



Reflection, 2007, oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches

Packed with colors and textures by David Pagel

In its heyday nearly 50 years ago, formalism took painting back to the basics: line, shape and color. At Western Project, Oliver Arms' oils on canvas go a whole lot further. They take painting back to basic states of matter: liquid, solid and gas.

Think of the L.A. artist's second solo show as an eloquent essay on the most elemental aspects of the organic materiality of oil paint. Simultaneously fluid, crusty and ethereal, his primal pictures have one foot firmly planted in the primordial ooze and the other in the cultivated world of modernist abstraction. It's a feat that balances furious energy and strange serenity.

Each of Arms' five abstractions is jam-packed with so many colors, textures and forms that it looks like 10 or 12 paintings that have been run through an industrial-strength garbage disposal, compressed in a hydraulic trash compactor and then run over by an old-fashioned steamroller. Arms actually works with brushes and palette knives, piling on paint thickly and intuitively, letting it dry, obliterating many layers with a belt sander and then repeating the process, again and again.

Density is his forte. Yet none of Arms' riveting works seems overcrowded or claustrophobic. Part of that is due to the astonishing crispness of every square inch of his sediment-style surfaces, which are so vivid and sharply defined that they almost hurt your eyes.

Even more important is the light Arms captures in his brutally worked fields of fragmented gestures and broken marks. The laborious, even torturous process that goes into the construction of his works disappears in the palpable light that emanates from their fiery depths. Neither heavenly nor hellish, it's down to earth and gritty, the basic stuff of life.