

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

by Kaylee Rae Wyant

Making good on the show's title *She-male Guitar Solo*, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung's new paintings at Rowley Kennerk rip it up. The thought of an earsplitting, make-your-heart-stop guitar riff makes perfect sense considering the punch and drama of these hardhitting little paintings.

The show consists of eight small paintings. The largest one, a murky yellow portrait of a female figure, commands the space. Her body seems to be undergoing a werewolf-like transformation. Green scales cover her right arm. The fingers twist and bend grotesquely as they reach to scratch its right eye. The other arm (or tail?) is reduced to a hairy snake-like form. One wonders what the outcome of this mutation will be? Female or she-male, this twisted frontwoman sets the stage for a show that borders on the uncanny.

From there on, paintings bob in and out of abstraction and figuration with no apologies. The transitions hit you slowly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. In this universe an image can emerge from a mess of mark-making and gesture without so much as a flinch or cringe. All visual language is up for grabs. Hartung's lexical reverie feels virtually unaffected and utterly self-ruling, as if Clement Greenberg never uttered a word about purity or flatness. Indeed, her paintings recall an earlier modernism, one that was unafraid of metaphor or a keen relationship to literature.

Take the other recognizable figure in the room for instance. This figure's half-formed body is nearly absorbed by the lurid plaid background. Like a strange halo, a finger-drawn line through the paint circumscribing the body seems to protect it from being totally subsumed. Its dead stare confronts the viewer, inverting their own gaze and sucking them into those black hole eyes.

Hartung's paintings beg to be read, or felt. They demand attentive viewers who can let their guard down and let the work dictate what's going on. Two paintings opposite each other on the North and South walls benefit from such an indulgent read. At first glance both paintings resemble a child's scrawling with orange crayon onto blue finger paint. With time, the scrawls become hysterical, incised markings, and the blue ground opens up into a brilliant sapphire pool. These flaming orange scratches reveal elements that could resemble body parts or language. Here again, Hartung is playing with the push and pull between dichotomies.

Some works are less potent than others. The soft, rounded abstraction opposite the entrance and the gentle framed piece nearby exhibit some reserve. However, their quiet nature seems a bit more like the calm just after a violent storm. Looking closer at the surface, one can pick up on traces of the struggle that took place in order to present the final, seemingly peaceful composition we see now.

What seems to be at stake here is a resistance to submit to conventional roles. Traditional figure and ground relationships interchange. What is recognizable and what is inexplicable seem to be at odds. And our drag queen/werewolf of a hostess declares that first impressions are commonly deceiving. These paintings aren't sly or clever. They

pronounce their substance with brash, instinctual vivacity. Such work leaves its viewers all the stronger for having trusted in their own ability to think and feel for themselves.

Details

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: She-Male Guitar Solo

Rowley Kennerk Gallery

7119 N Peoria Street, #3C

Chicago, IL

to 19 April

www.rowleykennerk.com