



THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

The Culture

Currently Hanging

Painters Shape Up for Summer

For once! An off-season group show that actually makes sense

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THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE JULY 29, 2007, EDITION OF *THE NEW YORK OBSERVER*.



Courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

That's her in the corner: Beth Reisman's *Losing My Religion*, 2006.

Group exhibitions during the dog days of summer aren't inherently tired, but they do tend to straggle along, droopy-eared and sluggish, after the gallery season's end. The interest and enthusiasm of art mavens, whether aesthetes or investors, drop precipitously as the temperature rises. After a glut of big shows, big names and big money, less-taxing pleasures are sought. Museums play to the season—witness the Whitney's inconsequential *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*. Galleries dust off their inventory for display. Who's going to shlep through Chelsea in this kind of weather?

In a few ways, *Taking Shape*, an exhibition of 11 artists at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., meets typical summer group show expectations. Some gallery regulars—in this case, Stephen Westfall, Peter Soriano and Harriet Korman—are roped in. Other artists get wall space for whatever reason—possible representation, perhaps, or a goodwill gesture to a friend. An encompassing theme is draped over the proceedings; here it's "the identity of a specific form, something seen in outline, an assumed appearance, an organized form of expression, an orderly arrangement, condition or state of repair." Having established this suitably vague and promiscuously inclusive rationale, the gallery has something to show in the off-season.

Except that *Taking Shape* is a real exhibition; it's anything but arbitrary. "Shape" isn't an idle conceit—it's meant literally. Each artist explores concrete forms that state their presence unequivocally, taking different paths to wrest individuality from this shared pictorial concern. If the organizing principle isn't clearly articulated in the press

release, it's played out on the gallery walls, where it counts. There we are confronted with bold, clean colors and flat, frontal spaces. The featured painters (and the lone sculptor) make art that is crisp and punchy.

The works are abstract—though, as usual, “abstract” is an equivocal proposition. Stephen Mueller's paintings (unfairly and too hastily dismissed by this critic several years back) are the least representational. His luxuriantly colored and patterned emblems, not-so-distant cousins of mandalas, float and bob within atmospheric spaces. This hushed and endless cosmos is best seen in large formats: *Protogonos* (2007), with its unidentifiable extraterrestrial form and ineffably tranquil mood, exposes a quartet of “domestic-scale” pictures as professional trivialities. Mystery is preferable to merchandise. Ample surface area isn't everything to Mr. Mueller's art, but it makes a big difference.

Many of the artists derive inspiration from high modernist painting and, however obliquely, observed phenomenon. Andrew Spence exploits purity of form for impure ends: His *Squid* (2005) winnows its subject into a heraldic sign; a dry humor is embedded in its worked surfaces. Polly Apfelbaum's monumental woodblock monoprint, *Rainbow Park 3* (2006), is true to its title—a geometric riff on impressionism, sort of. Ms. Korman's flexing biomorph, with its pinched and sloping forms, is likable enough, but doesn't beguile like the complex structures seen in her last solo exhibition.

Mr. Westfall's *Winslow* (2005), an ordered array of inverted triangles, casually associates the Zen-inspired geometry of the California painter John McLaughlin with the flapping multicolored banners flown at a store's grand opening. Jenifer Kobylarz's looping, pointed forms and Shirley Jaffe's hodgepodes of eccentric shapes look, respectively, to nature and the city. Their joyous and sharp pictures sport fresh rhythms and hues.

Not everything is equally infectious. Daniel Carello's “dials”—they are what they advertise—are as concise as Mr. Spence's images, but they lack the latter's indispensably tactile surfaces. Mr. Soriano is up to something elusive, and his sculpture suffers for it; his *Tito* (1993-94), a vertical wall piece featuring a bright yellow orifice, suggests a space alien's bathroom fixture. Billy Copley's *Mugwump* (2007) is the odd painting out: With its scrabbled surfaces and ungainly cartoons, it crashes the party with an unappealing thump.

Beth Reisman, on the other hand, is a find. Her *Losing My Religion* (2006) and *Isle* (2007) evince an artist still in formation—and well worth watching. In the paintings, masses of small, topographical shapes coalesce into lumpy, anonymous personages. Drifting upon shadows or, perhaps, flying carpets, they navigate across dense, uninflected fields of color—weird and intense variations on blue and pink. Surrealistic without yielding to trite sentiment, Ms. Reisman channels Clyfford Still's jagged forms, as well as a skewed Pop sensibility: The dry absurdism of *Yellow Submarine* is evident. Her oddball art will get better the odder it (or she) gets, and at this juncture, there's no reason to worry that it won't.

Taking Shape comes at an opportune time. The exhibition provides an inadvertent—or at least partial—response to *What is Painting?*, MoMA's muddled attempt to define the art form and explore its place in contemporary culture. There are no big statements at Lennon, Weinberg, thank the Lord, only artists working within the constraints of their medium and finding within them great flexibility of purpose and potential. Refusing to throw in the towel, they dig deep, with quiet determination. Making art is a challenging but intrinsically optimistic pursuit—a truth *Taking Shape* emphasizes unassumingly but eloquently.

Taking Shape is at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., 514 West 25th Street, until Sept. 15.