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Photo: Grant Mudford

TIM EBNER

(Cover)

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(Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica) A studio preview of Tim Ebner's newest work offered the luxury and joy of seeing the current show in the context the artist's entire, diverse career arc. Ebner's new installation features "schools" of 4- to 5-foot fabric fish "floating" at about eye level in spiraling metal armatures (sculptures in their own right), plus clusters of smaller fish suspended atop thin metal rods tall enough to hover overhead. One feels submerged in a Loony Tunes, kitsch-craft underwater world. Stuffed and embroidered, sumptuous and silly, the sea of textures makes us think of everything from lush Victorian curtains to that funky low-brow floor pillow you nestle in when no one else is looking.

Viewed alongside an archive of excellent past work, we find that these wild objects are after all more related than not to Ebner's very fine early minimalist paintings, inspired by a coiled 'shape-as-shape' he noticed in a photo (still tacked up in his studio) taken from inside an actual ocean wave. Ebner produced those pristine abstract paintings with careful airbrushing and passages of glass lithography to intentionally reverse spatial/scale relationships such as forward vs. back and dense vs. light, hoping to stress that mark-making is a perceptual

phenomenon with no necessary relation to the narratives of Ab Ex.

The first stuffed objects that followed these canvases weren't fish at all, but organic, painted pillow shapes made because Ebner hoped to render spatial experiences even more literally. They were irreverently clumsy to continue Ebner's light hearted assault on the whole tradition of transcendent abstraction. Eventually — aided by his humor and romping imagination — these shaped, pneumatic canvases morphed into the delightfully absurdist creatures that comprise this show.

Whether in his current floating world, his quirky, assiduously painted animals, or his post CalArts MFA systems painting, Ebner seems to be reiterating minimal art's effort to unhinge "gestural" readings. Whether via fabric fish or pristine monochrome fields layered to a near machine finish, Ebner makes us experience the artwork as a tactile object in real time and space, not as a rather enervated aesthetic artifact.

To wit, the overall impact here is whimsical, baroque and enchantingly whacky. Creatures include a wild range of surfaces, sizes and resultant vibes — fish made from black, lush kimono silk crowd up against others made from rough, burlap-y fabric. Some are small and impish, others massive and weirdly looming: benign toys on steroids. Ebner sews in slots on fish designed to hold real, taxidermied fish eyes — glistening, slightly creepy and utterly hilarious — preserved perhaps from the huge tuna the artist catches himself. If these don't work, Ebner also makes dozens of zany ceramic glass "eyes" (minimal little objects in their own right) in neon and freaky un-art colors that he stores in what looks like a fish bait bucket and slips into fabric

sculptures at will.

I noted to Ebner that even this seemingly goofy fish work continues minimalism's emphasis on process — real men do sew! — as well as that style's deployment of kinesthetic experience to activate both the making and viewing sides of art. In the midst of this heady discussion, Ebner told me to squeeze a sculpture — a pressure-induced microphone deep in the fabric had this elaborately tufted and tucked angel fish respond with a sidesplittingly ridiculous and seductive "heeeeeey ..."

A military brat, the artist traveled but grew up mainly in San Diego, near water and nature. His deep connection to both is obvious in the impeccably realist, wonderfully comical paintings of exotic National Geographic animals from the late 1990s, early 2000s. A naturalist stance is also behind the fun and amazing handwork, but Ebner mixes his own personally celebratory spirit with our globally entangled relationship with nature as an inadvertent, never dark subtext.

Ebner's current show — indeed his whole career — is evidence of the mix of freedom, skill across media, serious study, ability to self edit, delight in risk, and the sheer love of just plain messin' around that we imagine when we think of true creativity.

Marlena Donohue