

Conceptual abstraction runs through shows at Robischon and Vertigo

By Michael Paglia Thursday, Feb 20 2014

In the last decades of the twentieth century, conceptualism was on the upswing in the wake of pop art and minimalism, both of which have big conceptual components. The cutting-edge work of the '80s and '90s was heavy with narrative, and artists often chose representational approaches to tell their stories. Now, in the first decades of the 21st century, things seem to be morphing toward conceptual abstraction.

Just in time for this discussion is the very impressive *Out of Line*, at Robischon Gallery, which brings together six artists and an artist pair, all of whom are working in some way that is related to conceptual abstraction; all but two of them are exploring post-minimal or post-pattern work, which has an international presence right now. As is usual at Robischon, a number of the artists are seen in some depth, making their sections essentially solo shows that dissolve into the large group feature. This depth is possible because of Robischon's enormous size, which makes the gallery seem more like a swank little contemporary art museum. Another thing typical for Robischon is that co-directors Jim Robischon and Jennifer Doran make sure the work of Colorado artists is displayed alongside that of established talents from elsewhere. This creates an even playing field for the home-state crew.

The show opens with a selection of mostly large abstracts by New York artist Jason Karolak, who is making his Denver debut in *Out of Line*. The paintings feature a dark ground over which Karolak has freely and expressively conveyed the images of three-dimensional structural or ladder-like elements carried out in bright Day-glo colors. Robischon's registrar, Debra Demosthenes, pointed out the ghosts of other lines visible beneath the black paint. There is a striking visual tension created by the bright colors contrasting with the dark ground — and a similar frisson created by the wavy renditions of purportedly straight lines. In a niche open to the Karolak section are four luscious striped paintings by Colorado artist Wendi Harford. She also strikes a resolution of opposites, but in her case, it's the fluid and hydrostatic qualities of the poured paint as opposed to the way these drips have been organized into tight, straight, parallel lines.

In the space behind the niche is work by New Mexico's Ted Larsen, whose pieces strike me as being conceptual deconstructions of various stripes of geometric abstraction. The resulting work really resonates with the Karolaks, as they share a vertiginous approach to compositions, with their unbalanced character making them seem as though they are about to collapse onto

themselves. There are some marvelous wall pieces, like "Missing Present" — in which linear scrap-steel strips outline a dense arrangement of solid rectangles inside one another — and a charming take on the grid seen in "Baby Giant." And in "Here and There," Larsen has created a room-divider of sorts with a complex pattern of triangles and quadrangles in salvaged bar iron — the kind of material used to make railings.

Beyond "Here and There" is a large section filled with the marvelously iconic sculptures of Denver artist Derrick Velasquez, in which carefully cut lengths of vinyl in a wide array of colors have been draped in precise stacks over a wooden wall mount. A spectacular example is "Untitled #90," which evokes a Mexican weaving. Despite the simplicity of the idea of draping vinyl and letting gravity do the rest, these pieces are really successful, which explains why Velasquez has been the subject of a buzz in the city's art world over the past few years. In addition to his appearance at Robischon, he is also the subject of a solo at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, *A Language of Structure*, which includes lots of unexpected work.

Next to the Velasquez selections are a half-dozen neo-color-field panels by Colorado's Kate Petley. In them, she riffs on mid-century abstraction, creating vaporous forms that float beneath the unifying resin sealer; they're very aloof and elegant. And in a darkened space behind the Petleys is a computer panel by Annica Cuppetelli + Cristobal Mendoza in which lights in a grid change in their intensity. It's very smart, being a moving pattern "painting," but it's hard to look at for long without getting dizzy.

I've saved one artist until last because, despite appearances, his work here is sort of out of place. I'm talking about the Bernar Venet prints — intaglios and silk-screens — that depict his sculptures. Venet's sculptures, like the well-known "Indeterminate Line" on Speer Boulevard, are undeniably abstract, but these prints are more or less realistic views of them, so they're not. This is a minor complaint, though, because the Venets are so good and work well with the rest visually if not stylistically.

Truth be told, though, there is also a current of conceptual abstraction in *Be a Cloud not a Grid*, at Kara Duncan's Vertigo Art Space, even if the show features other types of work. This taste for conceptualism makes sense once we learn that it was put together by artist and arts advocate Theresa Anderson. Though Vertigo is fairly compact, there's just enough room between the pieces to allow for an airy look, a quality enhanced by the soaring ceiling in the front gallery.