

The Dallas Morning News

The Dallas Morning News

February 20, 2002

Section: TEXAS LIVING

Page: 12C

Lacevalue: Mark Flood uses tatters of tatting to create astonishing works

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Lacy patterns in sensuous colors - not what one expects from a strapping artist known for fractured forms and strident messages. But breathtaking as Mark Flood's new paintings are, they nag at the senses like loose threads, proving that beauty can have an edge. The buzz was out well before the 44-year-old Houston artist's show opened at Angstrom Gallery, as collectors clamored for surreal pictures with strange names such as Dragonseed, Green Blood and Cigarette Burn. Even buyers weren't sure what they were getting. Granted the lace has gaping holes and tattered edges with strings hanging down. It's all an illusion anyway - what looks like fabric glued to canvas is really only paint. Mr. Flood uses the lace like a stencil, drowning it in color then draping it across the surface to transfer the pattern.

It's a tricky process. If the paint's too wet, it smears. If he waits too long, the lace gets stuck.

"Much of what I do ends up in the garbage can," Mr. Flood admits.

"At the end it's like pulling the backing off a Polaroid - I don't know what's there, and I can't see what's coming," he says. "Then I basically have to chain myself to the bedpost to keep from going back in and messing around with it some more."

Chancy as the process is, he's produced astonishing results. Works ranging from the sentimental to the maudlin evoke emotions as disparate as ecstasy and angst.

The color combinations, which Mr. Flood says are inspired by bird species, can be jarring. And while some lace looks like vintage stuff from Grandma's attic, some appears to have gone through the wringer. Either way, the textures are a remarkable blend of tiny dots and fish-scale patterns that come together in pointillist fashion to form an image.

And image is a factor, despite the abstract features of the work. The lace depicts flowers confined within neat borders that Mr. Flood in turn breaks down. Implications are that efforts to control nature are flawed, and beauty knows no boundaries.

A self-confessed control freak, Mr. Flood has forced himself to relinquish power over much of what he does. Rather than tear the lace by hand he ties one end to a tree and the other to his pick-up truck. Like a mad chemist, he experiments with all kinds of different paint products - acrylics, dry pigments, thinners, retardants and something new called "interference" that produces iridescence.

He thrives on surprise, which he says has become an addiction. "Sometimes I can't believe I painted that," he says. "But the fact that these things are so unlike me - I like that."

He's been an art obsessive all his life, he says, and has worked at the sublime Menil Collection in Houston for 15 years. But for most of his career he bucked tradition - ran a shoestring gallery in an offbeat Houston neighborhood with fellow artist Jeff Elrod and helped Mel Chin explore art's role in a consumer society via a collaboration with the popular television series *Melrose Place*.

Dallas audiences may remember Mr. Flood from a group show at Angstrom in 1998. But those paintings were irreverent takes on pop culture and art world exploitation. It took long periods away from the studio and considerable soul-searching to get him interested in notions of beauty.

Oddly enough, the new paintings are an outgrowth of works made by collaging laser prints of things like copulating frogs and a guy fixing his car on lacy patterns that functioned as decorative backgrounds. Originally he planned to line the laser prints up in boxes along one edge of the canvas and put the lace on another side. But he soon realized he was "very interested in the lace and couldn't care less about the boxes."

Initially he worried that the lace alone might not be enough. Ultimately he gave in to his feelings. "I'm not afraid to do something transgressive and bad - I've proved that," Mr. Flood says. "I just finally decided to do what I wanted to do, not what I thought I should do." "Mark Flood: New Works" is on view through March 2 at Angstrom Gallery, 3609 Parry Ave. across from Fair Park. Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and by appointment. Free. Call 214-823-6456 or go to www.angstromgallery.com.