

Burke, Mack. "Outside the Lines: Mainsite's Latest Exhibit Presents Big Abstract Ideas in Small Forms," *The Norman Transcript*, February 12, 2015.



Abstract art has gotten high praise and grumbling criticism since its inception. Some people get it, and some people don't. Mainsite Contemporary Art's newest show, "Abstract Abstract," hopes to challenge the notion that abstract art is for a select few, while celebrating big creativity on the smaller scale.

"I think most people are able to listen to instrumental music, a classical symphony or a jazz or bluegrass standard, for instance, and connect with the piece on an emotional level without necessarily understanding what the song is about. Instrumental music doesn't announce its meaning, as opposed to the way lyrics in a love song do ...; it can be ambiguous or difficult to understand and this can be off-putting at times," "Abstract Abstract" artist Christopher Kuhn said.

"I would encourage those with an aversion to abstraction to give the show a shot, and hopefully they respond to some of the works and discover that abstract art is capable of speaking to them.

The show focuses on a collection of small-scale abstract works, curated by Tim Stark, that includes 40 pieces by 11 artists from across the country: Josh Aster, Elise Dietrich, David Kelley, Chris Kuhn, Jacob Melchi, Ellen Moershel, Lester Monzon, Stark, Brad Stevens, Greta Svalberg and Sungwon Yun.

Rounding up artists from across the country for the show has been a two-year endeavor for show curator Tim Stark, who met many of them during personal studio visits.

"Curating a show like this is an interesting experience. Over the past few years, I have had the chance to do studio visits with many of the artists in this show," Stark said. "Meeting up with the artists in their studio and talking about their work gives you an in-depth view into their process and a chance to discuss their work directly.

"During these visits I had seen a lot of great little abstract paintings and I guess that is where the idea started. So once I came up with the show's concept, little abstract paintings, most of the artists were already selected. The truth is that I didn't really build the show and fill it with artists; I let it grow organically over the past few years. Sometimes exhibitions happen like that," Stark said.

As for why he chose Norman? He said it's not so surprising to have art converge on galleries like Mainsite.

"Norman was never really an issue," he said. "I talked to each artist and told them I wanted their work for a show in OK and they were in. Norman and Oklahoma aren't that out of the way these days."

According to Stark, the exhibit serves to spotlight the breadth and depth of small-scale abstraction in contemporary painting, challenging artists to work quickly and decisively while giving a focus on craft and detail rarely seen in extra large abstraction.

"Abstraction is often thought of as the movement that changed modernism through visually and physically breaking down the constructs of classical and early modernist art. It also responded to the rapidly developing world and changed the way in which people viewed and understood art and their surroundings," Stark said in his curator's statement. "As a result, abstraction began to grow in popularity and size.

"Abstract paintings, not bound by the constraints typical of representational artwork, were only limited by the relative limitations of the paint and the surface being used. The trend of unbound abstraction, a perfect example of the modernist mantra 'art for art's sake,' expanded throughout the duration of the modernist era and resulted in an almost fetishistic obsession with extra-large-scale works."

After seeing the pendulum swing so far in favor of giant, wall-spanning canvases, Stark said he found a big inspiration in the little things.

“I was inspired to put this show together by all of the really great small-scale work that I have seen during studio visits over the past few years. I love small-scale abstraction and believe that because of its size and tendency to be a little more raw and rough that it offers a much more personal connection when viewed,” Stark said. “I contacted Mainsite with the idea. I really loved working with Erinn Gavaghan and Joshua Boydston on StART Norman and believe in the work that the NAC is doing. That, along with the fact that Mainsite is a beautiful gallery, made me want to propose to do the show there.”

Art is subjective, but keeping an open mind can broaden appreciation. The works are small, but the impact isn't supposed to be. It doesn't have to be big to make an impression. For people who are still skeptical that perhaps their cat could be an abstract artist, Stark hopes they'll consider a different perspective.

“I feel like this is a hold-over from abstract expressionism — think Pollock, and minimalism, think black square on a white canvas. That work all came out of modernism and had a lot of baggage. This is not your grandpa's or your dad's abstract artwork. Contemporary abstraction (is a) wholly different beast,” Stark said. “To those people that don't really think that abstract painting is their thing, I would say that may be the case. ...

“But, I firmly believe that good art work is good art work and that a good painting is a good painting, irrespective of its type or subject matter. Abstraction can be challenging, sometimes even discomfoting, but it can also be beautiful and ceaselessly endearing.

“In general, I am not a big fan for the term ‘art appreciation.’ Art is something to be experienced and enjoyed. If you are working hard at appreciating it, you are most likely missing the joy.

“I say stand back, lean in, have a glass of wine, have a beer, have a seat and have a nice, long look. Give a painting some time and it will most likely give something back. A least the good ones will.”