

GALLERIES

Kenneth Baker

There is an odd flavor of sophistication to the recent work of New York painter Peter Dean at the Rena Bransten Gallery, 77 Geary Street (through July 15).

His new paintings are landscapes (in one a grotesque still life blocks the view), sketched during his travels and painted later in his New York studio. The pictures look like they combine memory, day-dream, tall tale and self-intoxication.

Dean's colors are so raucous at times, and his application of paint seems to waver so wildly that his canvases start to look like the work of a crazed amateur. His occasional affinities to Van Gogh and the Fauves serve to remind us that their art once looked like the work of crazed amateurs, too.

The earnestness of Dean's painting seems to modulate with his technique. In some passages, he whips straight-from-the-tube colors into a lather of impasto to suggest, say, the texture of seaside rocks. Elsewhere, he paints thin skeins of gradated color to get a sunset sky that looks flat as a stage backdrop. In places he appears to have applied dollops of paint with a pastry decorator, like Roy De Forest.

Every time he works out a notation for a feature of landscape or sky, he toys with the possibility of turning it into formula. The spiky leaves on some of his plants, for instance, are just too rote to be descriptive, yet you know this is not the best he can do, it's a choice, a way to confess the work's artifice.

In only one painting, "Mount Pond II," does Dean seem to stop mugging and register without exaggeration the way a violet mountain looms over a dense, misty evergreen forest. Only the foreground here is abuzz with garish flora and even that is nicely subsumed in the relatively muted color harmony of the whole.

Also at Bransten are some big, goofy ceramic works by Tony Nat-soulas. I think he overreaches himself, but he does try really wild, technically challenging stuff, such as a sculpture of a man deflating like a punctured balloon.

Steve Derrickson At Wirtz Gallery

New York artist Steve Derrickson is having his first San Francisco show at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery, 345 Sutter Street (through July 28). Derrickson works in pastel on paper and mounts the paper on thin sheets of aluminum. Several of his pieces feature rectangular panels

hung on the wall in a kind of pin-wheel configuration.

Words and images carry about equal weight in Derrickson's work. In the series on view, he uses highly charged words and names lodged in our collective memory of the 1950s and 1960s. "Zapruder" runs across one piece, overlapping a grisaille image of a haute bimbo, early '60s style.

"Powers, Gary" is neatly printed on another large piece in which there are repeated (pin-wheeled) images of a swinging trapeze artist, who might just be part of a girlie show. Some of Derrickson's own contemporaries may not remember that it was Francis Gary Powers who was shot down over the Soviet Union in his U-2 spy plane, embarrassing American military espionage operations at a sensitive moment in the Cold War.

Other pieces seem to have a more general topical significance, like "Blue Vietnam" and "Danger in Paradise," which appear to adapt sultry figures from old movie posters.

Derrickson's work is full of attitude and empty of most everything else. It relies on the catchwords it pretends to criticize and counts on our willingness to nod and cluck with self-satisfied hindsight about how weird, sinister and innocent the good old days were, back before we had artist-semioticians churning out post-Pop tokens of media-conscious sophistication like we see here.

For relief from the pretensions of Derrickson's work, you can turn to a small show at Wirtz of color photographs by Sara Leith. She works with inset images that imply references to memory, fears or personal obsessions. The technique obtrudes itself too much in most cases, but in some, such as "Untitled No. 13," its effect is arresting, poetic and haunting.