First, Weisgerber was long-listed for the RBC award last year (only the second ever artist from Saskatchewan to be so honoured). Secondly (and more excitingly), the three works he’s presented here could be described as painting, or installation, or sculpture — and there’s even an element of craft and furniture — or simply as making art with form and space as your concerns, rather than worrying about stifled academic pedants.

“Thrill” is the first piece you’ll see as you descend the stairs: running floor to ceiling, it seems to grow out of the wall, the flat black extending out horizontally onto the gallery wall proper. Weisgerber’s works are physical: wormy or antennae-like spikes move out from the surfaces, somewhere between an organic growth and a viral infestation.

His palette is restrained, privileging form over colour. In “Electric Mud”, the monochromatic tentacles seem almost industrial in their clean delineation between black and white, and they seem to spill out of their frame, in a Cthulhu-worthy manner. (Unlike many that play upon sensual aspects, I’m not interested in touching these works: in fact, the textures seem alive, and a bit aggressive...)

At the end wall, far right, is “Hot Bloom”. It’s the piece that pushes most strongly against stereotypical assumptions of painting, and the obsession we still have with, variously: the illusion of the 3-D picture box space (painting as a

“window”), or Monet’s assertion of how it’s just gobs of coloured paste on a flat surface, or Greenberg’s “purity.” (You’ll also bang your head on it, if you’re not careful.)

The work projects outward, on what could be described as a grey, metallic tongue, that’s as much part of the work as the “boxes” it proffers out to us. The wooden cubes (three, increasing in size as they move out from the wall towards the end of the projection) have more of the dark feelers coming out of them, pointing upwards (like a plant growing, perhaps, or a fungus, due to their black/grey, almost mouldy and globby look).

Weisgerber’s art acts as an adjunct (and perhaps a contemporary voice) to the painted works upstairs and the questions of history and abstraction therein. These pieces act as a punctuation mark — a closing, perhaps — to that larger conversation.