

art

Smear Factor

September in Denver means that the 2012-2013 art season is fully under way, and there is a lot to recommend, including a pair of solos featuring paintings by two local abstract artists and a group show, also featuring abstracts, with most of the included artists likewise being local.

Andy Berg, a neo-abstract expressionist who lives in Golden, is the star of **Andy Berg: Dialogue With the Unconscious**, at Rule Gallery. Though Berg studied at the Kansas City Art Institute during the 1980s, life took him in other directions until 2009, when he began to exhibit his

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paintings again.

This solo at Rule is a followup to last season's wonderful *Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin* at the Singer Gallery, in which curator Simon Zalkind chose Berg work that featured wild palettes and slashing brushstrokes. For this show, gallery director Robin Rule has chosen paintings with more subtly shaded hues and smoother areas of paint. This kind of range rightly suggests that abstract expressionism is inexhaustible as a source of inspiration. And that makes sense, as the style turns the paint itself into the subject of the work. But it also shows that Berg, as Rule points out, has an inexhaustible bag of painterly tricks.

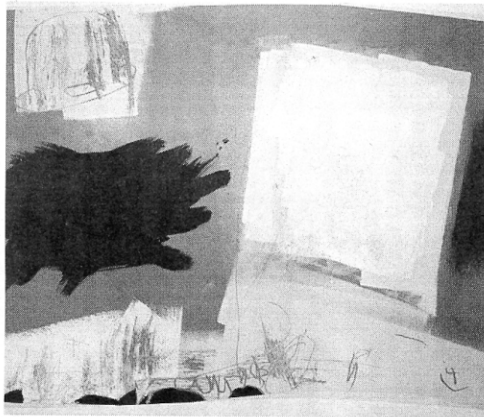
There are many standouts; in fact, everything in the show is worth looking at. Some, like "Terra Damnata," have a moody quality, owing to dark, shadowy colors like gray and amber. The composition in this piece is broadly divided into a pair of rectangles, like a pseudo-diptych. It reminded me of Motherwell, as did "Shadow of the Hand," which is covered with Motherwell blue juxtaposed with sand and white.

Several of the other paintings are predominantly composed of a set of shades, typically earth tones ranging from cream to brown and black, yet here and there, Berg has inserted a tiny patch of an incongruous shade. This sparring use of accent colors can also be seen in Clifford Still's paintings, which have become familiar to us since his namesake museum opened here.

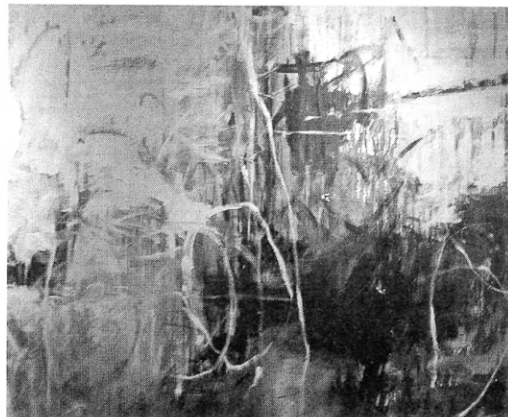
Berg is new to Rule, but his work fits perfectly into the gallery's well-established sensibility.

Among the current offerings at Edge Gallery is **Mark Brasuell: 25 Years in Colorado**, which makes a wonderful companion to the Berg show.

Though it is billed as a retrospective, the exhibit is more of a sketch of the last quarter-century of Brasuell's work. So it's a shame, especially considering how long Brasuell's been a part of Edge and a part



"Shadow of the Hand," by Andy Berg, mixed media on panel.



"Plot a Course," by Mark Brasuell, drawing materials on canvas.

of the Denver art scene, that this career survey is crammed into the front space instead of spreading out through the whole set of spaces. As this small show suggests, Brasuell could have easily filled the place—and had he been allowed to, it would have given him the room to lay out his stylistic development.

