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David Pagel
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The idea behind "Oranges and Sardines: Conversations on Abstract Painting" is pretty simple: Give six artists a room apiece in which to display a work or two of their own alongside a selection of works they love, for whatever reason.

The result, at the Hammer Museum, is fantastic: a six-show combo that puts art front and center by demonstrating how arguments can be made visually and that, better yet, lets artists flaunt their visual intelligence by giving them the space and the resources to be their own personal curators.

Best of all, the exhibition treats visitors as intelligent beings -- responsive participants in freewheeling dialogues that make poetic, if not strictly rational, sense.

After a couple of decades dominated by aesthetic hectoring and long-winded wall labels, it's refreshing to visit a show that puts a priority on the open-ended to and fro of real conversation.

The show gets off to a great start with the room arranged by Mary Heilmann. It's the most focused, concise and efficient of the six galleries as well as smart, beautiful and deeply moving.

It includes two of Heilmann's wildly elegant abstractions. "Fire and Ice Remix" and "Blood on the Tracks" combine the punch of Pop, the solidity of Minimalism, the verve of Abstract Expressionism, the drama of movies and the ordinariness of everyday affairs like nobody's business. Flanking them are four works: a juicy pair of figurative paintings by David Hockney and Francis Bacon, a spindly gray sculpture by Bruce Nauman and a man's suit, made of thick gray felt, by Joseph Beuys.

None of the juxtapositions is obvious or even expected. Each makes you stretch to make sense of it. And each makes you see and understand more than before. The imagination leaps. Heilmann's selections represent the show at its best.

All of the works pull your eyes, mind and body earthward. Hockney's intimate picture shows a swimmer disappearing beneath a pool's surface. Nauman's fragile sculpture begins on the wall and ends on the floor, following a similarly downward arc. And Heilmann's paintings take you on emotional roller coasters, from giddy highs to sobering lows.

Tactility, messiness, bodily vulnerability and devil-may-care abandon emerge as her central concerns. Her installation is serious, even profound. Yet it's neither heavy-handed nor pretentious. Gravity comes across as a force everything, and everyone, obeys.

The next room is more rambunctious but no less intelligent, equally driven by the desire for physical thrills and the wisdom that life is fleeting. It showcases a big, sensually acidic canvas by Amy Sillman, "U.S. of Alice the Goon," and nine other works that highlight the gregarious generosity of Sillman's wonderfully muscular composition.

The gallery has been installed coloristically, with a range of predominantly green works by Alice Neel, Eva Hesse, Juan Mele and Howard Hodgkin giving way to pinky flesh ones by Forrest Bess, Lee Krasner and Willem de Kooning and meaty red ones by John Chamberlain and Philip Guston.

The shift in color corresponds to a movement away from fractured planes that clash violently to fluid forms that drift freely. At the center is Sillman's painting, which does not steal the show so much as it keeps the otherwise disparate works on key, in unexpected harmony.

The next two galleries fail to attain the same level of eye-opening precision and soul-expanding satisfaction.

In the first, Christopher Wool's stylishly smeared black-and-white abstraction pales by comparison with the paintings around it: a nice oil on linen by Albert Oehlen, a messy muddle of black blobs by Guston and a second-rate portrait that Pablo Picasso painted in 1969. Two silk-screened posters -- advertising pieces by Otto Muehl -- and seven deliciously goofy kid-style images by Dieter Roth show Wool to be less of a painter and more of a designer of sassy graphics in which Midwestern cleverness rubs shoulders with Eurotrash abjection and both are passed off as urbane sophistication.

In the fourth gallery, Charline von Heyl presents a big black-and-white abstraction alongside eight individually potent pieces that do not converse with one another so much as make point-blank declarations and fall silent. The eclectic range of works includes provocative lumpen-sculptures by Franz West and Rosemarie Trockel, a playfully tormented painting by Wols (Wolfgang Schulze) and a hilarious copy of Raphael's "The School of Athens" by Malcolm Morley, in which a pantheon of Greek philosophers is rendered in goeey globs of acrylic, like a thickly frosted cake.

The final two galleries lack even such playful innovation.

Wade Guyton's room takes visitors to the early 1990s, when making a painting out of anything but paint seemed to be a big deal. His black-and-white inkjet print on linen is insipid. Its counterparts -- awesome monochrome sculptures by Dan Flavin and Isa Genzken, one-dimensional ones by Robert Morris and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and slight

pieces by Martin Barre and Andy Warhol -- hammer home the point so relentlessly that the grouping comes off as a pretentious 3-D illustration.

In the last gallery, lots of great paintings hang around Mark Grotjahn's serviceable monochrome. They include signature works by Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Ad Reinhardt, Josef Albers, Clyfford Still, John McLaughlin and Yayoi Kusama.

But Grotjahn's choices are so obvious and his orange-red painting so derivative that no sparks fly between them. His installation has the presence of an undergraduate assignment. It lacks the idiosyncrasy of firsthand experience, the insights of originality and the verve of individual vision. Illustrative in the worst sense, it reveals Grotjahn as a sampler whose risk-averse work just wants to fit in.

"Oranges and Sardines," titled after a poem by Frank O'Hara, was organized for the Hammer Museum by former chief curator Gary Garrels (now senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). The fascinating, often gratifying exhibition falters only in the narrowness of its focus: Five of its six artists are New Yorkers, and four practice a strand of conceptual abstraction that's beginning to look dated.

But the show's insistence on the importance of visual experience ranks it among the best of the last year, a judiciously selected arrangement that loosens logic, defies language and, on occasion, lets the spirit soar.--

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'Oranges and Sardines'

Where: Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., L.A.

When: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays. Ends

Feb. 8.

Price: \$7

Contact: (310) 443-7000 or www.hammer.ucla.edu

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