



Relief in Sight

Rising star David Ryan lays on the visual pleasure with his sensuous wall sculptures | by david pagel

David Ryan's new works make his old ones look lumpy. That's quite an accomplishment because there is nothing clunky about the old ones, which are not even that old. But if you compare "HI 56E 478" from 2004 with "221b Baker Street" from 2006, you will quickly see how far the 36-year-old artist has come since earning his master's from UNLV in 2003. With three critically acclaimed solo shows at Mark Moore Gallery in Santa Monica and group shows in London, Paris and Dallas, Ryan's reputation is keeping pace with his artistic development.

portrait by
wes myles

In terms of materials, methods and palette, the two works are similar. Each consists of a few sandwiched-together layers of medium-density fiberboard (MDF), the inexpensive material found in kitchen cupboards all across America. Each layer has been laser-cut by an industrial tool programmed to follow the lines he has drawn by hand and then altered on his computer, resulting in idiosyncratic shapes best described as blobs. Think puffy cumulus clouds flattened, a la the proverbial pancake, into cartoon silhouettes. Or fried eggs cooking sunny side-up in puddles of melted butter, in more or less oval pans, on more or less circular stoves—as Dr. Seuss might depict them.

Most of Ryan's shapes are loosely concentric modules that nest one inside the other. Some fit together perfectly, like the interlocking pieces of well-made jigsaw puzzles (and some high-end furniture that goes out of its way to demonstrate its space-saving efficiency). Others do not snugly abut

one another, instead leaving variously sized gaps—like cut-away openings in mechanical diagrams or "reveals" in architectural plans. This allows viewers to see an underlying layer or two, and recalls the structure of geological sedimentation as well as overlapping windows on crowded computer screens.

Whatever the scheme, all of Ryan's multilayered abstractions put visual pleasure front and center. He meticulously sands the edge of each layer, leaving no trace of the laser's sharpness. In its place is rounded smoothness that begs to be caressed—if not with your hands at least with your eyes. The hot colors Ryan mixes to spray-paint his eccentric shapes add to their sensuality. Numerous coats of high-keyed acrylics



"HI 56E 478"

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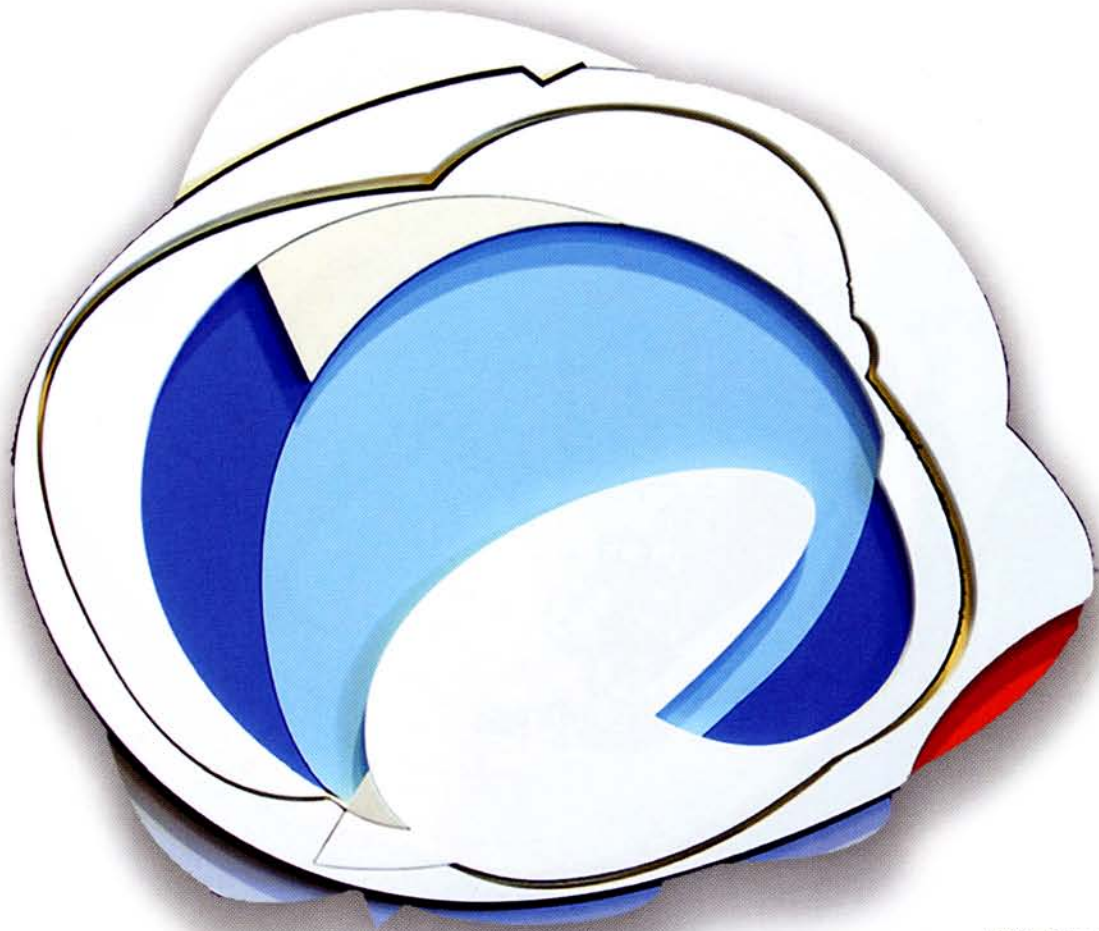
form a super-saturated rainbow of impure tertiary tints that accent larger expanses of pristine, snowy whiteness.

