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By Kenneth Baker

Charles Arnoldi's paintings at Modernism



"Fragile Mind" (2008), acrylic on canvas by Charles Arnoldi.

Photo courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco

Walking into Los Angeles painter Charles **Arnoldi's** show at Modernism feels a little the way it did to enter Andre Emmerich's or Lawrence Rubin's Manhattan galleries in the heyday of color field painting.

Arnoldi's paintings appear exuberantly self-involved, immune to the grating of events in the street and wide world outside - the more so because they seem to make a project of distancing color from function, even from functioning as code for emotion.

Arnoldi also risks the accusation of superficiality because he accepts and asserts painting as decoration of a surface. But his paintings operate on more than one level.

Several of the flat, painted rectangles within the patchwork composition of "Juggler" (2008) prove to be small monochrome canvases inserted flush within a larger painted support. This multi-canvas structure contradicts at points the illusion of overlap that comes of painting a shape atop a ground of contrasting color. It would be a trivial fact, if **Arnoldi** hadn't made it part of a syntax for thinking mutely about his art's relation to enveloping reality.

What sort of detachment do we experience when we look at abstract painting today? Does it amount to the aesthetic escapism for which color field painting was denigrated from the late '60s on? Not in **Arnoldi's** case, because the intensely considered

character of his work stands at a critical angle to the rote methods and the lifelessness of most of the built environment.

The Modernism show samples several phases of **Arnoldi's** art, none more satisfying to my eye than pictures such as "Skylight" (1990-2003) and "Fragile Mind" (2008), rectangular works composed of individually stretched canvases that themselves appear cut from some other pre-existing whole.

It takes a few moments to discern the physical structure of the 6-foot-square "Fragile Mind," in which canvas triangles, rectangles and a trapezoid play against the seemingly truncated scimitar shapes painted on them in deep violet black and white. The sort of pinwheel composition that results makes the picture burst with graphic energy.

As in several other pictures here, the interrupted arcs in "Fragile Mind" suggest the letter "o" in uppercase italic, cropped and immensely magnified. This inkling supplies a comic visual backbeat of anxiety or eroticism or both: *O O O O ...*

The intense colors **Arnoldi** favors tend to confine attention to the moment of looking, but his paintings incorporate a chain of associations to the work of artists as diverse as Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), Ellsworth Kelly and Ed Ruscha.

Arnoldi's art, in Modernism's compact survey, suggests that viewers' resistance to abstraction will come today neither from unfamiliarity, nor from its refusal of topicality nor even from the seeming



"Skylight" (1990-2003), oil on canvas by Charles Arnoldi.

Photo courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco

irrelevance of painting itself to graver human concerns. Resistance arises because abstraction, as **Arnoldi** practices it, confronts us most clearly with painting as a freely chosen discipline, in all its absurdity, difficulty and reward.

Charles Arnoldi: Works 1990-2008: Paintings and works on paper. Through Nov. 1. Modernism, 685 Market St., San Francisco. (415) 541-0461, www.modernisminc.com.

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