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Christian Eckart: The Absurd Vehicle and Other Propositions

McClain Gallery, Houston

Rachel Hooper



Christian Eckart, *The Absurd Vehicle*, 2006-2011; mixed media (aluminum, steel, stainless steel, powder coat, wheels, etc.); 120 x 161 x 161 inches; courtesy of the artist and McClain Gallery, Houston; photo by Nash Baker

Christian Eckart's exhibition *The Absurd Vehicle and Other*

Propositions at McClain Gallery showcases recent works by this veteran Canadian-born, Houston-based artist known for fabricating objects using industrial techniques. Although Eckart's highly finished works here seemed austere at first, I could not help but smile as I took in the bright colors, shiny surfaces and dynamic geometries, all infused with a subtle humor. The variety of mediums and forms on view feels fresh, like Eckart is trying out some new ideas, while the skill apparent in the objects' execution exemplifies an artistic vocabulary and practice well honed over time.

The exhibition's largest work and namesake, *The Absurd Vehicle* (2006–11), is a tall hollow oval form that narrows slightly as it extends back into space, like a giant tuba horn cross-section squeezed on the sides. The oblong cylinder rests on a spoked chassis of sorts, which supports the sculpture on eight pairs of wheels. The form's interior, painted with extreme-effect acrylic urethane (most commonly used to paint lowriders and hot rods), shifts between blue, purple and gold hues. Eckart has been using this polychromatic paint for years, but here he combines it with a ring of lowrider wheels and chrome rims, exaggerating his interest in car culture towards self-parody. I imagine a scenario for this object where a collector commissioned a painting and Eckart delivers a sculpture that could be on an episode of MTV's "Pimp My Ride."

I especially want to put *The Absurd Vehicle* in a humorous light given that Eckart built his reputation on works that take a skeptical postmodern and deconstructive approach to painting and its history. Eckart is roughly of the same generation as Julian Schnabel and Peter Halley (both also represented by McClain) and first gained notice in the 1980s in New York when he and

these other young artists were hearing that painting was “dead” but decided to take it up anyway, defying the assumption that the medium had been exhausted. One of Eckart's earliest series, *Andachtsbild* (1987–90) or “devotional image,” used thick moldings, boxy asymmetries and gold leaf to contemplate painting’s spiritual utility. Though Eckart leaves the interpretation of *The Absurd Vehicle* open, in the context of his deconstructive approach to painting, it’s tempting to read the work as a metaphor for painting itself and the ridiculousness of the idea that a canvas could be a vessel for profound ontological revelations. Were the wheels to start spinning, *The Absurd Vehicle* would go nowhere. When read as a metaphor for painting's teleology, the shock absorbers on the sculpture (read “shock of the new”) are especially funny.

To my knowledge, *The Absurd Vehicle* is Eckart's most sculptural



Christian Eckart, *Dichroic Hexagonal Perturbation*, 2011; Dichroic glass on aluminum armature; 96 x 113 x 38 inches; courtesy of the artist and McClain Gallery, Houston; photo by Nash Baker

work to date in that it consists of a conglomeration of volumes and contained spaces and is presented fully in the round. The other works in the exhibition are more typical of the artist's wall-bound and planar forms, but their compositions, complex interlockings of narrow angles and shapes, seem more baroque than his previous work. *Dichroic Hexagonal Perturbation* (2011) is a standout example of how Eckart is pushing the planar into more dynamic and utterly engrossing forms. In contrast to the analytical detachment often present in his earlier work—which sometimes makes me feel as if I am listening in on a conversation about art rather than participating in it—these suspended, reflective and semi-transparent surfaces directly engage the vision and bodies of viewers. The works invoke the presence of something sacred or transcendent, an appealing move to viewers like myself, who believe in art's transformative power. Although I am not sure that Eckart shares my perspective (his *Vehicle* suggests an undertone of doubt), his “propositions” allow me to see my faith in art reflected back without judgment or intercession.

Rachel Hooper is associate curator and Cynthia Woods Mitchell fellow at Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston.