

The Seattle Times

Friday, January 16, 2009 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Art review | Entrancing works of Michael Dailey at 2 galleries

By Gayle Clemans
Special to The Seattle Times

This may seem disrespectful to Michael Dailey, the immensely talented Northwest artist, but frankly, I've never liked the way his paintings look in reproduction, online or in print. The abstract paintings seem too slick, almost schmaltzy, like panes of colored sugar. In our age of virtual realities and reproductions, this could be one reason why Dailey is a bit underappreciated.

In person, his paintings are an entirely different story — a nuanced story that is both intimate and spacious. Since the 1970s, Dailey has imbued his paintings with gradations and contradictions that draw you in for an entrancing visual experience.

The vivid and surprising colors (mint green! salmon pink!) and vibrant light of the canvases are grounded by an unexpected opacity as well as stable compositions and variations in texture and hue.

Dailey has been committed to the possibilities of abstraction for decades, and exhibitions at two local galleries demonstrate how lucky we are to have him here.

At Greg Kucera Gallery, take advantage of the opportunity to contrast the trademark Dailey paintings with some of his earlier works. In the 1960s, Dailey created oil paintings that are rich with impasto, earthy colors and landscape-ish compositions that bring to mind Richard Diebenkorn's early landscape works. These are large, dramatic paintings with strongly horizontal, organic compositions that don't lead inward but hang right on the surfaces of the canvases.

Like Diebenkorn, Dailey began to empty out the center of



MICHAEL DAILEY

At top, Michael Dailey's "Foggy Green."



MICHAEL DAILEY

At left, "July Tide."

Exhibition reviews

"Color, Light, Time, and Place: Selected Works, 1965-2008"

Paintings, drawings and mixed-media work by Michael Dailey, 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays through Feb. 14, Greg Kucera Gallery, 212 Third Ave. S., Seattle (206-624-0770 or www.gregkucera.com); 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, and 1-5 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 8, Francine Seders Gallery, 6701 Greenwood Ave. N., Seattle (206-782-0355 or www.sedersgallery.com).

his canvases and thin down his paint application. In the 1970s, Dailey switched to acrylics for health reasons and experimented with paint application until he achieved the paradoxical effect of solidity and translucency that is so key to his art.

The centers of his paintings are pure color and light — glowing, floaty spaces that might bring Mark Rothko to mind except for the distinct differences in color palette and framing. While Rothko's works are profound and often somber, Dailey's are both invigorating and soothing.

While Rothko feathered the edges of his central shapes, creating an ethereal effect, Dailey frames his with geometric lines and structures that show off and anchor the central spaces.

Aside from indulging in historical comparisons, these references to great abstract artists provide some insight into Dailey's position in the arena of post-World War II painting.

A prominent Northwest artist and former University of Washington professor, Dailey actually has more in common with the light-filled, California abstract expressionism of Diebenkorn and the color field explorations of Rothko than with the more calligraphic, expressive approach of Northwest Mystics like Mark Tobey and Michael Graves.

While Kucera (a collector of Dailey's work) presents a chronological range of works, Francine Seders, who has represented Dailey since 1970, is now exhibiting only recent pieces.

Although there are some stunning larger paintings upstairs, the works at Francine Seders are mostly smaller — about 2-½ by 3-½ feet, compared with the larger ones which go up to more than 7 feet long.

In addition to carrying Dailey's trademark colors, light-imbued spaces and compositional framework, almost every painting contains a surprising little moment.

In "Foggy Green," for example, Dailey opens up the structure of the border to give us a peek of swirling brushstrokes. These smaller paintings seem to allow Dailey freedom to play.

Dailey has said that, during his process, the "image changes many times as the painting evolves, and I quite literally don't know where I am going until I get there." For the viewer, there is no fixed arrival point. While there is space, structure and a sense of very abstracted landscape in his works, the paintings sustain exploration and unendedness.