

# LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

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## Image Makers

L.A. Artists

*Return to Abstraction*

by David DiMichele

Abstract painting has been making something of a comeback lately. For most people, abstraction is synonymous with modern art, probably because of

### ART REVIEW

the success and subsequent proliferation in the media of 1950s abstract expressionism.

Since that period, which represented a kind of apotheosis in the development of abstraction since early on in this century, the form has become problematic. It has degenerated into mere decoration (1960s and '70s field painting), limited itself into oblivion (minimalism) and replaced its sincerity with cynicism (neo-geo, appropriated abstraction, etc.).

However, following a long period of emphasis in the art world upon exceedingly theoretical and non-visual art, artists have begun to grapple seriously once again with what is undeniably one of the most significant developments in 20th century art. The results can be witnessed currently in two Downtown exhibitions: Sandra Ramirez at Galeria Las Americas and Tom Savage at Cirrus Gallery.

Ramirez works in a hybrid zone, vacillating between pure abstraction and covert representational references. Stylistically, her work relates most closely to pattern and decoration painting of the late 1970s, a movement which emerged partly in response to minimalism's austerity. Onto blazing colors and optical patterning, Ramirez grafts the sen-

sibility of a mystic; the works are mysteriously symbolic of her life, past and present. "I Saw Frogs," an acrylic, collage and wax work, recounts a hallucinatory experience Ramirez had while on a midnight walk along a San Diego beach. "Carmen and Maria Felix" makes reference to the Mexican actress Maria Felix, with whom the artist identified as a child. Several works deftly employ elements of collage with drawings done by Ramirez's junior high school art students.

All these works reinvent formal vocabulary into sinewy lines, oddball color combinations and strange appendages. The sensibility is something akin to Robert Rauschenberg's emphasis on inclusion.

By contrast, Tom Savage's paintings are marked by a pronounced sense of restraint. Like Ramirez, Savage is an artist who possesses a strong sense of how to put a painting together, an ability that has been unfortunately absent in a majority of today's artists. Emphatically abstract, his work seeks to preserve something of the initial excitement that occurs when an artist first puts brush to canvas. Almost all of the works are painted on unprimed canvas, drawing attention to the process of painting.

References to other artists abound in Savage's paintings. One thinks of the dreamy, organic abstractions of Arshile Gorky, whose thinly applied tracers seem to have been an inspiration to Savage. The quintessential California abstractionist, the late Richard Diebenkorn, also comes to mind, not only for the visual similarity to the early phase of his work from the 1950s, but because of Diebenkorn's commitment to aesthetic values and well-made paintings.

These days, kitsch-based imagery, "pathetic" art and pop-derived irony represents the mainstream in this city. It's refreshing to see that artists like Ramirez and Savage still exist, quietly following the commitment to serious painting.

Sandra Ramirez at Galeria Las Americas, 912 E. 3rd St., Suite 402, through June 6; hours: Thurs.-Fri., 11-6, Sat. 11-



Tom Savage, who references Gorky and Diebenkorn, is at Cirrus gallery with serious abstracts through May 6.

5, (213) 613-1347. Tom Savage at Cirrus Gallery, 542 South Alameda, through May 6; hours: Tues.-Sat. 10-5, (213) 680-3473.