

Shane Tolbert**Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston**

Through April 16

by Wendy Vogel



Shane Tolbert
(Installation view)

Shane Tolbert's hand-dyed fabric paintings at Devin Borden Hiram Butler possess undeniable visual appeal. Merging the loaded tropes of gestural abstraction and radical monochromes, with nostalgic references to tie-dye and the reappropriation of "craft" sprinkled in, they hit all the right notes. It's like he raided a vintage store of art-historical references and emerged with some stunning and inventive combinations. But the critic's responsibility is to pick apart the dyad of style vs. substance, and after viewing Tolbert's paintings, I was left wondering: are these works simply trafficking in radical chic?

Tolbert's exhibition is his first solo show after graduate school at University of California Santa Barbara, and the last for the Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery as such. (The pair of gallerists announced on **March 10** that they would part ways.) The artist creates his paintings subtractively by bleaching fabrics he dyes himself or purchases in commercial locations such as the Los Angeles garment district. The influence of Southern California can be read more notably in Tolbert's indebtedness to the political motives of '70s feminist artists. Tolbert writes in an artist statement that he is fascinated by "the intersection between the domestic process of making these paintings and their heroic presence as art."

These same questions preoccupied artists like Miriam Schapiro, who started the

Feminist Art Project at CalArts with Judy Chicago and reclaimed “women’s work” such as quilting, sewing and pattern-making from a low-art ghetto to a high-art mode of production she called “femmage.” While this legacy still holds powerful sway, the radical potential of this strategy has undergone revision by younger artists engaged in craft-based practices. Artists like Allison Smith and Sabrina Gschwandtner rewrite the psychic impact of craft histories through social participatory projects like Notion Nanny or the Wartime Knitting Circle while Travis Boyer’s recent Indigo Girls dye-vat events celebrate skill-sharing and conjure queer communities.

In his painstaking production, Tolbert’s work aligns more with the work of young process painters. Sergei Jensen’s constructions mobilize frayed edges, sewing-machine mistakes, and use bleach as a mark-making tool. Tolbert’s stress on the manual manipulation of his panels through ironing, cutting and sewing also bring to mind the recent “folded” paintings of New York-based artist Tauba Auerbach, which were a highlight of the 2010 Whitney Biennial. But where Auerbach deals with the slippages in the language of two-and-three dimensions (she spray paints in trompe l’oeil gradations to give a heightened sculptural effect to her folds), Tolbert’s work remains mired in mixed metaphors. He scatters Twomblyesque scrawls across store-bought and hand-dyed fabrics (*Untitled*, 2011) without a clear critique of either the sweatshop labor of textile production or of Twombly’s poetic gestures. In two other paintings (*Black & Tan* and *Arc*, both 2010), store-bought panels that recall Blinky Palermo’s *Stoffbilder* are sewn to the bottom of fabrics that the artist has bleached. As a commodity critique, Palermo’s gesture of refusal—stretching purchased fabric and presenting it as a monochrome—was scathing. Here, however, it reads as a reference emptied of content.

While Tolbert is moving swiftly and is building a great repertoire of technique, I remain skeptical that in attempting too much, these works say too little. One of the exhibition’s smallest works, *Visions of an Epileptic*, is most revealing of this breathless approach. The tie-dyed fabric, worn through in sections by excessive squeezing or folding, is hastily stapled to the too-big stretcher. It’s the equivalent of rocking your mom or dad’s cool leather jacket that you haven’t yet grown into. Tolbert nonetheless has the chops and intelligence to make rigorous work. I hope he embraces the growing pains over sartorial slickness.

Wendy Vogel is Editor of ...might be good.

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