

## Review/Art; Sculptural Paintings by Larry Poons

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It is unlikely that the small retrospective of paintings by Larry Poons at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries will completely change anyone's opinion about this artist. The works that have been brought together describe what is by now a familiar path to those who have followed Mr. Poons's career.

Here are the sleek and very appealing Op Art canvases of the mid-1960's that thrust Mr. Poons to prominence before he was 30 years old. Here is at least one of the thickly encrusted canvases of the early 70's that were widely considered at the time a radical break from the artist's past. And in greatest abundance, here are the sculptural paintings that have occupied his attention for the better part of a decade. About these most recent works, it is almost impossible to be neutral.

They result from an elaborate process. Mr. Poons tacks canvas around a room and then affixes mud, corn, polyester fiber pebbles, carpet lining, foam balls and other materials to the canvas, according to patterns he has drawn in a small sketchbook.

The artist then throws and slathers paint across the whole thing, sometimes obliterating the objects that have been stuck to the canvas, sometimes highlighting them. Afterward, he crops the canvas wherever he feels it makes most sense.

The patterns in the sketchbook are abstract, although these works inevitably suggest specific shapes. Fossils, ribs and landscapes of one sort or another can leap to mind. For his part, Mr. Poons remains adamant that his paintings are about painting.

These are, from any vantage point, not easily likable images. Their tone is aggressive, they are unabashedly ugly in parts, and they are almost entirely without wit. A painting like "Shores of Orion" presents a lumpy, grayish expanse that stretches more than 20 feet from side to side. Just as it was not easy for Jackson Pollock, it is clearly not easy for Mr. Poons, working in the nearly unfettered way he does, to sustain coherence across wide and complex spaces. "Rudapeo," for example, includes some of the most elegant and some of the deadest passages that the artist has painted. Elsewhere, the problem is with near and far: A painting like "Sylvia," for instance, looks considerably better from a distance than from a few inches away, which is where a viewer is inevitably drawn by the busy surface of the canvas.

But there is an ambition, an almost religious belief in modernist ideals and a sense of conviction about these works that commands respect. Moreover, the show suggests that there has been a consistency to Mr. Poons's work that is evident in the connections between these latest paintings and the early Op images, which can easily look as if they were by a different artist.

To see the recent "Rattled," with its foam balls jutting from the canvas, and a work from 1963 like "Cherry Smash," with its blue dots that seem to leap off the bright red canvas, is to realize that Mr. Poons has sustained throughout his career a fascination with the illusionistic possibilities of painting. His progression, in that sense, parallels Frank Stella's.

The show also includes several of the works from the late 70's and early 80's that are, in some ways, Mr. Poons's most satisfying paintings. The surfaces of "Orleana" and "Dusk" are less knotted, the paint more evenly laid down than in the recent canvases. These paintings are in many ways the most convincing cross between Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis. Most of all, they exude a sense of ease and calm.

Mr. Poons is an artist whose sudden fame and subsequent fluctuations of reputation typify the often frantic and desperate character of the New York art scene. If this show does not rewrite his career, it at least restores a measure of balance and reason to any assessment of Mr. Poons's place in the art of the last quarter-century.

The show of paintings by Larry Poons remains at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 20 East 79th Street, through April 30.