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Cave paintings for a modern aesthetic

An exhibition at Fleisher/Ollman brings together a magnificent seven.
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Edith Newhall, For The Inquirer

As its title hints, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery's "Cave Paintings" is an exhibition of large, not easily deciphered works on walls that appear to record events over a passage of time, diagrammatically, lyrically, or both. But unlike, for example, the bulls and felines that decorate Lascaux, these "cave paintings" come in acrylic and oil on canvas, steel chain and brass-threaded wire, enamel on aluminum, and ink and gouache on paper. You have to wonder what a prehistoric artist might have fashioned from such sophisticated media.

In the late 1950s, say, a show on this theme might have assembled paintings by Dubuffet, Baziotes, Matta, Lam, Gottlieb, Gorky and Graves. Today, when painting can be a hybrid of sculpture and installation (with almost anything else thrown in), Fleisher/Ollman's motley and magnificent seven makes perfect sense. Chris Churchill, Charles Fahlen, Mark Mahosky, Bruce Pollock, Kate Abercrombie, Mark Surface and Isaac Lin cover the gamut of contemporary cave painting.

Churchill, whose sprawling acrylic-on-canvas *High Heat* is one of the few bona-fide paintings here, has created what looks like a Hawaiian landscape through the lens of an LSD trip: mountains of darting strokes of turquoise, hot pink, and parrot green under a red and orange Clyfford Still sky. Nearby, Fahlen's quirky wall sculptures of steel and bronze wire rope and other materials - which hold colorful cast-epoxy balls resembling large marbles - simultaneously bring to mind drying fishing nets, electronic airwaves, and the ordinary-turned-magical contents of Joseph Cornell's boxes. (The elegant shadows these works cast on the wall, like drawings or sound echoes, are clearly an integral part of them).

Mark Mahosky's mammoth acrylic-on-newspaper *Face to Face With a Great White*, which took him more than a year to complete, is one of those extreme, obsessive works that could take center stage in a biennial or an unusually expansive art-fair booth - but it also seems as though it was fun to make. Isaac Lin has filled an entire room with his whimsical painted, cut-paper pieces.

Every artist in this show gets to be a space hog, a privilege in this age of overpriced real estate. Caves are looking better than ever.

Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 1616 Walnut St., 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 215-545-7562 or www.fleisher-ollmangallery.com. Through April 12.X