

KuBO and Tom Herberg: Dreams of Chaos at Mt. San Antonio College

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In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order. —Carl Jung

The painters Tom Herberg and KuBO are dedicated abstractionists. Each man in their way remains tethered in concept to the external world of observable things and places; each articulates an abiding affection for the idea of layering as both a practical and metaphysical activity. Yet on the aesthetic continuum of non-figurative painting, they are almost as dissimilar as possible. Their pairing in this installation produces a kind of dissonant harmonics, wherein the divergence between their styles serves to illuminate essential qualities each in the other. By considering them together, the viewer's attention is focused on technique, materials, processes, and such adamantly formal issues. Operations of surface vis a vis pictorial space, orderly concept versus fraught restraint, and to what extent meaning is to be derived from the manner of handling paint — these kinds of considerations are often, as is the case here, better served by contrast than by confluence.



Artwork by Tom Herberg

Tom Herberg is open about his nervous, agitated relationship to “the world out there,” the phenomenology of which nevertheless informs both his content and the language he uses to describe it. His various series are consistently based in the world of images and meanings, yet the major works especially are all purportedly non-representational. Herberg himself acknowledges that they exist on the threshold of figuration. It’s worth noting that he taught art for some 32 years, including figure drawing; there’s no denying Herberg has a persistent sense or muscle memory of “how to draw” that he can’t shake, even when he has no intention of depicting objects in his compositions. That said, he has no aversion to a casual nomenclature that derives from the basic shapes he perceives in his finished works — quilts, doorways, windows, pelting rain, and his vertiginous “big mouths,” referring to the gyring vortexes that frequently occupy the center of his most emotional works, like negative architecture or the forbidding dark eye of a storm. You’re not meant to go through the darkened doorways either, that is not what they are for.



Artwork by Tom Herberg

Often, Herberg is somewhat more directly inspired by actual elements of nature, especially in cases where the phenomenon itself presents a compelling embodiment of abstract principles. For example a school reflective mackerel fish, proceeding in a self-distributing pattern of fractal movement; the DNA’s spiky double-helix in the swirling metamorphosis of microscopic genetics; the ragged contours of rusty prickly pears; the folds of a kimono; or the resemblance of a fictional edifice to the structure of his family tree. His figurative etchings —

self-portraits and rope knots, mostly — and scratched grease-pencil drawings contain as much density of pattern interference and intense linework as do his most scarified abstractions. Embossing the plate in much the same way as he burrows down into the painted surfaces of his canvases, his gestures have both physical consequences and existential connotations. Herberg builds up in order to excavate, insisting on the visibility of the artist's hand to the point where the hand, the finger, is used as a palette knife literally engaging the pigment and canvas to create troughs and depth and reveal the palimpsests of his own striated architectures. In the end that is what the paintings are of, if they are “of” anything — the eventual achievement of a breathless, exhaustive equilibrium of intention and intuition. His mark-making has the flavor of urgency and immediacy, but Herberg insists, “I control every square inch.”



Artwork by KuBO

KuBO is not particularly interested in exercising too much control over his paintings' outcomes. Though he has devised an array of intricate, energetic, and labor-intensive techniques, he uses them to create certain conditions inside of which he sets painterly events in motion and bears witness to what happens. Of course by now, he can largely predict what results his stagings will produce — not least because he has scientifically formulated his own paints. But with the dyes, inks, coatings, and other unique liquid pigments he favors, as with watercolor, “mistakes” cannot be “fixed” — there is only what is. KuBO is fine with that

because to his way of thinking, nothing is a mistake, everything is fascinating to consider; he even derives his nom de brosse from Chinese ceramic term having to do with the special, enhanced beauty of a vessel once broken, the scars of whose repair transcend perfection to render its form all the lovelier.



Artwork by KuBO

KuBO engages heartily in the vigorous jettisoning as well as the pouring and pooling of color, achieving the energy of painterly gesture without discernably specific intent. Here the artist's hand is an actor and a guide, not necessarily the most determinative factor. The compositions he engineers in this way are animated by visual qualities that can't be replicated with deliberation; they must be enacted with a high tolerance for risk. The medium interacts with the forces being applied to it — from the natural world (gravity, viscosity, momentum) and the artist's hand (density, juxtaposition, velocity) — organizing alchemically according to its own inscrutable logic. That is how forms are generated; shape and color are in this way inseparable. The chromatic work is florid, deep, visceral and almost tropical; the gossamer stalagmites of his monochromes are linear, crisp, shadowy and fractal. In all cases, the light trapped within the prismatic surface geology stays restless; refractions among scores of translucent layers echo the turbulence of the picture's creation.



Artwork by KuBO

Despite his esoteric relationship to imagery as such, KuBO does speak often of the Gestalt effect — the human brain's unavoidable predilection for pattern-seeking and image-recognition. He knows that due to this atavistic impulse each viewer completes anew the process of interpretation and analysis of any given picture. As in the studio, he embraces and anticipates his lack of control over that process. His background in chemical science speaks to his patient laboratory temperament; one in which he can be both a passionate protagonist and curious observer. These paintings are formal choreographies — but they are existential allegories too, or at least, it is possible to experience them that way.



Artwork by Tom Herberg

Where KuBO cultivates the meditative bravado to “create something uncertain,” for his part Herberg manifests humanity’s agitated mind through his own disruptive hand, because, as he says, “You have to add confusion or it doesn’t look right.” Each has invented a unique hybrid language that reflects their private and objective experiences of reality, to which they remain liminally bound even as they seek to express themselves outside reality’s most obvious trappings. That’s a workable definition of abstract art, or of poetry, or of spirit.

This is a show about painting, about abstract painting in particular. It is also a show about painters, these two painters and their worldviews and their emblematic attempts to give concrete form to invisible things. It’s also a show about seeing, and being present, and confronting mystery, and cultivating an appreciation for ambiguity and paradox. Despite an official lack of imagery, the inspired pairing of these artists makes plain that even within the hermetic spectrum of abstraction there are brave and salient choices to be made — not only between elements of form, but between phenomenology and psychology, immediacy and eternity, observation and action. Between chaos and control.



Tom Herberg, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 5' x 6', 1995 ©

DREAMS of CHAOS

Featuring artists HERBERG and KUBO

Mt. San Antonio College Art Gallery

MARCH 17 – APRIL 14, 2016



Kubo, *Untitled*, mixed media on paper, 44.5" x 65", 2009 ©

DREAMS OF CHAOS opens at [Mt. San Antonio College Art Gallery](#) on Thursday, March 17.