



Kent Williams, *Lemon*, 2006, oil on canvas, 22" x 28", at Merry Karnowsky Gallery, Los Angeles.

woman in various states of undress on a shabby couch builds a staggered pyramid up through the center of the image to the room's back wall, where a painting of a standing female nude hangs, propelling the motion out the top of the frame. The encroaching shadows

from the top left also pour from an overturned pot at the bottom right.

Williams also uses color to retain cohesion in his visual tapestries. *Lemon* is a provocative image of a topless woman with her back arched in a pose more predatory than sexy. She traverses an ambiguous patch of ground, dotted with lemons. The composition is a symphony of yellows and sands, even the flesh of her body. In *Emilie* the sweet, dusty rose of a sitting woman's skin and the fabric of her chair swirl together in a bruise of rose and ivory. In his palette as well as his draftsmanship, Williams does not prioritize aesthetic naturalism but rather the evocation of emotional tones and symbolic psychological narratives. He imposes his style on his subjects; his work is more about how he sees the world than a reverence for how the world might actually appear. James Joyce has said that "Poetry, even when apparently most fantastic, is always a revolt against artifice, a revolt, in a sense, against actuality," and in Williams's agile hands, portraiture becomes poetry.

—Shana Nys Dambrot

Amalgam: New Paintings & Drawings by Kent Williams closed September 9 at Merry Karnowsky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Shana Nys Dambrot is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Thomas Campbell at Roberts & Tilton

Surf and skateboard culture and graffiti styles have fused with traditional art practices so that it is impossible to differentiate between who does what where and why. Thomas Campbell is an artist who moves between disciplines and styles with ease. His second solo exhibition at Roberts & Tilton comes not too long after the release of his surf documentary *Sprout* (2004).

Campbell has a fluid hand and his doodle-inspired drawings cover a myriad of surfaces ranging from paper to canvas to walls. While the

exhibition includes a corner of small, framed drawings and collages as well as a re-creation of Campbell's studio (including a sewing machine) and his first bronze sculpture, the most satisfying works are his multi-panel paintings that combine collage, drawing and painting.

Each of Campbell's works features an iconic figure—a character who at times resembles a teepee, at times a tree, but, more often than not, a triangle-shaped cone that conceals a figure. The figure frequently projects lines of words or is submerged in water or obscured by dots falling from the sky. A stand-in for the artist as well as for everyman, the figure becomes the unifying element in much of Campbell's work. *Yep, I'm out of Here* is an 80-inch-long painting on wood panel in which the figure is awash in a textured red ocean. Covered in waves of concentric red lines, the helplessness of the figure becomes apparent. Similarly, in *Not Alone* the figure assumes the role of a tree. The sparseness of the painting reinforces its isolation—huddling among trees that are rendered to conceal him. The figure becomes whatever it is near—be it a tree, a cloud or a shelter. As somber as these moments maybe, Campbell's works are not without humor.

Campbell gives the "Yep" figure significant presence by casting it as a bronze. The solid form adhered to a base is a young boy cloaked in a heavy triangle-shaped costume decorated with leaves along its front. There is a circle cut for the face to peer out, yet only with some difficulty. The figure could be a hunter or a navigator as it carries a long pole with a sign that reads "Sing Ding-A-Ling," at once humorous and cutting, like all of Campbell's work. The bronze sculpture becomes a symbol and elevates what was once simply a doodle into a solid piece of sculpture.

Perhaps the most ambitious and revealing aspect of the exhibition is the corner of the gallery that houses many small-framed works. Here, cut colored paper pieces are sewn together and col-

Thomas Campbell, installation view, *Yep, I'm Out of Here*, 2006, mixed media on canvas, wood panel, at Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles.



inform, rather to entice. Though they are often frantic in tone, there is no conceptual depth. The hysteria generated seldom represents the gist, or the real implications, of the story. More often than not, the information we receive is a come-on. This is not uncommon knowledge. It has become second nature for most of us: to dig deeper, explore a variety of sources, and to wait for the news beyond the initial bulletin to unfold before forming opinions about the significance (or lack of it) of a report.

Allison Miller's paintings give a preliminary impression similar to a visual/sound bite. There is a sense, upon first glance, that these are intended to be rigid and superficial productions; painting as (non-representational and unemotional) object. After all, they are comprised of geometric forms, include radiating lines, plus flats or stripes of color. In fact, the impulse the paintings initially suggest could hearken back to Barnett Newman, but especially to Frank Stella's geometric works of the 1960s—replete with their direct influence on the development of minimalism—at a time he is credited with saying a painting is "a flat surface with paint on it—nothing more."

Miller, however, has gauged her audience, or more accurately, engaged her audience in a telling moment of cultural recognition. She understands that few among us take our information at face value. And this, the second take or close reading, is where the paintings become consequential or (for those of use who like art to act as intermediary) useful. These works serve as red flags—riptide or undertow warnings posted on the beach of visual information. They are cogent reminders to watch, read and listen carefully for the subtleties or undertones—the subtext often lurking in private and published presentations of information.

Taken in the light of the "emperor's new clothes syndrome," Miller's paintings are an incisive critique of the information age. For example the painting, *Untitled (V)* seems to present as the foreground figure a thickly outlined, in black, rectangle. Upon closer inspection, it becomes obvious that the strength of this figure is compromised in a number of ways. The black line is bowed. It is not an imperial geometric form, rather it has fragile (or sublime) organic characteristics. In addition, soft blue, peach, beige and gray lines cut over, overriding and diffusing the dominance of the focal shape. The radiating lines do not occur equidistantly from one another, they splay with fleshy indifference to their counterparts. And, perhaps most telling, the stripes of blue, gray, brown and tan that activate the background of the painting, wobble. The strips of paint are neither parallel nor equidistant to/from the neighboring strip of color—all are weak, flawed, vain attempts at representing a solid and regular form. *Monument* features a triangulated form outlined by wobbling colorful

stripes and bifurcated with a pale beige color field, to similar effect.

Miller is pointing a finger with her work. She is admonishing her viewers. It is a pertinent warning. The load of incoming information into the cognitive space of any individual is overwhelming. In its many forms—analogue and digital—it is a voluminous, all encroaching, invasion that often initially presents itself as a fast, brief and flat bite of data. Miller reminds us—and her work serves as an object lesson—to look again, and look carefully, before swallowing the bait.

—Charlene Roth

Allison Miller—New Paintings closed in August at ACME, Los Angeles.

Charlene Roth is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Kent Williams at Merry Karnowsky Gallery

These hip and hypnotic new paintings by LA-based illustrator and fine artist Kent Williams should finally convince any remaining skeptics of the value of graphic design aesthetics in the evolution of contemporary figurative painting. Illustrators, like surgeons, develop efficient operational techniques; visual codes and systems of reductive compositional indicators that communicate complex bundles of information quickly and keep the eye in motion; innovative ways to convey narrative threads in pictograms. All of Williams's pictures reflect the evidence of his personal lexicon, which mines classical idioms of proportionality and symbolism from throughout art history as well as contemporary culture. He tends to engineer his compositions using correspondences between clusters of basic shapes (the pointy fronds of a bird of paradise relate to a cascade of bent limbs; a breast and a ripe lemon share the same contoured nubs; a fall of robe and a half-painted rear wall share a dusty threadbare surface). *Night of Ambitious Reasoning* uses all of these formulations and more; its central composition of two men and a