

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

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Swoops, Wedges of Imaginative Travel

By David Pagel



For the past eight years or so, Las Vegas artist Yek has been spray-painting candy-colored rainbows and razor-sharp lines on concave panels. Now his works have gone flat.

But the fizz has not gone out of his hyper-refined abstractions. At Western Project, four new acrylics on canvas stretched taut over elongated panels jug the wall in the way fine radials grip a mountain road's curves.

Yek's two- and three-tone works compress the spacey thrills of his earlier paintings, which invariably followed a square format, into swoops and wedges of aerodynamic color with more G-force that most art delivers.

With its title, "Cabriolet," the series' reference to the pleasures of driving is explicit. But the type of travel Yek's images evoke is purely imaginative. It takes place in the space between your solar plexus and brain, moves at warp speed and has at least as much to do with sci-fi movies, big-screen theaters and digitally transmitted graphics as it does with racy automobiles.

The palette is straight out of the painter's past, only more saturated. "Arrangement #4 (Cave, Impression)" pairs an arc that slides from fiery orange to screaming yellow with an oddly cropped lozenge of azure. It evokes Mediterranean languor.

The shapes of Yek's works are entirely new. The left and right edges are perfectly vertical, just like those of traditional paintings. And one corner of each works bottom edge forms a right angle. But this edge also curves upward, as if it's tracing the Southern Hemisphere's horizon as seen from the North.

The top edges of the 8-foot-long paintings, meanwhile, curve gracefully downward but never at the same rate as the bottoms. And the tops of the fatter 6-footers include a kind where the curve stops and the line straightens, ending in a second right angle diagonally across from the first. All of Yek's paintings resemble the mutant offspring of elegant old surfboards and stubby boogie boards.

Their shapes pay homage to Minimalist compositions by Ellsworth Kelly and Joe Baer. Their textures and tints recall the backdrops of Edward Ruscha's word paintings. Whatever type of transport you favor, Yek's pictures of wide open spaces take you on rides with no end in sight.

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For immediate release:

YEK
Cabriolet

April 3 – May 8, 2004

Western Project is proud to present new paintings by Las Vegas artist, Yek. This exhibition marks a quantum shift in scale, shape and imagery. *Cabriolet* conjures a convertible car speeding along the highway, as the paintings' new horizontal shape points to a fast-blurring atmosphere, addressing motion and vastness simultaneously.

The paintings are configured using cinema screen formats: 35:1, and 16:9, a high tech perceptual field of vision. Previously his paintings were singular and square; concave portals of light. Now the structures are flat, irregular and sensuous shapes – an abstract flash of cinematic screen imagery. Yek's colors are no longer faded top to bottom in the image, but right to left, or left to right (driver or passenger?), as vivid sensations of landscape – hence the titles: *Forest* , *Lake* , *Cave* , *Slope* .

What remains a signature element in this body of work is the artist's radiant color palette - a perfect balance between the synthetic culture of the Las Vegas strip and the subtleties of desert light. These new paintings also have the feeling of being backlit by a fast, almost familiar, eternal light that seems to allude to natural color, but is more akin to computer monitors, television screens, or dashboard glow. Yek has moved the viewer from a reflective position to the front seat of a cinematic vision.

Yek's work has recently been acquired by the Albright Knox Art Gallery and has shown in museums and galleries in New York San Francisco, San Diego, Portland and Paris, and Graz.

Flash Art 59
MARCH APRIL 2002
Aperto Las Vegas

By David Pagel

"The Strip" is to Las Vegas what Hollywood is to Los Angeles : the focal point of a one-industry town in which entertainment is big business, pleasure is profitable, and increasingly vast corporations are increasingly desperate to increase the size of their audiences Unlike movies, however, whose individual popularity is relatively unpredictable, gambling follows a mathematical formula. The best casinos have it down to a science: room-rates fluctuate from day to day, even rising by the hour when demand is at a premium, and the moment you start wagering, the laws of probability take over. No matter the size of your bet, every gambler believes — and, more importantly, behaves — as if he is the exception to the rule that the house always wins. Watching movies doesn't require such convictions. On the contrary, going to see one ordinarily involves getting lost in the spectacle, disappearing into a dark theater filled with an invisible crowd drawn together to do the same thing, at the same time, in isolated proximity. Gambling generates an entirely different type of experience. Built into its logic is an appeal to misfits and pretenders, wanna-be renegades who want anything but to be like the losers around them.

This attitude has a lot more to do with art made in Las Vegas than does the superficial resemblance of these works to the bright lights, dazzling colors, and over-the-top artifice of

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The Strip. While the best young artists coming out of Las Vegas do tend to favor super-saturated palettes, eye-popping compositions, crisp contours, vividly simplified forms, and sleekly polished finishes, their embrace and exploitation of such formal characteristics have nothing to do with mimesis. They do not mimic what is around them because they are not Realists, faithful duplicators who treat art as if it merely reflected its surroundings. Instead, their bold works embody the idea that making it as an artist is a long shot, especially in a country where business is king, the dollar is god, and contemporary art is commonly thought of as a charlatan's scam.

Inspired by low-riders, surfboards, and LA painting from the 1960s, Robert Acuna's abstract panels dress up the interiors they grace with a kind of decorative muscularity that's neither masculine nor feminine. Each of his oddly-proportioned acrylic panels glistens like a hot-rod whose multiple coats of primer, paint, and polish create a mirror-like surface that just can't get enough sunlight. The razzle-dazzle exuded by Tim Bavington's woozy canvases is more atmospheric but just as unnatural. Airbrushing away niggling imperfections to make more room for the imagination's free play, his hot and fuzzy stripe paintings do for hard-edged abstraction what Playboy did for pornography. And making stripe paintings look sexy is significantly more difficult than increasing the appeal of a centerfold.

