

# San Francisco Chronicle

## SUBSTANCE WITH STYLE

### Emotion figures in works of two very different abstractionists

By Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic  
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How do we recognize content in abstract painting?

The answer is suggested differently in the recent works of senior Bay Area painter Mike Henderson at the Haines Gallery and in the small survey of work by New York painter Ralph Humphrey (1932-1990) at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery.

Henderson denies neither himself nor us any of the richness inherent in oil paint. His canvases are heavy with slick pigment. Many passages are worked with palette knives into a confectionary state that resembles faceted frosting.

At one extreme, he presents a patchwork of shifting hues and details, as in "Religion, Time, Humor" (1996), which looks almost as if it is composed of many smaller, chockablock paintings and is oddly reminiscent of Nicholas De Stael. At another, he may paint over a canvas almost completely with black, as in "Penetration, Time, Edge" (1996), whose carefully groomed surface sheen makes it look irrigated by light.

Henderson's challenge is finding a way to project himself into what he makes, not so that it will be about him, but to turn mere physical repleteness into artistic fullness. This process is not simply manifest in any single picture but must be tracked through a whole show, and implicitly through a whole body of work, which may span many years.

Henderson's method is to piece together each painting many times over. He may start with a rough plan, but soon the working process generates unforeseen effects and structures that demand elaboration or countermoves or effacement.

Consider the curtain of black that blots out, and so becomes, about a third of the otherwise very busy picture "Unspoken Truth" (1995).

This black area might be a blunt, self-critical gesture, though no inflection encourages us to see it as an index of mood change. In fact, a small black rectangle -- one of many levitating monochrome rectangles in Henderson's work that recall Hans Hoffman -- deftly restores the picture's inner balance. Henderson tempts us to imagine the large and small black rectangles as close-up and long views of the same shape, the close-up cropped by the canvas' edge.

That implicit illusion, even when we do not focus on it, frees the rest of the picture space to be both flat, as it is in fact, and wide open, like the space between two facing buildings.

Such dynamics are empty exercises unless, like Henderson, the painter feels them so keenly in the making that we recognize them as a choreography of the heart.

A stiff effort such as "Angels, Time, Secret" (1996) shows that even Henderson cannot always find a good fit between inner impulse and objective structure. But his best work is proof that painting's future depends equally on its distinguished past and on just who is painting now, not on the National Endowment for the Arts or the art market or the international museum mafia.