

ART IN REVIEW; Roland Flexner; Iona Rozeal Brown

By ROBERTA SMITH

Caren Golden Fine Art

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Through tomorrow

Contemporary art abounds with idiosyncratic techniques, and sometimes they seem to be the main point of the art that results. It is more interesting when the technique is less the punch line than a mildly interesting footnote to an engrossing effect. So it is with the French-born New York-based artist Roland Flexner, who for more than a decade has been making drawings by blowing ink-and-soap bubbles through a hollow brush and then exploding them onto paper when the swirling patterns of their surfaces seem promising.

The small works in his sixth New York gallery show take this technique to extremes of slightly demonic perfection, crossing the modernist love of accident with Fabergé refinement. The variety is impressive: the wildly marbled images, which hover between the abstract and the hyper-real, almost catalog the possibilities of fluidity itself.

They evoke things atmospheric, geological, topographical, lunar, microscopic and galactic, with smoky tones so rich they might almost be in color. They give the Surrealist term exquisite corpse added meaning and also belong to the tradition of Surrealist automatism. Like Indian miniatures, the best of them obtain a concentration of pictorial refinement that is both oppressive and liberating, like force-fed reverie.

The paintings in Iona Rozeal Brown's New York gallery debut have punch-line issues of their own. Colorful and well executed, if a bit bland of surface, they seem to conflate two highly ritualized styles of female dress aimed primarily at male pleasure: the complex sartorial modes and codes of the Japanese geisha and those of the well-dressed young woman of hip-hop.

The images are based on 18th-century Yukiyo-e prints of kimono-wearing geishas, but their skin is painted brown, their coiffures tend toward afros or cornrows, and they wear bits of bling-bling and have long nails. A gallery statement takes a narrower, more arcane tack: the

paintings are intended as comments on the phenomena of hip-hop-obsessed young Japanese women who do everything they can to imitate its style, including darkening their skin.

It is culture-clashing artifice either way, but the less informed reading seems fuller, funnier and more promising. Still, Ms. Brown may be edging toward the rich tradition of painterly social commentary that includes the vehement pictorialism of Peter Saul and Robert Colescott. This would give her a lot to measure up to and, coupled with her complex subject matter, also a lot to work with. ROBERTA SMITH

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