

Remarkable and **That Was Then | This Is Now**

Are Sights to See

Review: by Michael Paglia | May 4, 2016



Andy Berg, *Aholah*, oil on panel

Shows in town right now include work by artists who haven't exhibited here in some time — and they're a welcome sight. **That Was Then, This Is Now**, conjoined solos at **Goodwin Fine Art**, pairs paintings by **Mark Villarreal** and **Andy Berg**; though both have lived in Colorado for decades —Villarreal in Boulder, Berg in Golden — it's been several years since either has been the subject of a Denver show. The exhibit's title refers to the fact that Villarreal and Berg went to the prestigious Kansas City Art Institute back in the late '70s and early '80s, and the exhibit begins with a single example of work done by each artist during his student days.

Villarreal first came to local prominence in the late 1980s with heavily worked, neo-abstract expressionist paintings that were richly colored and had lots of pigment piled up by the brushwork. The '80s were dominated by neo-expressionism, an exuberant representational style, as well as conceptualism, which made Villarreal's approach seem somewhat unusual — or even out of step — at the time. In a sense, he was behind the aesthetic curve then — but as revealed by the stylistic development in contemporary painting over the intervening years, he was also ahead of it.

These recent paintings are both signature Villarreals and distinctly new. Villarreal is interested in the history of art, and in his written statement, he explains that the arc of his painterly development has been from the macho, two-fisted mark-making of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock to the delicate, even feminine moves of Arshile Gorky.

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The rounded shapes that resemble loops or droplets dominating his recent compositions are Gorkyesque; so is the relative flatness of the coats of paint, compared with the heavy impasto he preferred in his early work.

A number of the paintings have an unusual tall, narrow shape typically associated with full-length portraits; it turns out that this aspect of the work was inspired by John Singer Sargent. Though Villarreal's compositions are totally non-objective, the vertical shape of the canvases covertly suggests the human figure. "Venetian Painting, no. 3" is spectacular, predominantly a sunny yellow with freely drawn oval shapes outlined in black rising on the left side but offset at the top center by a turquoise one; the compositional elements are freely done and their casual placement guided by the artist's aesthetic instinct.

These paintings sport limited palettes of just a few shades, so *Venetian Painting, no. 5* is nearly all red and pink, while *San Polo Painting, no. 4* is blue and black. All of the titles have Italian references; this body of work was done after Villarreal returned from a recent trip to Italy.



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The Villarreals are installed in the front space, the Bergs in the back. Though Villarreal has been working at his art all along, Berg gave it up for decades while he established a construction business. After returning to studio practice, in 2009 he began to exhibit in Denver again. His paintings at Goodwin represent both the kind of work he's been doing since his return to the easel and a newer direction. I encountered one of the newer types, *Neteraat*, at *Art of the State* at the Arvada Center a few months ago, and described it as among the best Berg paintings I'd seen — but there are a bunch at Goodwin of that same high quality.

Many of the Berg pieces suggest the landscape, though there are no literal references; others have what may be figures or faces. When you zoom in on them, however, and notice their non-objective details, those impressions of recognizable features collapse.

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Among the standouts is *Urere*; done in 2015, it looks to be a transitional painting balancing the spare compositions of his earlier works with the rich, complex tangles of lines seen in the new ones. Many of the paintings are large and impossible to overlook — but don't miss the small ones, in particular *Oneiros* and *Visitatio*, which are wonderful.

That Was Then | This Is Now runs through June 4 at Goodwin Fine Art, 1255 Delaware Street, 303-573-1255, goodwinfineart.com.