

Artforum - May 1983 (Page 98 & 99)  
Donald Kuspit - Reviewer

Review of artist's first show of 3 dimensional throws at Andre Emmerich  
Rum Boat exhibited in this show.

**LARRY POONS, Andre Emmerich Gallery; STANLEY BOXER, Andre Emmerich Gallery; FRIEDEL DZUBAS, Knoedler Gallery:**

**LARRY POONS**

I'm frankly flabbergasted by these paintings; I'm not sure that's the surprise one's supposed to have at the shock of the new, but it's certainly more than the wonder one sometimes has at the prideful ways of artists. The pictures' material assertiveness, pushing what used to be called frankness of surface to a physical crescendo, is either a brilliant blunder or the realization of a bizarre beauty. Sumptuousness is achieved with the aid of a prosthetic device: small pieces of polyurethane foam infiltrate the paint, giving it lift, somewhat as falsies add to a bosom. I don't mean anything mocking in this simile; it only expresses my feeling that there is something sardonic, or at least overly clever, in this way of making surface go as far as possible. The

convention of the allover painting has been stretched to some kind of limit here; gestural elasticity has been made literal. The result, especially from a distance, is a relief effect in tension with our expectation of flatness. Flatness has, as it were, been staged—theatricalized through a projection that turns it into an "idea," a possibility perhaps never to be realized yet a reality always to be violated. The drip has been literalized by the foam, and its added dimensionality makes it a perverse reflection of an evasive flatness. It is as though sensuality were a Prometheus bound by its own materiality. Poons brings us the gift of a completely uninhibited surface, beside itself with expression; yet its lushness is ruinously self-revelatory, all too tricky in the suggestion of abandonment created.

One realizes another masterful tension in the works, which for me helps them to credibility: that between the downward pour of the paint and the buoyancy of the surface—between gravity and "atmospherics." Through this tension they achieve abstract picturesqueness, a powerful charm that could be mistaken for sublimity if the surface were not too full to evoke the infinite. These paintings, then, are about plenitude and pleasure; either the sense of plenitude that comes from pleasure, or the sense of pleasure that comes from the illusion of completeness. They are about surface that has become fullness, and fullness that realizes it needs only surface to exist. They are about the seemingly spontaneous generation of surface and its blossoming into a fullness that seems more than surface yet covers no depth.

One thinks of Poons as a fire-eater, swallowing what would hurt another painter but coming away unharmed. He has an enormous appetite for surface, which he covers with condiments and consumes without pausing for breath. (Unless this is Clement Greenberg's famous "breathing surface" breathing very heavily.) Poons is like a gluttonous python that seems to have swallowed a big surface whole; we watch him digesting it. He is a great performer creating the illusion of density out of material that is next to insubstantial.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that a woman's soul is all surface, "a mobile, stormy film on shallow water." Is Poons' mobile film on still-standing, not quite stagnant water, of indeterminate yet improbable depth, a metaphor for the masculine soul? Does this painting evoke a masculine sensibility, in the swim yet getting nowhere? Poons is not a begin-

ner and this is vigorous work, but one wonders if it does not demonstrate a peculiar deflation of the macho myth of the gesture, which has here become an extravagant, calculated flourish.