



Off to great starts

Future looks bright for two young artists

By Matthew Kacigas • Special to The Seattle Times

Two young artists starting to gain modest national recognition are featured in gallery exhibitions this month. Larry Bemm at Ballard Fetherston and Jesse Paul Miller at Howard House are both creating abstract art that references popular consumer culture in very different ways. Taken together, they express visions of humor, wit and considerable visual pleasure.

Miller is not yet an accomplished painter, but his Howard House exhibition is a great start. It combines assemblages of found objects with a few paintings containing simplified, ambiguous shapes. The paintings do not pay enough attention to surface or composition. They still act as if they are part of one of Miller's installations that were seen in shows at the Seattle Art Museum and Project 416 in 1997.

Since then, Miller's work has attracted considerable attention from curators, critics and dealers. They are piles of found objects carefully set on the floor, or near a wall, often made of cast-off computer parts or leftover supermarket packaging. They seem like the proverbial boy's bedroom mothers are always demanding to be cleaned up.

The painting "Untitled Blue," 1999, has a three-pronged shape that resembles the back-drop of "Domain," the highlight of Miller's Project 416 installation a few years ago. "Untitled Green," 1999, uses a pastel-green background for another bulbous image. "Sweetie," 1999, is either a four-headed alien or a pink and yellow profile of a four-toed foot. Ambiguous in the extreme, their power rests on a refusal to be identified specifically with anything. "Seeding Device," 1999, a green fiber-glass cube, is another stand-out.

The 31-year-old Denver-born artist has lived in Seattle since 1992. Trained as a graphic designer, he needs to get beyond a facility for casual placement and overly simple composition in order to create paintings with more complex images and painterly presence. Miller's color sense is already assured in the paintings on view.

Bemm is already an accomplished young painter who shows every sign of becoming a great one. Entering painting through the back door of printmaking, Bemm's earlier works depended too much on the etcher's strong outline. He's now 30, and his fifth Seattle gallery show since 1995 is a modest breakthrough in terms of balancing color, creating interesting compositions and taking abstract art seriously enough to make it carry humor and pop-culture references.

The world of manufactured plastic products is never far from a Bemm painting. Most of his colors seem machine-made, redolent of children's toys, kitchen gadgets and convenience-food packaging. But it would be a mistake to discount the sensitive or subjective side of his imagination. With recent solo shows in San Francisco and Portland, Bemm has developed a more confident touch in his oils on canvas. Far from brittle and flashy, Bemm's new picture surfaces faintly reveal each painting's prior history, slowing us down to look over the entire finished work.

His palette still concentrates on retro pastel shades of salmon pink, chartreuse green, turquoise blue and even beige, but each canvas now contains other color accents. "My 11:11 Wish," 1999, "Temporary Primary," 1999, and "Raining Right Above Me," 1999, demonstrate a growing maturity, complicating the colors as well as the images.

Bemm's larger works average four to five feet square. Smaller works are one-foot square. Among the best paintings are "L-Chain," 1999, and "Temporary Reclamation," 2000. Both are intimate encounters with quietly dazzling color effects. Whether by employing dots, curlicues or blips, Bemm manages to keep the viewer's eye moving, giving each work a dynamism that is sometimes lost in the bigger pictures. None of these is a heavy statement. But they attain a hedonistic pleasure associated with the great abstract painters of the past century: Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky and Ellsworth Kelly.