No illusionistic tricks enter the picture. None of Ryan's colors modulates from light to dark or from one part of the spectrum to another. All are solid. The only shading that takes place is the real thing: actual shadows that fall across one part of his low-relief sculptures when other parts block the light source. The stacked layers and irregular cutouts give his works just enough three-dimensionality to make them change in appearance as

you move around them, the proportions of their frontal surfaces and sides shifting with every step. Unlike paintings, in which every square inch is visible all the time, Ryan's wall reliefs put viewers in motion. Taking the sleekness of digitally transmitted imagery and flat-screen TVs into account, they are space-saving sculptures for folks on the go, compressed 3-D forms that intensify—but never abbreviate—the physical experience of contemplative looking.

In terms of look, impact and attitude, "HI 56E 478" and "221b Baker Street" could hardly be more

different. The first sits still, like the best moment of a sunset seen years ago and emblazoned in memory, or like a desert mirage that is forever beyond reach, shimmering and shifting around its blurry contours but too tantalizingly substantial to disregard. "HI 56E 478" is not static, like an icon by Kasimir Malevich, nor delightfully dopey, like a biomorph by Jean Arp. Strictly speaking, it's a sculpture, but one acutely attuned to painting's pictorial moves and drawing's decisive line work. A great leap of the imagination is not required to see its two-tone central component as a traditional



"221b Baker Street"

are about contemporary design, architecture, computer discover narrative meaning in abstraction.

abstract painting (indebted, say, to Ellsworth Kelly), and the white component that encircles it as a customized, one-of-a-kind frame (as found in Steven Crikqui's Pop pictures). The recessed red, orange and mustard-yellow components in Ryan's work echo the central shape's contours, making it seem to float free of its high-keyed surroundings. These 3-D lines resemble the ripples in a pond's surface when a pebble is dropped in it. The colors and shapes evoke a lush, tropical landscape, filled with gorgeous flora, white-sand beaches and sunny afternoons that slide gently into twilight.

It's appropriate that Ryan has titled this piece after the fictitious license plate of Magnum P.I. The distance of the Hawaii-based detective—in miles and years—lets the imagination drift.

The second sculpture, titled after Sherlock Holmes' address in Arthur Conan Doyle's novels, is more urbane, fast-paced and dynamic. Think Jaguar XJ8 rather than surf buggy. Its colors—pastel and royal blue, dove gray, cool white and just a touch of hot orange—are more serene or subdued than those in "HI 56E 478." But the number and configuration of laser-cuts,

now accented with black paint, give "221b Baker Street" its high-speed energy. Ryan's cuts are no longer exclusively perpendicular to the surface of the MDF, creating angled edges with the complexity of facets and contemporary computer-assisted architecture. (Think Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Thomas Maynes.) Ryan also introduces ruler-straight cuts to his repertoire of curved edges, and cuts back on the sanding, leaving some corners crisp. The radar-defying silhouette of the stealth bomber lies behind some of his increasingly complex edges. Other



