

Art

Gotham artists create figurative and colorful images

BY CAROL FERRING SHEPLEY
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The work of a quartet of New York painters is on display this month at Elliot Smith Contemporary Art. David Mann and Andrew Mockler create paintings about color; Craig Carlisle and Brian Novatny favor small figurative images. It is Novatny who emerges as the most intriguing.

While pictures of people and furniture generally tell some kind of story, Novatny's seem more concerned with "how" it gets told rather than "what" is said. The artist mentions Fra Angelico and Ferdinand Leger as influences. While the Early Renaissance painter Angelico inspires the patterns that flatten the couches, walls and clothes on display here, Novatny's tubular figures and sense of layered space reflect Cubist master Leger.

Looking at these simple compositions of figures can be quite unsettling. This results from Novatny using several methods to create three-dimensional illusions

Four New York Painters

Where: Elliot Smith Contemporary Art, 4727 McPherson Avenue,
When: Through Feb. 24
Info: 314-361-4800

within one figure.

In "Woman with Gray Pants on Floral Floor," for example, the subject's face is given depth with crosshatching lines, while her sweater gets a complex outline. Her pants receive the most detail through the use of light and shaded color — but her foot is completely flat. This strange combination of art-school techniques is set against a very elegant floral pattern background. An odd coupling, but one that works.

Mann, meanwhile, fascinates the viewer with his luscious use of color. In complete contrast to earlier work of thick impasto and gestured brushstrokes, these paintings seem miraculously

smooth, with no firm evidence of the artist's hand. Mann uses a combination of oil and acrylic to create effects that seem to have hatched naturally inside a petri dish.

The high-tech tools of science — such as the scanning electron microscope, the MRI and the CT scan — inspired these images, which seem to represent fantasies of stained cells twisting and turning in space. "Cellular, VIII" could almost be taking us inside an esophagus tube with light glowing from within individual cell structures.

As interesting as the forms are, it is the color that really delights. In the most complex image, "The Geometry of Innocence, III," three stripes of cells are split by two solid, flat stripes. Green is lit by blue; blue fades into orange. The biological shapes glow within their skins.

Mockler also makes color his primary subject. The latter-day color-field painter uses oils in the same bright pastels that Matisse found in the light of the French

Riviera, and he lays these colors down in narrow stripes with blurred edges.

While Mann's other paintings depict vertical stripes, the stripes in "AM 15," a personal favorite, stretch horizontally across the paper inside a broad white frame. The colors are warm and lively reds and oranges, like those of a sunset or an American Indian blanket.

Carlisle's series of figures with hairless heads and nearly naked bodies present metaphors that aren't easily identifiable. Serene in mood, these figures look flat and blank-faced, like Cycladic idols or people rendered in a folk-art style. Features are simplified.

Carlisle's flat backgrounds feature a few essential details, such as a tree or water, and occasional attributes such as butterflies, clouds or birds. His "Blue Egg" depicts the head and shoulder of a figure topped with a bird's nest holding a speckled egg. Because eggs symbolize birth, perhaps this stands for intellectual birth. In the end, Carlisle keeps things a



"Man in Aquamarine Shirt Suspended" (1999) by Brian Novatny, oil on panel

bit mysterious.

While their subject matter may have little in common, all four artists present small-scale, colorful paintings that share one es-

sential quality: They all prove worthy of a look.