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Mike Henderson's 'inner studio' alive in his paintings

By Kenneth Baker

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Even abstraction that precludes imagery leaves plenty of room for a painter's preoccupations. Think of Sean Scully dwelling on walls, windows and floorboards or Brice Marden's unconscious fascination with maps. East Bay abstractionist Mike Henderson's coded preoccupation eluded me until my second visit to his show of recent work that ends today at Haines. (Another show of Henderson's work, with that of painter Amy Kaufman, continues at the Oakland Art Gallery.)

Every time I looked at it, "Just a Few" (2007) at Haines made me think of a studio wall, blanketed with reproductions torn from books, postcards, snatches of drawing, tatters of color-daubed canvas - the whole crazy quilt that a painter tends to make of his lair. (I have never visited Henderson's studio - for all I know, he may keep it as pristine as Mondrian's, but somehow I doubt it.)

To viewers aware of Henderson's other life as a musician, a semi-circular form in "Just a Few" may suggest a CD or record half out of its sleeve. One passage at the lower left corner looks like a painted memory of a striped canvas by Kaufman.

Rather than illustrate the reality of his work space, Henderson's paintings more likely correspond to the "inner studio" of his artistic process, which gets real only when he takes knives and brushes in hand.



Courtesy of Haines Gallery, San Francisco

Yet the thought of an actual studio seems to make sense - maybe too much sense - of some of the glyph-like details in Henderson's work. The red and black concentric circles in "There's Still Plenty" (2007) suggests a hot plate, the columnar spiral below it, a spooled drawing or canvas.

All sorts of possible references wink from Henderson's canvases, but finally the pictures assert sheer accretion as their theme: memories of Hans Hofmann paintings overlaying those of pieced quilts, Henderson's private notations of his experience jostling with his material's and forms' flagging of the meanings that art history might assign them.

At the Oakland Art Gallery, Kaufman not only enjoys the honor of showing with Henderson but also suffers having her work look cribbed and reticent in comparison to his. The fearlessness and generosity of his work, even at its weakest, make it tough company for another painter's to keep.

Henderson's work passes a peculiar test at Haines - it overcomes the "risk" of appearing too sincere - by showing alongside the slapstick post-modernism of Brooklynite William Powhida.

The ensemble of drawings, paintings and a video concerns Powhida's detailed plans for a biopic about him by Sofia Coppola - who may be reading about it here for the first time.

Illustrating notes for the casting, shooting and interpretation of the film, he gives vent to all the self-importance, frustration, self-pity and bile for which unrecognized artists tend to be famous among friends and family.

Powhida's comedy palls pretty quickly, but few will call him mistaken. He pours scorn on every sort of player in the art world, even those who pay his work the attention - *too late!* - that it so richly deserves. The big question about Powhida: How long can he keep this up?