

art ltd.

Critic's Picks: Chicago

by claudine ise

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Phase 2011

Steve Hough

Enamel on hand-carved Plexiglas

36" x 60"

Photo: courtesy Zg Gallery, Chicago

Carnival

2006

Kelli Connell

Digital Lambda print

30" x 40"

Photo: courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery

In many ways, the ebb and flow of art world activity parallels that of the traditional school year.

moniquemeloche

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Summers are the off-season, when many galleries cut their hours or hang up "gone fishing" signs for a few weeks of R&R. In September and October, everything ramps up again. In Chicago, art openings and gallery crawls enjoy especially high attendance around this time, because the cooler temperatures make for ideal walking weather.

Several upcoming solo shows stand out as among the most anticipated of the Windy City's fall season. The work of **Dan Gunn** is getting maximal exposure this fall, with solo exhibitions at moniquemeloche gallery as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago's "UBS 12 x 12" series (which focuses on emerging Chicago artists) on view in September. Whether his works are free-standing or wall-hung, Gunn considers them all to be paintings. This assertion may be hard for viewers to process, particularly when confronted with three-dimensional objects, like *Heraldic Marker*(2011) or *Multistable Picture Fable* (2010), whose forms have more in common with a coat rack and a Chinese folding screen, respectively, than they do a traditional painting on canvas or board. Or do they? Despite their unusual appearance, Gunn's painted constructions meet all the standard requirements we ask of "good painting." For example, he is astonishingly adept at bringing materials as disparate as wood, satin ribbon, glitter, feathers, string and pretty much anything else you can imagine together in harmonious balance. Sometimes, Gunn even "paints" with what is already there, as in *Trickster Mechanism No. 2* (2011), where a single peacock feather is juxtaposed with a painted wood panel, the feather's royal blue "eye" echoing the whorls ingrained in the wood.

Like Gunn, **Steve Hough** makes paintings that playfully take advantage of our innate attraction to surface beauty. On view at Zg Gallery in September, Hough's hyper-realistic paintings of rippled liquid surfaces are made by applying urethane auto paint to a carved and shaped piece of Plexiglas. Some works are deep blue or sea green, others murky grey or violet, their iridescent surfaces shifting and shimmering as viewers move around them. Hough's highly polished, prismatic paintings recall LA's "Finish Fetish" art of the 1960s, whose makers, like Hough, were similarly concerned with issues of color, form, and perception. Yet the fact that Hough's content is representational adds an additional layer of complexity to his works, which may ultimately have more in common with virtual reality technologies than they do with Finish Fetish or Light and Space art. Indeed, so perfectly do Hough's surfaces simulate tranquil pools of water, it's hard not to consider them in terms of the uncanny, and as more than a little ironic in nature.

Whereas Hough's surfaces attempt to simulate the real, **Angel Otero's** oil paintings (showing at Kavi Gupta Gallery in September) are overtly artificial. Otero brushes oil paint onto glass, allows the paint to dry for several weeks and then scrapes off the hardened substance (which the artist calls "oil skins"), reapplying it to his canvases in thick clumps or wrinkly sheets of paint. The resulting compositions often look like they're about to slide right off the canvas. Otero's early representational paintings were paeans to decorative excess, as in his depictions of gilded horse statues and gold-leaf vases filled with wispy, paint-skin flowers. More recently, the Puerto Rican artist has focused on abstract compositions that comment on the history of post-war painting. A piece from 2011 contains a text that reads, "Flesh Is the Reason Oil Paint Was Invented"--a phrase cribbed from Willem de Kooning's famous statement and lettered with Otero's "signature" scraped oil skins. De Kooning was championing oil paint's ability to successfully replicate subtle human flesh-tones, but Otero takes the notion one step further by likening his "oil paint skins" to flesh itself--his tongue planted firmly in cheek.

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Kelli Connell's enigmatic color photographs are similarly grounded in artifice. Many of the images from Connell's *Double Life* series (showing at Catherine Edelman Gallery in September) appear to depict two female companions in various states of intimacy: they play pool, talk, make out in the car. Closer scrutiny throws any interpretation in doubt, however, for the two women look eerily alike. Are they twins? Two different aspects of the same individual? Or lovers who have come to resemble one another over the years? Connell suggests all these interpretations and more by using one person--herself, digitally "doubled" via computer scanning processes--as the model for both women, one of whom is styled in a slightly more "butch" manner than her "femme" counterpart. Identity is a complex construction, Connell's photographs suggest, where notions of the self are formed in relation to another--and this "other" is just as likely to be an imaginary construct as not. In this way, Connell's photographs are mirror-like: in them, we see our own assumptions about who these women are and what their relationship means, and in these interpretations we find reflections of ourselves.

Ann Toebbe's small-scale domestic interiors make no attempt to look real, yet the comfortably cluttered environments her gouache paintings and cut-paper collages portray are familiar to many of us. Toebbe's compositions are crafted with painstaking precision and attention to detail, their disorienting viewpoints shifting between top-down and frontal perspectives, often within the same composition. It may take several seconds to recognize a solid black rectangle as a wide-screen TV set, or a series of flat squares as sofa cushions. Viewers are estranged from the familiar just long enough to take a second (and even a third) look, and in so doing, the mundane becomes a marvelous discovery. The more one looks at Toebbe's paintings, the more one sees: each composition contains dozens of smaller ones sandwiched inside. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in October, Toebbe's works will focus specifically on the domestic space of the kitchen, representing in miniature the complex meanings and associations this traditional hub of family life has had for women of different generations and backgrounds.

Also in October, the **Chicago Urban Art Society** (a relatively new Chicago space focusing on the city's vibrant street art scene) will present the work of Chris Silva, a well-known street artist who works in Chicago and Puerto Rico. Silva has created several public commissions, including *Amor*(2004) a mosaic mural that can be found in the Chicago Transit Authority's California Station. *This One Will Hold You In Her Arms, These In Their Mouths* (2009) is a site-specific installation created on the beach in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico by Silva and Lauren Feece, his wife and occasional collaborator. Building on the remains of a broken-down shack, Feece and Silva installed plywood paintings with empty plastic bottles, driftwood and other found refuse to recycle a debris-strewn area into an enticing hidden oasis. Silva's street installations offer similarly bewitching transformations of neglected or forgotten environments. Silva has said that working with others is fundamental to his identity as an artist. "I am more interested in seeing what 'we' can do than showing what 'I' can do," he states on his website, expressing a proclivity towards collaboration shared by many other Chicago street artists.

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