

# Clash of views can still coexist

BY DAVID PAGEL

Bare-bones efficiency and wondrous luxury mate in John Mills' new paintings, which are some of the most casual mischief to have come out of Los Angeles in some time. At Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Santa Monica, "High on Signs" fills three rooms and a hallway with 20 paintings that are easy to approach and hard to tear yourself away from.

There's nothing off-putting about Mills' abstract canvases, each of which looks as if it's been around the block once or twice and cleaned up real nice. The slacker preciousness that plagues much contemporary painting is nowhere to be found. In its place is the sense that Mills' works are giddy about the possibilities of what a painting can be and startled by their own capacity to realize such possibilities.

There are not many elements to a painting by Mills. A basic white ground, some halfhearted marks (that share more with abandoned cartoons than finished pictures) and long, meandering lines pretty much account for everything there is to look at. Likewise, Mills' colors are nothing special: Each could be found in a 12-pack of markers at any office supply store.

It's what Mills does with such mundane materials and pedestrian gestures that makes his paintings so

entrancing. Everything in every one is both itself and something else, sometimes twice over.

For example, what first appear to be plain white surfaces are neither uniform nor flat. The tiny impressions left by the bristles of Mills' brushes form mismatched patterns that catch light and animate surfaces with jittery movement.

In some of the largest ones, which are 6½ feet square, solid planes dissolve into atmospheric expanses. Colors often drift into view, like objects in the fog, unfocused memories or intuitions on their way to becoming heartfelt convictions.

From across the gallery, the lines in Mills' paintings are graceful and elegant — evidence of effortless gestures and virtuoso draftsmanship. Up close, they're the opposite: Wobbly and uncertain, each was not drawn in one fell swoop but painted, an inch or less at a time, with a tiny brush and an unsteady hand. The imperfect workmanship and unflagging persistence embodied by Mills' lines give the work its humanity.

The power of Mills' weirdly lyrical works resides in the way they compel incompatible viewpoints to get along with one another. That's not a bad model for modern life or a means for making our neighborhoods and nations just a bit more civilized.

**Rosamund Felsen Gallery,**  
Bergamot Station, 2525  
Michigan Ave., Santa Monica,  
(310) 828-8488, through  
July 5. Closed Sundays and  
Mondays. [www.rosamundfelsen.com](http://www.rosamundfelsen.com)