While Acuna and Bavington represent the abstract end of the impure spectrum of art in Las Vegas, Curtis Fairman, Sherin Guirguis, and Almond Zigmund practice a sort of abstract pictorialism. Fusing abstraction and representation, their promiscuous pieces play fast and loose with all sorts of rigid distinctions. Fairman recycles an impressive inventory of plastic home accessories, sleekly joining cups, bowls, soap dishes and rubberized doorknobs to form loopy totems. At once retro and space age, his tabletop and wall-mounted objects take viewers back to the future, to an era when streamlined designs embodied far-out fantasies of a newfangled world. Mid-century design also lies behind Sherin Guirguis's shaped panels, which turn the overlapped silhouettes of modernist furniture into asymmetrical Rorschach blots animated by fun-loving energy. Guirguis appropriates images of designer chairs, sofas, and lamps from high-end catalogs, transforming these luxurious furnishings into indescribable representations suffused with the playfulness of cartoons. Also computer-designed, Almond Zigmund's impossible landscapes bring indoors the feel of the open road, ornamenting vast expanses with synthetic colors and artificial textures. Her appealing prints don't stop there. Like chemically induced hallucinations, they get into your head, using figure-ground reversals to stimulate a pleasant sense of vertigo.

James Gobel, Sush Machida Gaikotsu, and Gajin Fujita are figurative painters whose works put a variety of kinks into a variety of traditions. Gobel's images of hefty homosexuals and middle-class interiors, all made of carefully cut-out sections of felt, stick to the surfaces of things. Preferring the complications of the visible world to the ineffability of the beyond, they use the language of church banners from the 1970s to render wholesome pictures of mundane elegance. Gaikotsu puts Japanimation to good use, employing its whiplash graphics and digitized slickness to make slice-of-life paintings that simultaneously function as still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. Inflatable superheroes, diabolical pets, glowing vermin, and monstrous sea creatures star in his stop-action dramas, which capture the frivolously ominous tenor of the times. Likewise Fujita combines traditional Japanese imagery and downtown graffiti, creating a potent melange in which beauty feeds off danger, and luxury is fueled by excitement. His gold and silver leafed panels bring to life turf wars that are fantastic yet far from imaginary.

In all of the works by these eight artists, tawdry vulgarity and formal refinement conspire to produce unexpected results. Despite their stylistic diversity, each painting, sculpture, and print is made to be lived with. The punch packed by their vibrant, eye-grabbing surfaces is only the beginning of the experience they engender. They go on to deliver visual pleasures

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that unfold slowly and sensually, sustaining repeated viewings under different lighting conditions, from different perspectives, and in different moods. Handsomely crafted with more care and devotion than is usually associated with Las Vegas, they fly in the face of the idea that this is a city of all style and no substance. As a group, they propose that the lesson to be learned from Las Vegas lies not in the flashy glamour of its casinos' neon-enhanced facades, but in what takes place when any individual puts his chips on the table, his desire on the line.

This ethos — of not hedging your bets, of risking everything and going it alone — is among the general principles imparted to students in the art department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a once sleepy program that has become a hotbed of activity largely due to the presence of critic Dave Hickey and art historian Dr. Libby Lumpkin. Acuna, Bavington, Fairman, Fujita, Gaikotsu, Gobel, Guirguis, and Zigmund are all graduates. Although conservative viewers still scoff at the notion that art is being made in Las Vegas, it is a profoundly American city, a place created, like the rest of the country, to turn a profit, the faster the better. Everything bad that New Yorkers used to say about Los Angeles is now said about Las Vegas: that it lacks the history, the institutions, and the collectors to produce art of real seriousness. With all that going for the city in which they live, Las Vegas artists have no choice but to take bigger risks. And it looks like that's paying off.

David Pagel is a critic and curator based in Los Angeles.

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By Roberta Smith

This double debut of two young abstract painters indicates that the impulse to build on 1960's-style abstraction has both possibilities and pitfalls. Tim Bavington's elongated canvases covered with blurry but tightly vertical stripes suffer from familiarity. The color changes are beautiful and the stripes are sometimes highlighted in ways that have an animated optical effect. But in terms of technique and concept, and except for the narrow line of grisaille stripes along the bottom of "Before Today," these paintings look as if they could easily have been painted in the 1960's. In particular, they suggest Gene Davis' stripe paintings as rendered by Dan Christensen in his paint-can day.

In contrast, the paintings of Yek, who uses only his last name, provide genuine visual thrills. Painted on square panels whose edges curve slightly in and corners curl slightly forward, they appear to be unbelievably light, almost weightless. Their hot shaded colors and thin lines, also shaded, which loop in from the edges like fragmented calligraphy, are painted on some kind of space-age glass. They have an almost elastic quality, a cartoonish bounce that suggests they have just been knocked back a bit by their own optical power and finesse.

In a brochure accompanying the show, the critic, Dave Hickey, who taught both artists at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, cites Edward Ruscha's blurred transitions of color overlaid with ribbon-thin words as Yek's precedents. Other precedents include Robert Irwin's hovering Plexiglas disk paintings of the early 60's and Ralph Humphrey's little-known fluorescent-toned surfboard paintings from the same decade.

Yek has achieved the levitating, disembodied opticality that these earlier artists were after but never quite reached, and it gives his work an irrefutable present tense.
