

Edie Fake and Aili Schmeltz: Experiments in Transformation

Although their aesthetic and methods differ, both artists in this exhibition reflect an interest in a continuing development of abstraction, minimalism and modernism that is informed by their studio practices in the Mojave Desert during the pandemic lockdown. Edie Fake's high-keyed abstractions are simultaneously figurative and abstract, combining recognizable household objects and dynamic geometries. Portraying lively chemical interactions within ordinary containers, his colorful images serve as visual metaphors of the body. Aili Schmeltz's thread-based paintings are largely monochromatic, abstract patterns of vibrating intensity. In them she finds analogues for lives in the region shaped by gender issues. Schmeltz and Fake draw on their recent domestic isolation to reconsider cultural clichés, both resisting them and transforming them into new possibilities.

In earlier paintings, Schmeltz used patterns and colors from the architecture of Los Angeles to explore the city's historical roots. The 1920s were a defining time of growth, and the prominence of art deco played a major role in shaping the ideas underlying L.A.'s image. Deco is an especially interesting architectural style because it both participates in, and challenges, emerging modernist assumptions. On the one hand, the modernism dedicated to rejecting ornament in favor of visible structure that is associated with European principles, especially as articulated by the Bauhaus, appears to be at odds with art deco's emphasis on stylized surface decoration. On the other hand, the shift to a machine-age culture based in speed and technological innovation is evident in deco's references to streamlined transportation and mechanical forces. Schmeltz's painting *Object/Window/Both/Neither Study 43, 2020*, illustrates how she reveals the relationship between external façades in the city's deco buildings and the ideologies they were built to serve.

Schmeltz brings insights from these earlier architectural investigations to her series, *California Women*, created at her Joshua Tree studio during the pandemic. The focus on modernist-inspired abstract patterns and colors continues. But now they reference the personal narratives of historical women in the Mojave Desert who pursued internal passions in the face of confining social structures. Through an innovative mixing of painting, embroidery, collage, and sculpture, Schmeltz's handcrafted constructions honor women who made choices surprising for their gender, choices that break with expectations at odds with their desires.

For instance, Schmeltz explains that Charlotte Parkhurst escaped from an orphanage by donning boys' clothing, changing her name to Charley, and coming to California during the Gold Rush, distinguishing herself in the typically male occupation of stagecoach driver. Schmeltz represents this remarkable transformation through an elaborately sewn pattern of geometric lines rendered in light and dark blue, combining traditional women's work with minimalism's hypnotic repetition.

Other sewn paintings reference Twentynine Palms homesteader and writer Helen Bagley; feminist, self-taught designer, and architect of Llano Del Rio Co-Operative Colony Alice Constance Austin; African American ex-slave, real estate entrepreneur, and philanthropist Bridget "Biddy" Mason; midcentury Twentynine Palms resident, gallerist, and handmade book illustrator of desert flora Beverly Mockel; and founder of the innovative and extensive Lotusland botanical garden in Montecito, California, Ganna Walska. These women from California's history overturned various expectations about what they could accomplish and challenged perceived gender barriers.

Similarly, the trajectory of Fake's paintings is rooted in earlier paintings of architectural spaces that engage playfully with an understanding of the structural relationship between inside and outside. In his previous paintings, Fake used the building blocks of doors, windows, and passages, combining the façades of queer bars and clubs to suggest layered spatial experiences that are multidimensional. They are visual conundrums, metaphors for the complex bodies and identities of those within them. Another series of recent paintings based in alchemy, *12th House*, suggests interconnected worlds, the macro and micro referencing each other in an unstable structural hierarchy.

In the series exhibited here at BoxoPROJECTS, *Home Brews*, Fake paints recognizable objects, principally various containers, that he renders as simplified, flat outlines in vibrant colors. In addition, Fake suggests the contents of these vessels through intensely hued, geometric shapes that jangle together visually in an active frisson. Placing these shapes against a black ground heightens the feeling of excited movement and energetic interactions. As in his previous works, Fake focuses on the exchanges that deny any possibility of immutable forms.

In the paintings exhibited here, the transformational alchemy referenced in previous paintings gives way to the active chemical processes of liquids within jars, bottles, flasks, and other ordinary containers. Fake renders these vessels and their contents with his characteristic pop-inspired minimalism — hard-edge circles, triangles, polygons, and waves in colors that shade from pastels to strong hues. The graphic quality of the images abstracts the liquid content even as it symbolically references the turbulent mixing of elements within the solutions.

In *Probiotics*, for example, Fake depicts a mason jar, using a series of graduated brown hues for its shape and a stack of bright, yellow bands to outline its threaded lid. The liquid within is indicated by a pair of abstract wavy lines in fleshy shades of red and pink that recall mathematical signs for equality, similarity, and congruence. Below them, geometric shapes jostle energetically together, while between and above them, simpler and smaller geometries suggest the dissipating action of escaping bubbles. Fake has created a dual visual analogue for both the invisible properties at the particle level and the visible sensations at the physical level. A similar jar shape in *Live Cultures* depicts a different combination of reactive properties in a more turbulent liquid.

In *The Last Straw*, another set of wave forms indicates the liquid level in a bottle with a straw. However, in this case, the abstract geometric shapes form a curving counterpoint to the bottle rather than being confined within it. Reminiscent of cubist still life arrangements, the bottle both lies flat and floats somewhere between two- and three-dimensional space. *Candy Apple* pairs phallic and yonic forms — the transparency of a striped straw is visibly contained within a bottle while a similarly rendered stick suggestively penetrates an apple. In *Three Tinctures*, a group of three medicine bottles, also outlined by graduated brown hues, forgoes Fake's usual geometric indicators of active solutions. Not entirely still, the quieter compounds within these bottles are represented by circles that suggest buoyancy. Penetrating droppers with their flesh-colored rubber squeeze tops stand ready to extract the contents. In *Concoction*, Fake depicts the distilling apparatus used to generate home grown chemical reactions. And in a surprising reversal of function, the tincture dropper in a nearby bottle of yellow liquid pokes out of the container's neck while its squeeze tip floats ineffectually inside.

Although Schmeltz and Fake rely on different visual languages, they both have developed their current series out of an earlier interest in architecture, specifically the relationships between structures and what they embody. Schmeltz turns the focus of her sewn paintings to social and political structures, whereas Fake is depicting the interactive properties of chemical structures. Both artists are investigating the fluid potential of perceived distinctions between inside and outside as visual analogues to envision change. Their works ask viewers to consider the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the possibility of lived experiences that resist being constrained. In these compositions with their minimalist vocabulary of abstract, geometric forms, Schmeltz and Fake refuse to acknowledge controlling hierarchies. Instead, they propose artistic spaces of free play where anything is possible.

Essay and Co-Curation by Daniell Cornell, Curator Emeritus at Palm Springs Art Museum