

Linda Besemer

Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Formalist painters have to walk a very fine line between vacuous decoration and obtuse theories of abstraction. One wrong step and the work becomes either silly or impenetrable. Of all the abstract artists working in Los Angeles today, no-one pulls that feat off with greater panache than

current works are solid skins of acrylic paint up to two metres long by one metre wide and a centimetre thick. She hangs them in such a way that they drape and sag under their own weight. A series of smaller pieces she call 'Slabs', each about the size of a sheet of notebook paper, hang like more conventional pictures, but only because the body of paint, at about 25 cm, is all the more unconventionally thick. Their rubbery quality is particularly seductive,

hands. Of course, having that impulse forbidden only makes it all the more delicious.

Viewed from the front, each of Besemer's 'Slabs' is a monochrome, arguably the ultimate form of illusionism in painting: pure opticality, pure chromatic energy. Seen from the side, however, each piece reveals alternating strata of colour which seem to intentionally play up the works' sculptural nature. Whereas some might see in

but, to a certain degree, making them theatrical as well.

The strata of the 'Slab' paintings also read as a band of stripes – yet another essentialist painting motif. She takes up this theme more thoroughly in her larger works. Aptly referred to as 'Folds', Besemer showcases the physical nature of these acrylic hides by presenting them draped over rods mounted to the wall, the way one would hang a piece of cloth. One suspects that the allusion to fabric is more than incidental. The references range playfully from the feminine craft associations of weaving that her plaids and stripes reinforce, to the sumptuous drapery portrayed in classical painting. Each work, again, resounds with the formal values of reductivist painting, while at the same time deflating those pretensions by hanging around like flashy beach towels.

It's a sign of the work's accomplishment that the paintings can assume this vernacular twist without being trivialised. In fact, Besemer's 'Fold' paintings easily step up to the plate as rigorous meditations on the nature of painting and illusion. Because the stripes are embedded into the body of the painting rather than applied to a substrate, it's as though the image has no surface, only depth. At the same time, there are two distinct sides, both of which are revealed because of how the pieces are draped. Besemer emphasises their interaction like the recto and verso of a manuscript page. A stripe from one side continues over and aligns itself perfectly with the same stripe on the other, creating spatial contiguity, while opposing colour schemes simultaneously enforce spatial distinction.

What Besemer has created is the aesthetic equivalent of a Klein bottle or a Mobius strip. Like such mind-bending conundra, one can either study her paintings as exhibits in a highly specialised discussion, or just as easily – and perhaps no less fruitfully – enjoy them for the mischievous way they complicate things, like puzzles that are fascinating for being irresolvable.

Carmine Iannaccone



Linda Besemer
Fold #27
(detail)
1999
Acrylic paint over
aluminium rod
79 x 158 cm

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Linda Besemer. Her allusions to critical theory are intelligent without being cerebral, while the surprising and humorous physicality of her work is as appealing to the eye as it is to the mind.

Besemer produces abstract paintings without any kind of support for the paint. The largest of her

resembling the plastics used to shape the ergonomic grips of appliances. This association with touch is one of the ways Besemer makes her Formalism sensual. Academic arguments about the 'object quality' of painting get turned into a sneaky impulse to reach up and test the weight of one of these chunks of colour with your own

that conflation a crisis of will on the part of the painter, it's precisely Besemer's ability to create paradox that keeps the formal issues alive. She isn't advancing any position about the nature of painting so much as enjoying the argument – which of course means not only showing the debate's many sides,