



NOVEMBER 2007

Medium in the Middle

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[EXCERPT]

There's nothing new about working at the intersection of art mediums, especially pieces that combine aspects of both painting and sculpture. Take, for instance, those bas-reliefs from antiquity. Since they are three-dimensional, they're technically sculptures, but because they were meant to be viewed from one side only, they're actually more like paintings. Despite its deep roots in art history, the blending of painting and sculpture is very hot in the world of contemporary art. Several exhibits around town are anchored by examples of these hybrid forms.

For Colorado artist Pard Morrison, whose *50 Ways To Fall In Love* is on view at Rule Gallery, sculpture and painting are, respectively, the "body" and "soul" of art. This is more or less the explanation of his elegant style, which he calls "human minimalism." Exemplars of human minimalism, as carried out by Morrison, reveal a combination of crisp, rectilinear forms with striated and brushy, patinated finishes.

Morrison's luxurious surfaces are the product of repeatedly baking the colors onto aluminum boxes so that the shades are modulated as opposed to homogenous. The variations within single colors are the product of the brush marks, which permanently preserve the artist's touch. The precise crafting of the boxes and the super-precise margins that separate the colors are juxtaposed with these softer painterly passages. The contrast is subtle, however, and only apparent on close examination.

The exhibit opens with the freestanding "Love Prayer," which functions as a wall and creates an entryway into the gallery. But it could also be used as an outdoor installation. "Love Prayer" is made up of eight attenuated vertical forms in patinated aluminum that have been lined up; six are finished in a creamy white, the other two in a deep red. The composition is hieratic, with two white forms on either end and the red ones playing bookends to the two white elements in the center.

The relationship of "Love Prayer" and Morrison's other pieces to American Indian blankets is undeniable — an observation that becomes more apparent as the show proceeds. But there are other things about Morrison's style that mark it as being Western in character. For instance, his use of hard edges is something that's been done in this time zone since the 1930s: Think Raymond Jonson, Emil Bisttram and Charles Bunnell.

This regional character makes sense, because Morrison, who is in his early thirties, was born in Colorado Springs, where he now lives, and was educated at Colorado State University, receiving a BFA in 1997. Although geometric abstractionist David Yust is a longtime fixture in the CSU art department, he and Morrison never crossed paths, since Morrison focused on sculpture while he was in school. Instead, Morrison's principal early influence was the late Agnes Martin, of Taos, a legendary minimalist painter whose pencil lines on unprimed canvas somehow worked as paintings. His work also relates to that of ultra-minimal sculptor Donald Judd.

Everything in Morrison's show is so good, it's hard to identify standouts, but I'll take a run at it. A number of the pieces are densely composed and vividly colored, including "Good Heart" and "The River," for which Morrison has stacked up brick-like colored shapes. I also really liked "Someone Picked Up My Pieces And Made This," in which he has created a stack of horizontal bars across the surface. This majestic piece again brings up the relationship between Morrison's sensibility and American Indian art.

Rule is definitely the place to see minimalist art, as well as its post- and neo- progeny. And *50 Ways To Fall In Love* makes a worthy followup to the just-closed Clark Richert solo with which the gallery launched its fall schedule.

