

TOM DOWLING:

By Peter Frank

“For the past few years,” writes Tom Dowling, “I have been working in a style I like to call Baroque Minimalism – a fusion of the physical experience of the Baroque with the cool aesthetic of Modernism.” That cool aesthetic has always motivated Dowling; known for the precision and graceful counterpoint of his geometric forms, he typically makes work in two and three dimensions – and in between – that exploits a linear precision, an architectural soundness, and an expansive sense of space, so that shapes continually engage in dynamic but soberly paced relationships with one another. Throughout his career Dowling has distilled the formal essence of Modernism and given it new body, one responsive to the industrial sensuality of the southern California landscape.

In his Baroque Minimalist wallworks, Dowling acknowledges yet more thoroughly the physical environment he shares with many other artists of his time and place. The emergence of Material Abstraction in southern California after the 1960s resulted from the desire by students of Finish/Fetish and Light-and-Space artists to reinterpret, even upend, the reductivist, anti-materialist tendencies of their teachers – to make art not out of pure light nor out of slick, finely tooled substances, but out of the gritty materials that Finish/Fetishism left behind. Natural and manmade material, manufacture and decay, and the (always changing) relationship between process and resulting object motivated the artists who emerged, as Dowling did, in the ‘70s.

Where Dowling distinguishes himself from other Material Abstractionists – most subtly but also most emphatically in these Baroque Minimalist works – is in his reliance on compositional armature. No matter their forms, their surfaces, their sensuous evocations, Dowling arranges his elements with evident classical poise. Contour and orientation combine with surface incident – color, texture, inscription – to determine an aesthetic at once as loopy as a slapstick comedy and as balanced as a gyroscope. Dowling’s visual humor is normally soft-spoken, even soft-pedaled, evoked gently by formal contrast and a laconic simplicity (as is evident in the works on paper shown here). The prevalence of elongated forms in the Baroque Minimalism series and the bumptious manner in which they interlock determine a more overtly stated wit. Even the more compact compositions here jam together their disparate elements, pronounced colors, gaudy edges and all, with a goofy willfulness, as if the artist were cramming mismatched parts of a puzzle into one another to see if something new – an alternate puzzle, a portal to a different mindset – could emerge.

In fact, something new does emerge: a body of work that melds conditions into unlikely syntheses: attenuation and compactness, indulgence and restraint, rough-hewn materiality and elegant planarity, cool self-possession and an almost object sensuousness. In his Baroque Minimalist series, Tom Dowling, whose work normally relies on a certain clarity and purity inherited and modified from his Finish/Fetish forebears, has allowed himself a broadly impure approach. He does something quietly radical here, performing a balancing act that doesn’t contradict his normal aesthetic so much as parodies it. If Dowling’s art normally conjures the delicate clarity of Bauhaus art and design, his Baroque Minimalist wall constructions trace their lineage back to the brittle but funky paintings of Lyonel Feininger, landscape rhapsodies composed of oblique angles, airy but stagy spaces, and peculiar, compelling plays of light and shadow. Feininger had been a cartoonist before he was a Bauhaus master; in his Baroque Minimalism (itself a jocular term), Dowling allows a similar cartoonish playfulness to infect his oeuvre. But Dowling is dead serious about the presence of both Baroque and

Minimalist qualities – and about their uncanny ability to co-exist and merge.

Los Angeles

October 2016