

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Portraits of energy and immediacy

By Kenneth Baker  
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**LITTLE HENDERSONS AT HAINES:** Bay Area painter Mike Henderson has lined the back room at Haines with pleasingly summery, small pictures. They will surprise anyone who thinks of him as a determined abstractionist.

The paintings do not describe specific subjects or memories, but Henderson lets them wink out suggestions of imagery that he might ordinarily suppress. He titles each one "Barn," inviting us to see slabs of architecture, land and sky in troweled planes of color.

Henderson explains his interest in the barn by a combination of reminiscence and social concern. "As I travel through the U.S. and Europe," he writes, "I see the barns, the farmland, the open land all disappearing. . . . I always liked the word Barn. It is like the word born -- you were born to live in a barn -- it is the barnyard where I learned about life and death. . . . The Barn -- first romantic interlude and the realization that we are all here because of a roll in the hay."

Many of us with no memories of barns except as passing scenery have already found in Henderson's art lessons in the creative contest of liveliness and deadness. An hour's work too much or too little may make the difference between them, as may a shift in angle of vision, or even a few apt words. The "Barn" paintings make manifest this economy of effect and its risks.

"Barn No. 16" (2003) describes its subject with so few knife strokes of yellow, blue, gray and brown that we can unsee its depiction at whim.

Focus on its abstract structure and the painting evokes not a sun-shot landscape but a fact about the state of the art: Images appear to flow from paint itself at this point in art history, making it the painter's problem to control their emanation.

Doing that, Henderson shows us that allusions to earlier art also seem to flow from his material. Probably few people have connected Henderson's work with that of the early Bay Area modernists known as the Society of Six, but they will now. Nicholas de Stael, Hans Hofmann and even Milton Avery also come to mind -- Avery for his composition, not his touch.

Painting as a shareable pleasure has been the connecting theme of Henderson's work for almost 20 years, and the "Barns" extend it.