Review: James B. Thompson’s ‘painting’ as a verb at Hallie Ford Museum in Salem

By Bob Hicks, Special To The Oregonian
Monday May 04, 2009, 7:14 AM

As painters immersed in the 20th century’s abstract revolution stopped painting things that looked like things, several interesting things happened.

First, art—of this type of art—relinquished its sense of place. Even if the artist was thinking about a sense of place or an event on a towel; there was no mountain or carose or pillow to be seen. Impressionsists flubbed up the landscape. Cubists did it and reassembled it in funny ways. Abstract artists packed it in a steer train and sent it off on a one-way voyage to Yesterday land.

Second, space became intellectual, not actual. Painting had always been an illusory act—how can we feel the eye into seeing what we want it to see?—but now the illusion was that spatial relationship as we ordinarily think of there didn’t exist. Artists such as Mondrian and Klee were consumed with the idea of how space works—they could be downright mathematical about it—but they produced a geometry, not a landscape, and it was a geometry of the mind. (As a side benefit abstraction also strengthened realistic painting, because for the first time serious painters had to ask themselves why they were painting realistically, and then either come up with a good answer or start looking for one.)

Third, painting became accidental. Yes, Jackson Pollock had ideas in how, and no, not even one of his drip paintings showed the way he wanted it to. But the chance of the throw became a central aspect of the process. It was the C-lining of the act.

Except as abstraction became less a revolutionary act and more a way of approaching art— in other words, as it matured it also opened up. It could be about all sorts of things, including landscape or whatever else was in the artist’s mind, whether anyone looking at the finished product realized it or not. And that’s an interesting concept: if viewers don’t know there’s a level of thought below the surface of the paint, how can they tell they’re seeing anything like that?

The paintings and prints of James B. Thompson’s exhibition that continues through May 17 at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, miss precisely that issue. They’re ravishing things, especially the paintings—the art of such people that like to call eye easily, although that’s a curiously dis activate way to think about art: What’s wrong with pleasing the eye, especially if you’re also doing other things at the same time? And Thompson’s art does a lot of other things, even if you’re only thinking about its surface. It’s a considered and sophisticated grappling with matters of space, color and mark-making—the difference, you might almost say, between a man and a mark.

Underneath those lovely surfaces, mewing is very much on Thompson’s mind. A native Chicagoan, Thompson has been an art faculty at Willamette University in Salem since 1966, and he’s come to think of himself very much as a Westerner. What he sees, he tells in his artist statement for this show, is the transformation and disappearance of the region’s landscape: “as planned developments, agribusiness and even golf resorts replace small town life, rural communities, family farms and forests.”

The tradition of landscape painting doesn’t deal adequately with the disappearance of land, he believes, instead, it tends to depict idealized, uninhabited evocations of what remains, so that we see a romanticized pastoral dream instead of the radically altered reality. A long tradition in photography has witnessed and recorded the sometimes brutal reshaping of the land, and representational photographers such as Michael Bishop have tackled the issue of land use and above-head.

But Thompson seems to want something at once deeper and more subtle—the philosophical undercurrent that transforms the art of artmaking into a reflection of the way we change the land. “The method of rendering abstract paintings and prints,” he writes, “is a celebration of the very act of change since this creative process involves the kind of continuous mark-making that generates new acts of perception on the surface of each piece.”

In other words, you make marks on the canvas or the wood, and each mark is a risk. After all, the landscape of small towns and family farms that Thompson himself painted was itself a reshaping of an earlier landscape far less decided by human intervention; one that might itself have been lamented if it faded before the as and glass. So you think not each mark is varying your mark-making according to some sort of loose plan, and you also to some extent know before you do it that you can’t make the same canvas over, in the Pollock sense, is part of it. But instead of a big burst—a strip-miming of the image—the is reconsidered imagination, like good chamber jazz, each change refining what the next change will be.

How do Thompson’s paintings and prints emerge from this philosophical improvisation? Well, they’re gorgeous— and gorgeous in a way that invites repeated looking, because the more you look, the more you see. That’s a bit like looking, really looking, at a landscape.

The show’s 14 paintings, which range from about 2 feet square to 3 feet by 5 feet, are acrylic on canvas, and they’re tightly layered, with a thick surface that makes them look almost like brightly fired ceramic tiles. Yet they’re also subtle, mortared like leather, with a suggestion of rinses and hollows, or of something granular, like earth. Their color is immediate, deep, vibrant, seductive—colors that slice the canvas open, or fly or ly down the leaves, rivers, roads, rivers, habitats.

The two dozen small intaglio prints are less deeply mysterious to color but more significantly and lavishly marked, and at times they seem almost biological, in a somewhat way. They increase the illusion of some sort of erotic map-making.

Thompson suggests his underlying concerns through his titles: “Prairie,” “Wetland,” “Arable,” “Range,” “River” and “Field.” Yet the question remains: Does the viewer get any of these connections from looking at the art? You can easily view these prints and paintings as they would be beautifully executed words that are simply about themselves. They’re abstract—non-representational. And their beauty raises another question: Are they, then, any less romanticized by the state of the land than the traditional landscapes Thompson finds so misleading?

Perhaps an answer lies in Thompson’s sense of movement, of making marks that lead to other marks in a dance of continuing small decisions. It’s a way of thinking about how we interact with the rest of the world, and it applies to interactions far beyond canvas paper. It’s ‘painting’ as a verb, not as a noun. And it’s how we paint—how we make marks—that makes the difference.