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Pop Goes the Easel: The work of Smith and Cannings explodes

By Charissa N. Terranova

"Remnants", 2006, inflated steel and paint

The dripped bumpy surfaces of Charlotte Smith's paintings and the bulbous pneumatic contours of William Cannings' sculpture convey explosions. You'll find no destruction of apocalypse in the exhibition Pop Up at Pan American Art Gallery. Rather, theirs is an artful blast that, in the case of Smith, makes for patterns of candy cane-colored tiny stalagmites and, with Cannings, smooth, shiny and taut steel skin that subtly ruptures at the seam. Smith makes canvases wherein surface quality becomes fingery and thing-like and painting's necessary flatness gives way to a skin disorder. Brightly colored

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carbuncles dapple the picture plane in disturbing fashion. Similarly working in a palette of the bright opaque hues signature of '60s-era Pop art, Cannings heats flat sheets of steel in kilns, making them soft and malleable so as to blow them into large and small pillowy inner tubes.

They rethink "pop" art in terms of a literal burst. Smith's paintings are volcanic landscapes reminiscent at once of Dr. Seussville and the imaginary spaces of the painter-cum-raconteur Trenton Doyle Hancock. Cannings' distended shapes belch open with tiny and gaping fissures. There is a literalism at work here that verges on banal decoration — an invocation of pop according to a blast of form and color instead of double entendres criticizing mass-media image. Yet it is precisely the coruscating color alloyed by form-intense color given body as nipply buboes in Smith's paintings and swollen pool toys in Cannings' sculpture-that keeps this work from being dumb in a boring way. The dumbness of these objects, there literalism, flares with suggestion and clever meaning.

Member of the cognoscenti have long held literalism in art to be a bad thing. The art critic and Greenbergian Michael Friend pejoratively called the work of Minimalist sculptors Donald Judd and Tony Smith "literal," demoting their hermetic black boxes to the realm of theatrical set pieces of furniture. It's not so much that Judd's untitled galvanized iron boxes (1965) or Smith's "Die" (1962) were functional like furniture, as they were not. In calling them "literal" Fried meant to underscore how they are objects in our world: He criticized the work of emergent Minimalists for being materialist rather than transcendent, concerned with phenomenal experience rather than a metaphysical world beyond. Translated into belief systems, if you're an atheist, "literal" is a good thing, and if you're a hold-out for art as a spiritual (i.e. Christian) experience, "literal" is a bad thing. Less religious and more besotted, the English architecture critic Colin Rowe similarly deployed the adjective "literal" in a derisive mode, using it to rank Le Corbusier's complexities about those of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus.

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For once the old white guys weren't all wrong. There are different types of literalism—some good, some bad. Good literalism is frank and forthright yet still engaged. Good literalism includes Leonardo's drawings of flying machines, J. J. Grandville's drawings from *Another World,* Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," Rauschenberg's "Odalisque," Warhol's "Cow Wallpaper" and the cheesy big-box projects designed for Best (an appliance store in the '70s) by SITE architects. Bad literalism is mindless and anti-intellectual. Artist and architects working in this vein "just want to make art" and desire to "to get back to the basics." Examples include Jack Vettriano's "Singing Butler," anything by Thomas Kinkade or Norman Rockwell, and any design by New Urbanist planners Duany Plater-Zyberk or anyone inspired by their work.

Smith, a good literalist and native Texan, carefully stacks drips of paint. The dripstacks have grown taller over time, and with each cycle of paintings emerges a more fantastically craggy surface. Works from 2005 such as "Aquatica" and "cherries Jubilee" betray an artist obsessively at work. In "Aquatica" tiny thickets of dark seafoam balls emerge from a bubbling surface of multicolored spots. Bright red blotches cover the picture plane of "Cherries Jubilee." The bumps are the result of a radical meticulousness: a monomaniacal process of delicately amassing tiny narrow mounds of dripped paint. The bright cheery colors counter the odd bumpiness, creating a painterly scrofula of sorts. This year the artist had ratcheted up the weird quotient, piling ever-higher thin blobs of paint on the top stretcher bar. The drips no longer emerge from the façade alone but from the top and sides of the paintings. The paint on "Over and Out VII" and "Over and Our I" stands on end like a fresh buzz cut.

Unfortunately, this new work is almost crushed by the installation. Presumably for reasons of sales, there are far too many paintings on view. What becomes palpably apparent in this poorly installed half of the show is the overwhelming power of Smith's work. There shouldn't be so many paintings in one room as

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the number does a disservice to the work: Their collective presence overpowers the individual pieces.

By contrast, the portion of *Pop Up* devoted to Cannings' work is balanced and smart. Like Smith, process is central to Cannings' work. The bright green open mawed inner tube of "Remnants" began as a flat, unpainted sheet of steel. Cannings welded it into circular form, placed it in a kiln, injected it with compressed air to make it expand and then coated it in the shiny powder-based paint used for cars. At the center lies a sheaf of curly matte-black steel spindles. "Raft," a gleaming neon-orange raft, leans against the wall of the gallery. The silver-painted aluminum pillows hanging from the ceiling of the gallery are too close to what the artist is referencing namely Warhol's "Silver Clouds," the helium-filled metallic balloons installed at Leo Castelli in 1966.

At the same time, Cannings' work is not solely about appearance. Their color and shape might be misleading here, because they have an iconic presence on par with much of Warhol's work, as well as Jeff Koons'. Cannings is equally interested in materials—their manipulation and the verisimilitude it creates—that he transforms the bulk of heavy steel into lightness and air. Perhaps more significant than iconic presence is the fact that the pillows are made out of a lightweight grade of metal, aluminum, that has been heated, molded and hung pendulously overhead. In the adjacent gallery, where there are too many of Smith's paintings, sits "Loop," an orange-red inner tube with a burping seam on top. The piece marks a thankful counter-balance to the onslaught on the walls.

Smith and Cannings inject metaphor into literally explosive form. If Smith's surfaces burst forth like so many pustules exuding unction in color, then Cannings' shiny tires eruct as though fat bodies swollen with hot sweet air.