

Dense, Fiery and Downright Strange

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By David Pagel



The five big paintings that make up Oliver Arms' L.A. solo debut are so steeped in history that it's difficult, when looking at them, not to envision works by other painters, including William Baziotes, Andre Bresson, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Roberto Matta, Robert Motherwell and Clyfford Still. Usually, nodding so obviously to past masterpieces is a recipe for disaster. It almost always ensures that the new works are forgettable footnotes to famous paintings reproduced in nearly every textbook about 20th century abstraction.

But there's more to Arms' dense, fiery paintings at Western Project than these standard points of reference suggest. The longer you look, the stranger they seem.

Each consists of molten blobs of color hurtling through a cosmos congested with the residue of furious collisions between asteroids, meteors and unidentifiable intergalactic detritus. Some blobs seem to cavort, like silhouetted cartoon characters, across 6-by-12-foot picture planes. Others resemble humongous insects splattered across a spaceship's windshield. Still others look like gaseous masses exploding ferociously.

From close up, the surfaces of the blobs are as complex and delicate as Impressionist paintings.

They consist of wispy swirls of red, blue and yellow, intermingled with green, orange and purple. To get the atmospheric effect, Arms uses a belt sander, literally obliterating layers of encrusted oil paint.

The sanded sections look dry. This contrasts dramatically with the thickly brushed grounds, which look wet and far more expressive or gestural.

An odd, Rip Van Winkle quality animates Arms' art. Out of step with current fashions, his naked paintings travel to the past in ways that may be ahead of their time.
