

Never fear, painting is here: 'The Prom' and 'Last Days' crank up the wow factor

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Some say the world will end in fire. In the art world, alarmists say paint. Even though Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight speaks for the savvy in claiming that a "lingering animus toward painting is so end-of-the-20th-century," fear of it continues to afflict many.

ART REVIEW

DARREN WATERSTON'S 'LAST DAYS,' AND 'THE PROM: A SEMI-FORMAL SURVEY OF SEMI

WHERE: Waterston at Greg Kucera, 212 Third Ave. S. "The Prom" at Lawrimore Project, 831 Airport Way S.

WHEN: Waterston through Feb. 9. "The Prom" through Feb. 23. Both galleries are open Tuesdays-Saturdays, closed Sundays and Mondays

There's little evidence of that fear in Seattle this month, as painting dominates front-runner galleries, including Lawrimore Project's "The Prom: A Semi-Formal Survey of Semi-Formal Painting" and Greg Kucera's solo exhibit of Darren Waterston's "Last Days."

Curator Scott Lawrimore has never been shy in expressing his reservations about the medium, until now. Helping him to see the colored light on canvas, panel and clear plastic is Alex Ohge, who curated "The Prom" with an eye to the vagaries of current practice.

Tomory Dodge contributed two small oils. Little more than a hands-span each, they echo Howard Hodgkin but with a strong residue of a narrative core. Their power is electric. If Dodge had made them in San Francisco in the late '60s (before he was born), they would have given psychedelia's limp visuals a transfusion of vitality.

Gordon Terry is going for the wow effect of mind-blown flower power with acrylic pours peeled off glass and affixed to clear plastic. With balls of color hurtling through a space that is flat and yet cosmic in its allusions, he brings motion to his oceans.

The third member of this tune-in, turn-on, drop-out phantasmagoria is Robert Hardgrave, whose profusions seem to be growing with viral abandon. Hardgrave lives in Seattle. The paintings in this show are a giant step forward from earlier efforts.

Eric Sall's canvases are the painting equivalent of baggy monsters, but full of joy.

Like Sall, Tiffany Calvert sees no reason to limit herself. Her work blurs inside and out, still life and landscape, the decorative and dainty with a doomed flourish. Nobody but her would swipe a

brown haze over a Delftware blue delicacy. And who else paints chandeliers in the wilderness? Things should fall apart, but instead, with jaunty insouciance, they cohere.

Yoon Lee dissects a painterly gesture without slowing it down. "Subatomic Verve" in acrylic on frosted Mylar looks mass produced from a distance, as if it were an easy swipe across the plate of a printing process. Up close, its true nature reveals itself. She painted it, tiny daub by daub, into a force field.

Nicholas Nyland fashions grids of semi-transparent color. Under them, chaos looms. Joseph Park's portrait of German painter Tim Eitel looks skinned alive. Under the skin, fractured planes hum with fluid energy.

"The Prom" is the second of the gallery's three-part exploration of paint. The less said about the November debut, the better. Crammed into the back gallery without any attention to visual affinities and disconnects, good painters saw their work misused. Part 2 more than makes up for the unintentional slight.

If there's a more imitated painter in America than Darren Waterston, I can't imagine who it would be. Waterston's silky rot and colored goo are gorgeous. They imply a world in which the air has evolved to carry a weightless and more sophisticated kind of consciousness.

Working in oils on panel, Waterston creates worlds inside the world, what Gerald Manley Hopkins' described in "God's Grandeur: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

In the current exhibit, titled "Last Days," Waterston merges beauty with blight. He paints starlight inside a cave, roots in the air, and minerals dissolving into liquids. "Fallen" features a hollowed-out and free-floating tree trunk. White orchids with stale, shadowed edges hang suspended under fragments of enameled blue sky.

"Last Days" is more restrained in tone and simpler in contour than past work -- pared down and quiet. Having proved he could paint the liquid light of grace, he now paints its silence.

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