

Painters return to Walker in a new show

By MARY ABBE
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Goodbye, angst. Hello, sunshine. Serenity reigns in the work of 15 youngish artists from the United States and Europe featured in "Painter Painter," Walker Art Center's new showcase of abstract painting on view through Aug. 11.

And isn't it about time? Twelve years have passed since the Walker last summoned painters to its precincts for a group show in "Painting at the Edge of the World," an ambitious international survey. So much has happened since, much of it not good (war, torture, economic collapse). This show doesn't attempt to settle any of that or even nod to the world's perennial messes. It just moves on and, for the moment, that's enough.

Mostly in their mid- to late 30s, the artists live primarily in New York or Los Angeles, where the painting scenes are especially lively now, said exhibition artist Matt Connors, who divides his time between those cities. Three are Europeans (London, Berlin) and three from the Midwest (Minneapolis, Chicago and Kent, Ohio). Co-organized by Walker curators Bartholomew Ryan and Eric Crosby, the show is more a snapshot of a scene than a draft for the next chapter in art history.

A disarming do-it-yourself sensibility lends the show a certain innocence. Much of the art looks improvised and unfinished. Pretty, limpid colors recur — orchid, lemon, aqua, dark forest green. Rough textures, ragged edges and jury-rigged stretchers prove things are handmade. The scent of fresh oil paint even oozes from a huge canvas that Dominik Sittig of Berlin slathered with so many thick layers of pigment that it may never totally dry.

All the tropes of abstraction are on view — swirling gestures, geometric shapes, raw canvas, stained veils of paint, splats and spatters, jittery lines, layering, collage, even some built-out sculptural forms. Each artist tosses an idiosyncratic, personal statement into a free-form chat about abstraction. Thus Scott Olson puts up a little notebook-sized patch of spattered colors set off by a wide, somewhat rustic black band that visually intensifies his colorful centerpiece. Nearby, three canvases by Sarah Crouner cleverly deploy assorted colors (red, yellow, ivory, lime, black), interlocking shapes (triangles, diamonds) and surfaces (painted, bare).

Minneapolis' own Jay Heikes pushes painting into sculpture by hanging a bunch of curious whatnots (bent-wire towel rack, grooved dowel, lavender fabric) on a wall as if they were tools. Londoner Katy Moran offers a 1950s-style, flea-market collage of cutup cards, shop signs and painted doodles (note the umbrellas and nutty glasses).

Matt Connors seems to be simultaneously channeling Josef Albers' color theories and Helen Frankenthaler's techniques in a huge canvas on which stains of blue and red blend into brooding maroon. Even better, he leans two luminous canvases in orchid and pale gold against a wall, where their brilliant edges — in magenta, yellow and Chinese red — glow like spectral halos.

The smartest experiments are from Alex Olson of Los Angeles, who cleverly divorces painterly gestures (streaks, swirls) from color. This is the show's most radical concept and it's fascinating, albeit maddeningly subtle. In her "Proposal 10," patches of blue, yellow, orchid and other hues float atop a sea of swirling black marks. In "Proposal 9" she has scraped eight lines of brush strokes into the sleek surface of an elegant gray canvas. Study the strokes and you'll see that what appears to be a monochrome gray ground is actually composed of myriad hues from bluish to pale peach. Or has she simply tricked your eyes? If so, how?

The surface of Zak Prekop's "Untitled Transparency" is also magical, an apparent pink mist in which hover graceful celadon pinstripes and ivory-yellow flags. Turns out that he paints, laboriously, only on the back of the canvas and that the delicate designs are microscopic effusions of pigment that have sifted through its fibers.

Elsewhere, Dianna Molzan experiments with shaped and draped canvases, Lesley Vance gracefully carves paint with a squeegee, Fergus Feehily noodles with awkward lines, and Charles Mayton uses spattered rags, bare canvas and a lithograph of stains in what could pass for a meditation on decay.

Continuing the drive to pull painting into three dimensions, Rosy Keyser concocted a wall piece from construction debris; Molly Zuckerman-Hartung created an installation including chairs and a pair of canvases (round, rectangular) linked by wide streamers of paint-spattered canvas, and Joseph Montgomery slathered wax, colored pigment and even textured ceiling material over wall reliefs sculpted from wood, cardboard and other building materials.

Some of these concoctions seem awkwardly labored and unrewarding, while others successfully riffle through the work of mid-20th-century masters in search of inspiration. The best inject fresh ideas into a long dormant field. What will come of it isn't yet obvious, but that ideas are stirring again is cause for optimism.