

by Ken Greenleaf: Portland Phoenix. 12.12.2012.

The hardest thing about starting an art career is finding your own voice. Strategies differ but often come down to navigating the fine distinction between novelty and originality. Thoughts like this come to mind at the interesting and enjoyable show "Variable Presence" at Aucocisco, featuring the paintings of Shirah Neumann and Jonathan Blatchford. Both artists are young and just getting started in their showing careers.

The good news about today's art world is that for most part the stylistic and thematic imperatives that once dominated the atmosphere have largely evaporated, at least outside academic circles. Since there is no mainstream, what once might have seemed to be tributaries now can be worthy locations to stake a claim. Of course they always were, but you used to take heat for it.

At first glance Shirah Neumann's paintings seem wholly abstract, with internal structure that provides room for dominant shapes, loose patterns, and areas of sophisticated color relationships with freely rendered borders. "Diamond Sky (Night Fire)," for example, has a jagged blue mass that rises from the bottom to form three points just above the middle, suggesting three overlapped triangles, or perhaps pyramids. They are surmounted by a red diamond shape with a blue spotted center that occupies a larger rectangular field of little yellow shapes, all on a darker and less concrete background.

A horizontal color change about midway up the painting gives it a sense of horizon, and turns it from a pure abstraction to something a little mystical, as if this were an impression of the effects of a ritual. And indeed, one of the other paintings refers to Johannes Itten, the Swiss artist whose book on color, written in the 1920s, remains one of the basic texts on the matter. Itten was a member of a fire cult based on Zoroastrianism.

It would be a mistake, I think, to ascribe too much of Neumann's purposes to a directly spiritual intention, but it seems clear with this painting and others like "Temple of the Sun" that she is working towards a numinous quality in all of them. The combined sense of pure abstraction and pictorial reference has, by now, a long history, and has plenty of room left in it.

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Jonathan Blatchford is after something a little different. His seven paintings in this show all depict an orchard in seasons where there are no leaves, with the exception of one whose leaves are just starting. There is no specific intention to abstraction in this group; they are landscapes, pure and simple. There is, though, a directed focus on their artifice that has been part of the modernist idea for decades.

For example, "Orchard #14" has the classic landscape areas of illusionary space — a foreground with trees in it, a middle ground with a grassy field, and a background with a hill and horizon. The sky goes from lighter toward the horizon and darker toward the

overhead, and is dotted with puffy clouds. All standard.

Blatchford does two things that wrench the illusion back to the abstract idea of "painting." One is that edges of the picture are blank — he brings the paint to within an inch or so of its border and leaves it there. The unpainted area near the edge reveals both the support and the underpainting.

The other is the tree color, which is the core issue. Blatchford cranks the color saturation of out of all relation to a realistic depiction. The lightest twigs are red, blue, or pink marks; the trunk is deep blue on the shadowed side and orange and, on the upper end, bright yellow on the lit side. These colors are outside all chromatic proportion to the range of the rest of the painting. To emphasize their artificiality, there's another tree a short distance behind this one that is mostly dark with a touch of white highlights. He is being clear about he wants to say, and not at all shy about saying it.

*"VARIABLE PRESENCE" | works by Jonathan Blatchford and Shirah Neumann |
through December 22 | at Aucocisco Galleries, 89 Exchange St, Portland |
207.775.2222*