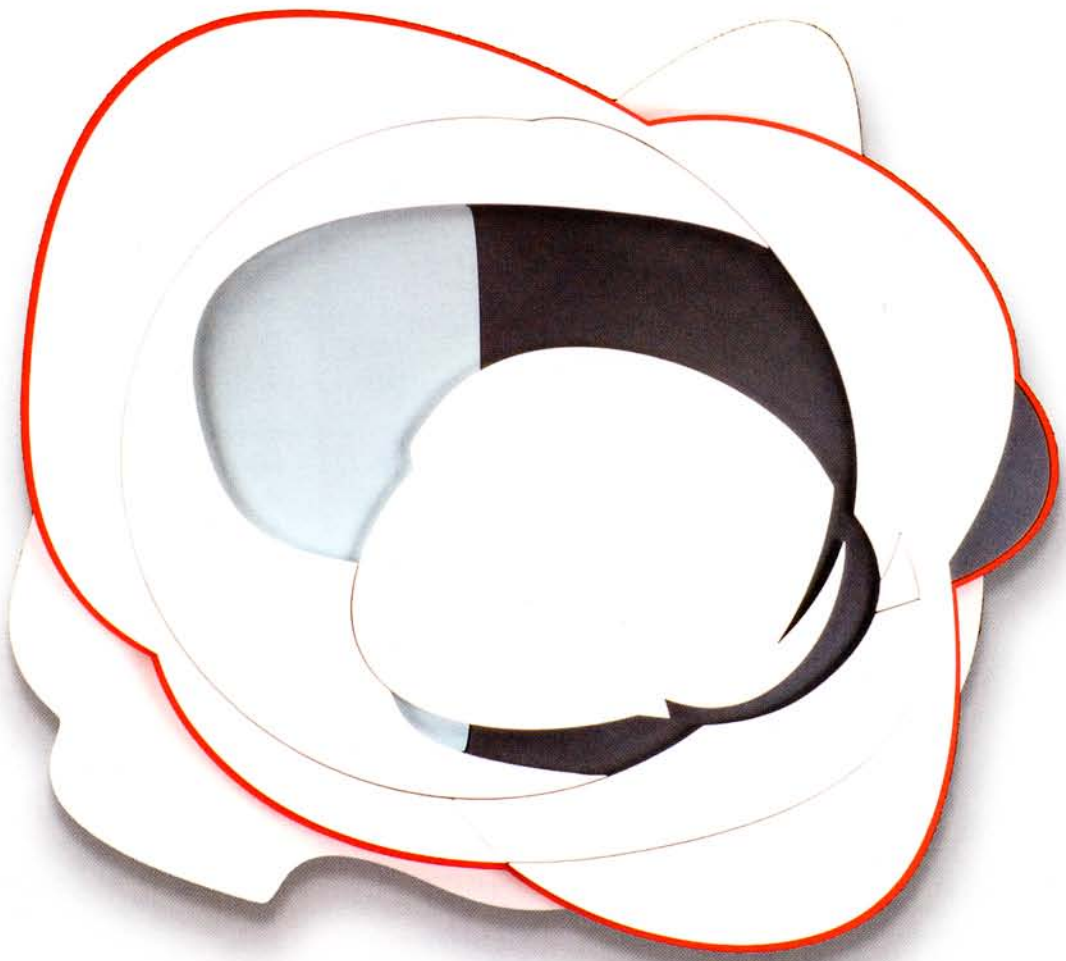
"3 Saville Row"

ones zigzag, as if tracing the lines of an erratic EKG, or following a glitch in any type of digitally transmitted information. "221b Baker Street" is a sort of inside-out painting, its wide, curvaceous white frame intruding into the middle of the central picture-plane, where it provides just a hint of spatial recession—and Nike swoosh movement. The atmosphere Ryan engineers is that of electrons whipping around an invisible nucleus, their elliptical orbits drawing your eye into a taut, abstract whirlpool.

All of Ryan's works are as smart about art

history as they are about contemporary design, architecture, computer graphics, cartoons and the imagination's capacity to discover narrative meaning in abstraction. "TX 6393 BB" (2005) and "CA 532 BEN" (2004) pay homage to the granddaddy of Southern California abstract painting, the former taking off from John McLaughlin's early still lifes of shadows falling across volumetric objects and transforming them into flat shapes, and the latter playing off of his late paintings, which employed an easygoing palette of lemon yellow, pastel blue,

and warm white. "CRM 114" (2005) echoes the shape of Robert Irwin's mesmerizing disks from the late 1960s, adding a sexy glimpse of fleshy pink, like forbidden skin peeked between parted garments. Encircled by a Saturn-like ring of azure, purple and burgundy, "CA OFP 857" (2004) similarly brings the neon glow for which Las Vegas is famous into the equation, mixing the artificial light with Tony DeLap's fantastically crafted wall reliefs, which are equally otherworldly. "DC 3FAN 834" (2004) riffs on Frederick Hammersley's intimate, eye-popping



"866-787-7476"

paintings of interlocked forms, all set in hand-made frames.

And Ryan's more recent works, such as "3 Saville Row" and "8 Gambier Terrace" (from 2006) and "555-3365" and "555-0599" (from 2005), share the up-to-the-minute sensibility of contemporaries Bart Exposito, Monique Prieto, Philip Argent, and Las Vegas' Tim Bavington and Sush Machida Gaikotsu. Like their accessible yet sophisticated works, Ryan's abstract sculptures are grounded in the real world, but unlike anything you've ever seen in it. ❖

DAVID RYAN

Special Vurb showing: Meet the artist from 6-9 p.m. Friday, March 2, at the new Vurb headquarters in The Arts Factory, 103 E. Charleston Blvd., Suite 101.

Where to see Ryan locally: His new "M31" appears right when you walk into Spago at the Forum Shops at Caesars (part of their recent redesign), and there's an additional piece upstairs, "8 Gambier Terrace." And if you happen to be shopping for a Lexus, a piece from Ryan's very first Mark Moore Gallery show, "NV 302 PHS," hangs at the dealership on West Sahara.

Other upcoming shows: *Las Vegas Diaspora*, an exhibit of accomplished Las Vegas artists curated by Dave Hickey, at the Las Vegas Art Museum (Sept. 20-Dec. 31), Galerie Jean-Luc & Takako Richard in Paris (Dec. 1, 2007-Jan. 16, 2008).

Recent shows of note: PULSE New York art fair in February with Mark Moore Gallery. Last spring, Ryan sold all four pieces at a Parisian showing called *Pop Abstraction in Las Vegas*, which also featured Las Vegas artists Tim Bavington and Yek. He also had a big show last year in London, and has had several showings at LA's Mark Moore Gallery, which represents him (markmooregallery.com).