

Chris Cran succeeds veering off course

New exhibit Diversions showcases painter's stunning new work

By Nancy Tousley, *Calgary Herald*
Sunday, April 19, 2009



Chris Cran has a retrospective at TrépanierBaer.
Photograph by: Paula Trotter, Calgary Herald

Chris Cran: Diversions, a solo show at TrépanierBaer Gallery, 999 8th St. S. W., through April 25

"It's all play," says the painter Chris Cran. A grasshopper among ants, he is always playing, experimenting, using his studio for R&D and, in his case, it pays to play.

Diversions, his new show at TrépanierBaer, presents a body of new work in which Cran opens up amazing space in the flatness of the painting surface to create ever more unexpected and elusive depths. The paintings fall into the series he calls "Abstracts," with a nod to a category of kitsch art, and one or two of them are among his best.

But while this solo show is full of new work, as one would expect, it also has the feel of a mini retrospective.

The exhibition contains four significant early works: Charts (1985), from the Self-Portrait Series; Four Portraits of the Artist by Andy Warhol #6 (1988), from a series within the Self-Portrait Series; Large Orange Laughing Woman (1991), from the Half-tone Series; and Alibi (1993), a diptych that Cran made just before his first show at TrépanierBaer, in which he switched from making representational painting to Abstracts.

Two other paintings, Island (2000) and Wall With Portrait & Curtain (2006), are from series in which Cran explored the framing device and painting genres. Another, So Many Canaries (2007), an all-yellow enamel painting on board with toy birds attached to the surface, reprises an idea he had while still a student at the Alberta College of Art, where the first Self-Portrait Paintings also was born.

The little history is satisfying to see. The exhibition might not hit every major phase of Cran's work, but it provides a terrific crash course in his preoccupations as a painter for

more than 25 years. It is telling to see how well the paintings grouped in the front hall and first gallery hang together.

With their references to 1940s and '50s illustration (Charts and Alibi), mechanical reproduction (Large Orange Laughing Woman) and cartoony or pop art (Four Portraits of the Artist by Andy Warhol), the older paintings stake out a large portion of Cran's territory and its references. The new work in this gallery, a trio of Abstracts called X, Y and Z (2009), claim kin with their Pop-flavoured layers of neon graffiti, which force the eye to perform contortions to focus on the different levels of the composition.

The grouping foregrounds Cran's abiding interest in the fluidity of perception and images. In Charts, his persona is seen from behind studying sheets of drawings of eyes, noses and mouths, as if he were composing a face for himself from these features. This is a visual narrative about the fluidity of images. The other paintings work on the viewer's perception in a different way.

This is the magical effect that Cran brought to his painting in the 1990s and has continued to develop. It is no mean feat. In the interplay of light, surface and depth in a painting, something actually happens, a perceptual event occurs. Painting as a static, iconic image becomes unfixed. Painting might, in the end, be a commodity but for Cran is first and foremost an experience.

The Half-tone Painting of the large head comes into focus as an image and disintegrates into dots, depending on the viewer's distance from the painting. The Abstracts, X, Y and Z, and other new paintings in the show produce more complex perceptual events. These paintings change dramatically as you move past them or view them from different angles. Painted shapes flip from positive to negative and back again. Colour changes with changes in the available light.

X, Y and Z, which like the Large Orange Laughing Woman are covered with vertical stripes, are the most complex and elusive. As the surfaces of the paintings interact with light, the images--which Cran creates by dragging the brush through the light-reflecting paint to make waves, zigzags, half circles, horizontal bands, vertical scrapes--become mercurial, metaphysical even, and beautiful.

The rhetoric of painting, the ways in which painting persuades the eye, has long been the subject of Cran's work. The range of this excellent show tracks it from the realist illusion of representational painting, as in Charts, to painting in which process and the materials and tools of painting create illusion independent of representation. Their abstract images, which are in constant flux, are the result of the tracks of a brush, the traces of a process, and light, which represent nothing else at all.

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