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Galleries: Shows and Waterston at Haines

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by Kenneth Baker

Experience teaches us to distrust reproductions of artworks. So the accuracy of the digital image I received from Haines of Leslie Shows' "Face P" (2011) stunned me.

Having seen some of her earlier work, I already thought of Shows as an artist who values aesthetic richness, but not even a luminous reproduction prepared me for the astonishing beauty and complexity of her new paintings.

To get a sense of the surprise that scrutiny of "Face P" (2011) delivers, consider its ingredients: ink, acrylic, Mylar, Plexiglas, metal filings, sand, crushed glass, canvas and engraving on aluminum. Now try to imagine a coherent way of combining these things.



"Face P" (2011) Ink, acrylic, Mylar, Plexiglas, metal filings, sand, crushed glass, canvas and engraving on aluminum by Leslie Shows 48 x 55 inches.
Photo by Monique Deschaines / Haines Gallery

I doubt that Shows worked from a recipe. She must have evolved works such as this slowly and by makeshift. Their tiers of different sorts of detail and finish have an ancestry in her earlier paintings. But the recent pieces at Haines invent their own new order of mastery.

Shows' new paintings have a subject of sorts: a chunk of pyrite, or fool's gold, that for some reason captivated her.

We might view the paintings as an effort to account for that fascination. They act on a viewer as a hallucinogen might, causing us to see them now as micrographs, now as satellite views, studies of crystal fracture and visions of a wounded reality. Differences of matter, finish and handling become unaccountably absorbing, as if Shows has found some way to sublimate fabulous narratives into concatenations of physical detail.

Then there's the associative level. Chemically, fool's gold is iron sulfide; metaphorically, it might signify any value sustained by delusion or misinformation.

Shows keeps us wondering with what looks to me like a misstep in her exhibition: a floor installation of forms - ranging from generic electronics remotes to mineral crystals to fortune cookies - molded in sulfur.

Perhaps Shows has "brimstone" in mind, old-school preachers' shorthand for damnation. Perhaps she sees the forms she's chosen to mold as symbols of magical thinking.

In any case, the sublimation of thought into material detail, so compelling in the paintings, does not seem to have worked with the sulfur elements.

Being chemically fundamental, they recall, at least in conceptual terms, the elemental material of certain minimal sculpture, especially Carl Andre's. But the faint, foul odor they emit might in itself be taken for a critique of minimalist purism.

The whiff of vulcanism from Shows' work prepares the visitor for the recent preoccupation with volcanic landscapes and their hellish implications in Darren Waterston's new work, shown in Haines' small room.

Leslie Shows: Split Array: Paintings and sculpture; **Darren Waterston: Forest Eater:** Paintings, sculpture and works on paper. Through Dec. 24. Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 397-8114. www.hainesgallery.com.