

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected 2005 Press on Oliver Arms

Immediately upon entering the gallery one encounters Oliver Arms' newest painting, "Slow Ride". Its presence is powerful, even bombastic, for the space between the entry door and the image is tight and one comes immediately face to face with the visceral intensity of Arms' works. The canvas, which is built with three different types of brushstrokes, is a battleground that fights over the history, nature and potential future of abstract painting. This particular work, for reasons more intuited than reasoned, evokes Arshile Gorky's "The Waterfall" (1943), as it contrasts fluid, lush, luminous passages of paint that cascade down the near center of the canvas with amorphous shapes of compacted scrapped paint that stands in for boulders of a sort.

Yet, the above description is far too facile for this and other Arms' canvases. For the narrative that interconnects these large scale, epic works is one that places the viewer amidst a figure ground war. Wrought with color revved into full gear, screaming, halting, jolting, screeching and sliding across space, only to be occasionally slowed by the lushness of lushly brushed passages, which interpret refinement as a space in which to pause and regain one's breath before hurdling full speed into the bedlam the extended vistas of Arms' painted world.

Turning the corner, one enters into a modest sized gallery space commandeered by four monumental, abstract paintings. One of these, "Recess", appears in a square format, while the other three are horizontal panoramas whose literal, framed space is a simple doubling as two identical square canvases, joined to form the rectangular painting's arena. Thus, ironically, the format of these robust, anti classical works emerges upon the foundations of the square, one of art's most classical forms. The classical allusions are subsequently sublimated by the intense and even harsh colorations, the agitated tempos and angry gestures that rumble like thunder through these works.

"Politics of Weakness" presents a large panorama that from afar abstractly suggests a city. There is the hint of a horizon line defined by a suffused allusion to monumental buildings cast against a dim sky, reverberating ever so quietly against the memory of Umberto Boccioni's skyline in his painting, "The City Rising". But, frustrating such literal and historical readings of the works is a tangle of abstract color strokes that coalesce into forms resembling enlarged skin scabs. These tightly packed, painted areas are literally composed of dense, encrusted and then scrapped passages of reds, oranges, yellows and umbers that have been spiked with occasional sky blue and blush pink highlights.

Metaphorically, however, from the center of the room, the scabs coalesce into the illusion of a cacophony of people thronging a city's streets in the tradition of James Ensor's "Entry of Christ into Brussels" (1889) that has been on display at the Getty recently. Indeed, in the foreground, beyond the madding mob of color or people or both, there is an unusual confluence of several large and more assured white strokes of paint that suggest a cloaked figure positioned atop a high precipice, sequestered within a glass protected arena. Here, the painterly allusions nod to Francis Bacon, ever so subtly referencing his "Study after Velázquez's Innocent X", though almost as soon as the vision appears it dissolves into nothing but painted smudges.

Rich in artistic references, Arms daringly combines the acerbic, dense, bellicose qualities of Jean Dubuffet's postwar era works with the loose, buttery quality of Willem De Kooning's early abstractions. But there is nothing here of De Kooning's Rubenesque coloration, nor of Boccioni's French color harmonies. Rather, these works, orchestrated and anchored in the color key of orange, are wholly Arms' own. Acrid and powerful, they present difficult, yet compelling panoramas that stretch narrative and formal possibilities to their extremes, creating harrowing, engrossing, intense works.

-Collette Chattopadhyay

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*Coagula* - April 2, 2005 by Matt Gleason



So that painting there above me is one of my all time favorites, Willem DeKooning's *Excavation*. Today I saw a show of paintings by Oliver Arms at Western Projects in Culver City and it made my day.

So if you like the painting above AT ALL I am recommending this show.

Without exaggerating it, the guy is a contemporary DeKooningesque force to be reckoned with. In fact, if you don't go see the show, it is like you are BEHIND the times in what is on the scene. And this is L.A., you don't want to be behind. So yeah, I am comparing someone young and alive to DeKooning. Go see the show and tell me why I am off my rocker or perhaps why I might be right. And if you have ten grand, one of them might still be unsold. It is the antithesis of what is going on in L.A. and even if it is nothing approximating DeKooning, it is refreshing as all hell to see some painting in this town that wasn't taped down, airbrushed and ironically slacker proud of its mediocre accomplishments.

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## Dense, Fiery and Downright Strange

*LA Times* April 8, 2005 By David Pagel

The five big paintings that make up Oliver Arms' L.A. solo debut are so steeped in history that it's difficult, when looking at them, not to envision works by other painters, including William Baziotes, Andre Bresson, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Roberto Matta, Robert Motherwell and Clyfford Still. Usually, nodding so obviously to past masterpieces is a recipe for disaster. It almost always ensures that the new works are forgettable footnotes to famous paintings reproduced in nearly every textbook about 20th century abstraction.

But there's more to Arms' dense, fiery paintings at Western Project than these standard points of reference suggest. The longer you look, the stranger they seem.

Each consists of molten blobs of color hurtling through a cosmos congested with the residue of furious collisions between asteroids, meteors and unidentifiable intergalactic detritus. Some blobs seem to cavort, like silhouetted cartoon characters, across 6-by-12-foot picture planes. Others resemble humongous insects splattered across a spaceship's windshield. Still others look like gaseous masses exploding ferociously.

From close up, the surfaces of the blobs are as complex and delicate as Impressionist paintings.

They consist of wispy swirls of red, blue and yellow, intermingled with green, orange and purple. To get the atmospheric effect, Arms uses a belt sander, literally obliterating layers of encrusted oil paint.

The sanded sections look dry. This contrasts dramatically with the thickly brushed grounds, which look wet and far more expressive or gestural.

An odd, Rip Van Winkle quality animates Arms' art. Out of step with current fashions, his naked paintings travel to the past in ways that may be ahead of their time.