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Critic's Choice Renegade abstractions of Polly Apfelbaum and Dona Nelson make for a stellar art show



Polly Apfelbaum and Dona Nelson, "Erasing, Tracing, Racing Paint," installation view, at Michael Benevento Gallery in Los Angeles. (Jeff McLane)

By **David Pagel**

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If you pay attention to contemporary art, you're probably familiar with Assemblage, Minimalism and Conceptualism. Those influential movements came to prominence, respectively, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

The dearth of new "isms" since then can be attributed partly to artists who want to be thought of as individuals and partly to a global art world that has no center, in the sense William Butler Yeats described in his post-apocalyptic poem "The Second Coming."

But during the last 10 years, an approach to art-making has been gathering force and gaining traction. It's called Deserted Island Abstraction and its ethos is vividly displayed in one of the best two-person exhibitions to be staged recently: Polly Apfelbaum and Dona Nelson's "Erasing, Tracing, Racing Paint" at Michael Benevento Gallery.

Apfelbaum and Nelson earn their Deserted Island bona fides because one glance at the wickedly wonderful stews of stuff each artist works with makes it clear that the two New Yorkers would paint and sculpt even if they were shipwrecked and had to scavenge for supplies on a deserted island. The inventiveness and ingenuity and sheer love of doing stuff with one's hands is palpable.

Apfelbaum works with crushed stretch velvet and clay. To the former, she adds a dazzling palette of fabric dyes, forming abstract shapes that recall gigantic caterpillars, stop-action explosions, hippie dresses and hallucinatory eggs. She then cuts out the shapes, stacks them in boxes and re-composes them on the floor. The two at the gallery, "Blue Joany" and "Brown Sugar," resemble scrambled rugs, molecular mishaps and comfy nests for 2-D aliens. With clay, Apfelbaum makes jawbreaker-sized beads and misshapen plates. She slathers both with gobs of glazes. The textures and colors are out of this world.

Nelson works with a simple inventory: paint, fabric and metal. What she does with such regular stuff is magnificent.

Each of her seven works starts out as a medium-to-large rectangle of canvas stretched over wooden bars. She messes with that standard format like nobody's business, pouring and staining various pigments and mediums so that the results run the gamut from diaphanous translucence to gooey opacity.

She also stitches culinary string into her surfaces, crisscrossing the stitches so they pile up chaotically, like the colorful dowels in the old-time children's game. Best of all, Nelson takes swatches of cheesecloth, muslin and unwoven canvas, wads them up into palm-size lumps and glues them onto her surfaces, creating sculptural reliefs that follow -- or disrupt -- a painting's pictorial organization.

Finally, she crafts idiosyncratic armatures that hold her paintings in midair. Set on a custom-made pedestal, "Hair Conditioning" divides a small gallery in half. "Line Light," "Luka" and "Shoe Painting" hang from the ceiling to form narrow corridors. All four allow viewers to see both sides. This builds memory into the process, creating experiences that are greater than the sum of their parts -- and far more mysterious.

The same can be said of "Erasing, Tracing, Racing Paint." Think of it as a renegade love poem to painting. Or painting by other means, deserted island or just across town.

Michael Benevento Gallery, 3712 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 874-6400, through May 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.beneventolosangeles.com