



PRESS RELEASE

Alive With Possibilities

Abstract Geometric Paintings by Holly Van Hart at SLAC Building 52

SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory is proud to announce an exhibit of paintings by the acclaimed Peninsula artist, Holly Van Hart. *Alive with Possibilities*, features eleven geometric abstractions in oil on canvas—with additional elements mixed into the pigment—that communicate the artist’s optimism about the creative life—in art, but also in other areas. Silicon Valley and the Bay Area are known for technological ingenuity, of course, and Van Hart, who became a painter after having worked for a long time in tech, embraces a wider definition that includes even traditional media.

Van Hart’s materials and methods, however, are by no means confined to oil paint. She also employs acrylic paint, and, mixed in, and lending texture (and a regionally appropriate conceptual context), silica wafers and silica sand. (Art aficionados may remember that the Cubists of a century ago, Picasso and Georges Braque, added sand to their paintings in order to emphasize the tactility and materiality of these aesthetic objects that had jettisoned traditional illusionism.) Van Hart in the past explored a personal symbolism of birds’ nests, eggs, interwoven ribbons, and circles, all painted realistically, although the ensembles and implicit narratives were invented. In a 2014 article on that work, I wrote:

...[The paintings] are ... both representational and abstract; and they express—well, let Georgia O’Keefe say it, succinctly: “I found that I couldn’t say any other way — things I had no words for.” Van Hart’s paintings, Romantic/expressionist depictions of birds’ nests enclosing eggs, are clearly symbolic, and thus out of step with ... contemporary fashion...

Van Hart’s [exploration of metamorphosis and growth] derives in part from her long, successful career in industrial engineering and operations research in Silicon Valley, a locus of “creativity and unrelenting optimism[, and] ... a place where anything is possible.” ... These works about potential and metamorphosis, then, are clearly autobiographical, but they’re also universal (as the deepest, most personal work often is, paradoxically)... Van Hart writes, “Each painting is a journey, requiring many layers of oil paint, and much inspection and introspection over a period of months.” [The Stanford painter] Nathan Oliveira ... reminisced about studying in 1950 with one of his idols, the German expressionist Max Beckmann. The older painter’s English was rudimentary, so he advised the young Californian through his English-speaking wife: a painting life, he warned, probably with perverse pride, was “Sweat, much sweat.”

In this series, the artist employs simplified, geometric forms that clearly derive from the organic, natural motifs in the earlier realistic works. They also share the sense of discovery that inspired modernist artists, who saw in modern technology’s machine forms —Léger famously admired the polished steel cylinders of cannon barrels—the potential for a new humanity informed by scientific rationalism. They explored a vocabulary of elemental forms that would be transcultural and universally comprehensible — a visual Esperanto based on Cézanne’s famous cubes, cylinders and spheres. But while Van Hart shares simplified forms with Léger, Mondrian and others, her colorful exuberance suggests growth and metamorphosis rather than straitlaced, sober common sense. The dynamic, dancing shapes and carefully harmonized palettes in “Flourishing,” “Great Expectations,” “Intertwined” and “Life’s Twists” suggest contemporary versions of the vibrant, vital flower paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. Van Hart: “The world [including Silicon Valley] ... is alive with possibilities.”

SLAC’s Building 52 is not open to the public except during receptions by reservation. For more information, please contact Curator DeWitt Cheng at 415-412-8499 and acdcmr@earthlink.net. Artopticon.us is the successor program to Stanford Art Spaces; it will also serve, when it goes online in March 2017, as a blog and art magazine focusing on the Bay Area.