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Brown's risky leap through 'Open Window'

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I have never much enjoyed the work of Bay Area painter Christopher Brown, but in recent years I have admired more and more his willingness to challenge himself openly. It shows clearly in some of his recent work at Berggruen.

Merely look at the differences between the version of the painting pictured on the exhibition announcement and the state of the work as it appears in the gallery. Even the title changed between printing and opening, from "Meditation" to "Open Window."

The finished picture - if it is finally finished - describes an impossible landscape: a sunlit brick red New York building in the foreground, behind it a much larger, apparently clapboard structure with most of its windows indicated by black rectangles.

The literal "open window" of the title hovers unaccountably and out of scale in the picture's foreground, a thick newspaper apparently having sailed through it, still airborne, with a tiny geisha riding it like a magic carpet. Pointless surrealism, perhaps, but also a go-for-broke gamble that such details spring from the unconscious impulses that give improvised art its power and prove themselves by the echoes they strike in viewers. The willingness to take that sort of risk should impress even viewers not persuaded by the painting in its final form.

"Open Window" makes the sense that painting makes. A medium for describing and envisioning things, responsive to the whims of its handler, it can express an artist's creative freedom, his receptivity to promptings of the culture at large, his appreciation of his art's and his own work's genealogy, and even - if he has it - a tendency to self-involvement. Brown's recent work manifests all these inclinations, which makes for an absorbing show of less than consistent work.

The more prosaic pieces, such as "Vermont" (2007), a vague account of maple syrup harvesting, leave us wondering why Brown bothered to make them. "The Floating World" (2008), with its slurred technique and air of unredeemed arbitrariness, hints a temporary fading of determination.

But other pictures, such as, "Flight Patterns in the Maze" (2008), "House and Garden" (2008) and "Diver" (2008), show Brown in top form, fully involved in their physical execution and in flavors of psychological strangeness that perhaps only handmade pictures can attain. In "House and Garden," the corner of a clapboard house, looking like something out of Fairfield Porter - or maybe even Gordon Matta-Clark - territory, sits embedded in a field scarred into lavish abstraction by

aggressive sanding.

Brown's recent work appears laced with puns and veiled references, from the pivotal painting that Jasper Johns titled "Diver" to the "open windows" that connect the computer screen and painters such as Vermeer and Matisse.

"House and Garden" may be Brown's "Expulsion..." from the Edenic garden of untroubled figuration.

Williams and Reid at Wirtz: Griff Williams' recent paintings at Wirtz suggest dark epiphanies, moments when natural grandeur and inner demons collide in the mind.

"In the Midst of One's Own Nature" (2008) puts a black Rorschach-diagram-like pattern over a high meadow landscape that has the same creepy symmetry as the non-signifying overlay. But nothing is straightforward in these pictures.

Williams' paint-pouring technique negates touch but affirms materiality. His custom-mixed colors refer not to hues seen in nature but to those from his son's paint-by-numbers set. The landscape vistas come from antique postcards. The anamorphic overlays, full of skulls, wings and such, have obscure roots. They seem at once familiar and untraceable.

In his new work Williams appears interested in the picturesque as an escapist, but haunted, realm. In that preoccupation I see a metaphor for the bad-faith requisite for behaving "normally" in an era of pervasive corruption, war profiteering and ecological breakdown.

Also at Wirtz, Laurie Reid presents drawings done in poured resin coated with crushed mirror glass. The sparkling filaments look like frippery at first, but several of them insinuate ugly entanglements, at worst intimating torture and hanging.

Christopher Brown: Recent Paintings. Through June 28. John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., San Francisco. (415) 781-4629, www.berggruen.com.

Griff Williams: Nothing Exists in Itself: paintings in poured enamel; **Laurie Reid: Crushed Glass:** drawings in ground glass. Through June 28. Stephen Wirtz Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 433-6879, www.wirtzgalleries.com.

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