

A Coffin filled with Soft Drinks.

Sunday, February 7, 2010

Oliver Arms at Ameringer McEnery and Yohe

First, a confession - I'm not much of a fan of contemporary abstraction. I like many abstract paintings (pieces by Motherwell, Georges Mathieu, Philip Guston, et cetera), but at the same time I am able to view the pieces in a historical setting rather than within the realm of contemporary discourse. I feel that contemporary art, with an emphasis on concept and irony, has pushed abstraction to the side in favor of more "brainy" work. That said, I recently saw a show that renewed my faith in contemporary abstraction: Oliver Arms at Ameringer McEnery and Yohe.

Arms's paintings presented themselves to me as mysteries: they are very difficult to describe, which is probably a good thing. The closest comparison I can make is to crinkled-up marbled paper, but even that falls short of accurately describing the paintings. The images on the gallery's website do the paintings no justice - the JPEGs are far too small and there are no up-close details to be seen.

Not only are Arms's paintings difficult to describe, they're also difficult to deconstruct technically. There are no visible brushstrokes, yet they are oil on canvas. I fancy myself to have a decent knowledge of oil painting techniques, and it took me a while to figure out how he got the effects he did. It turns out that the paintings are sanded; my hunch was confirmed by the gallery's press release. Arms builds up layers of paint and sands them down, creating concentric rings of color and different textures across the canvas.

Arms seems to sand the entire thing. I imagine he must use a power sander - sanding a 72x72 inch canvas by hand would be a painful ordeal. Whatever his method may be, the results are astounding. It's the kind of art that shows the failings of language - there's not really much to say about it. I'm at a loss for words, even more so than usual when trying to talk about abstract art. My inability to criticize this show in a sophisticated manner shouldn't be held against it, though. Silence is golden, and for work like this, the less that has to be said, the better.

- Kalinova