

Thomas Huber at Van Brunt Gallery in Beacon

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Informed art-goers won't want to miss Thomas Huber's show at the Van Brunt Gallery in Beacon. Who, after all, would want to pass up a chance to experience work that testifies to an emergent cultural moment? It's not, after all, an easy time - either on the planet or in the art world. But as the agendas of postmodernism slip further and further into the background, some qualified form of optimism is literally taking shape in visual arts. We don't have any choice, really, except to go forward. And although the data isn't all in yet, it's clear that Thomas Huber is among the artists riding the new wave.

Huber's show features small-to-medium format mixed-media paintings. The picture planes of the major pieces are dense, but their warm, collaged surfaces are openly seductive. Huber wants texture, the matt and the rough, so that the physicality of the work moves more than the eye. Unschooled viewers might glance at the canvas, register an emotion, and move on. Pity. Huber's works open slowly, layer by layer-moving from abstract to representational, expressionistic to voyeuristic, beautiful to weird.

One of the most gripping pieces in the show, a medium-format diptych entitled "Orchard," appears almost decorative at first glance. Painted in creams and whites with some touches of Granny Smith, the surface layer is sensuous, inviting. Elliptical forms seem to loll on a floating plane, perhaps enacting a kind of lazy cell division. New worlds are forming-or morphing-in these paintings. And they are curious worlds, indeed. A lady's purse dangles from a missing arm. Some sort of urn pours liquid underneath a bubble. Is that a Petri dish inside the cloud? Is it a Petri dish? Is it a cloud? And what about all those pots and pans?

Huber is fascinated with receptacles of all kinds-they lodge in the various layers of his palimpsests, ready to catch and hold attention as liquids swirl over, under, around and through the image. These ready receptacles favor sexual interpretation-the cosmic soup that gave rise to life on our planet as well as to our more intimate and habitual transfer of liquids. The receptacle metaphor extends even to the writing, since the words on Huber's canvas are referential vehicles of content. In "Orchard," a little scribble of text is talking about an orchard. The titles of Huber's paintings slyly recline within layers of transparency, a "Where's Waldo" of discovery.

To achieve suggestive viscosity, Huber uses various inks and oils, plaster and paints, waxes and varnishes, drawings and transfers, so that the layers flow into one another, and in and out of images. The figuration always seems on the verge of a potential announcement-of recognizable environments, of life itself. With all this liquidity of image and material, and commitment to life sciences and ecology, it's not surprising that Huber's work shuns slick and mechanistic, highly controlled surfaces in favor of something a little more gestural and messy. Like many of the works in the current 2008 Whitney Biennial, Huber's exhibition attests to a nascent creative moment that requires just that.