Brasuell moved to Colorado in 1987 to complete his MFA at the University of Denver. Most of his work from that time was in the form of performances or site-specific installations, so there's little evidence of them left. But there are a couple of early things included, notably "Pervert," a print from 1987 about Brasuell's gay identity, which was among a set of personally charged subjects he embraced over the years.

It was in the mid-'90s that Brasuell finally developed the signature style he's embraced ever since—a kind of abstract expressionism that incorporates various conceptual attributes. "Fences," from 1996, for example, looks completely non-objective, yet Brasuell has hidden words in it that convey political messages. In 1998's drawing "Dharma Queen," he had Kari Edwards start the piece, and then he went in and finished it, obliterating her work. In "Plot a Course," from 2006, he liquefied drawing materials to use as paints. He had his partner, Aidan Grey, work on "The View of From Up From Below," from 2009. And on and on.

One thing that links Brasuell's classic paintings is the pictorial depth he's able to achieve, even when he's working on

paper—or, even more astoundingly, when he uses transparent Mylar sheets. This is because he conceives of his paintings in layers, with each subsequent one either hiding or revealing what's underneath. He's also great at assembling bright colors, as well as expertly orchestrating white, black and gray.

Speaking of white, black and gray, that is the entire range of shades seen in the impressive group show **The Other Primary Colors—White Black Grey**, now filling both ground-floor rooms at Space Gallery. This is an ambitious show for Space and comes with a catalogue. It was put together by Denver area artist Marks Aardsma, who invited others who shared her interest in doing non-objective compositions in white, black and gray.

Everything Aardsma selected is elegant, aloof and well carried out. And all of it owes a debt to either minimalism or pattern painting, or both.

Furthermore, the show has been perfectly installed so that each artist is given enough room to display a body of related pieces.

Primary Colors begins with small prints by Denver's Tonia Bonnell that illustrate the theory of emergence; the artist uses identical elements to create different abstract groupings.

Across from these are New York-based artist Nancy Koenigsberg's series of three-dimensional wire-mesh bas-reliefs, whose geometric compositions have powerful graphic qualities akin to drawings.

Opposite the information desk are some

remarkable oil paintings by Denver's Carlene Frances, who, based on these incredible pieces, should be lots better known. Frances takes what appears to be an automatist approach, assembling various elements such as scribbled squares and circles and distributing them across the painting's surface in a way that is random and, thus, unpredictable. The results, however, are unfailingly balanced.

Behind the gallery's dog-leg and into the back, Aardsma has paired Chicago's Corey Postiglione with Space owner Michael Burnett, an accomplished abstract painter in his own right. The Postigliones are crisp pattern works, with the compositions made up of interwoven ovals. The margins between the pigments is extremely hard-edged, the result of Postiglione using laser-cut stencils. The Burnetts are abstractions in which groups of organic shapes are organized within vertical fields.

The show reaches a crescendo of quietness in the double-height back gallery, where Aardsma has included her own pieces alongside those by Boulder's David Sawyer. Aardsma creates what look like paintings, but that is something of a misconception, because they have no paint actually on them. To create the simple bars and lines that make up her compositions, she has unwoven the canvas itself, so that the shadow of the missing threads creates the imagery. Sawyer also uses lines as his principle motif, but in his case, it's with silverpoint on and under Nihonga pigment from Japan.

The Berg and Brasuell single-artist exhibits, along with this very strong group outing, prove once again that abstraction remains a widely embraced approach for many contemporary artists.

For more photos from these exhibits, go to showandtelldenver.com.

Andy Berg
Through November 3, Rule
Gallery, 3340 Walnut Street, 303-
777-9473, www.rulegallery.com.

Mark Brasuell
Through October 7, Edge Gallery,
3658 Navajo Street, 303-477-
7173, www.edgeart.org.

White Black Grey
Through October 20, Space Gal-
lery, 765 Santa Fe Drive, 720-904-
1088, www.spacegallery.org.