



VISUAL ARTS

ART REVIEWS

LARRY BEMM, recent paintings, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, through July 15, Ballard/Fetherston Gallery, 818 E. Pike St., Seattle. 206-322-9440.

Experiencing the pleasure of a painter's palette

By Sheila Farr /
Seattle Times art critic

Open the door of Ballard/Fetherston gallery and you get hit with a burst of happiness. It's the paintings of Larry Bemm. If you've ever wanted to discover an artist before he or she gets famous, here's the opportunity: Bemm, at 30, is one of the most exciting up-and-coming painters in the region.

Five years ago at Linda Cannon gallery, his paintings reminded me a little of Philip Guston's, for the quirky pistonlike forms and odd pink-struck palette. Even so, the work had a kind of self-contained satisfaction that signaled Bemm was on to something. Now the artist has hit his stride and the paintings remind me of no one else. I couldn't leave the gallery without setting up a payment plan.

Bemm's paint application is loose and confident, his palette more complex than before, and he has mostly dropped the black outlines prevalent in his earlier canvases. He juggles forms in space with total nonchalance.

I'm checking off these attributes in an attempt to put a finger on the secret ingredient that transforms these shapes and col-

ors on canvas into something soul-tingling. But you can't ferret out such things logically. The effect of these paintings percolates through your nervous system and bubbles up in the pleasure center of your brain.

Part of the giddiness of Bemm's visuals is in his palette. Mostly he sticks to colors that are leavened with lots of white, so that when he does turn up the intensity, it really pops.

He can make a splotch of icy pink slide like froth across butter yellow. All that lightness has the effect of music in a major key: These paintings are buoyant — an ode to joy.

Sometimes Bemm lets a casual bit of underpainting peek through, just a glance of crimson from beneath a gauze of airy pink. The thrill of it is a lot like falling in love.

All this might give the impression that Bemm's paintings are pure fluff, which isn't so. There's a serene consciousness at work behind these abstractions and Bemm links his images to quirky titles that stir up rampant, brainy allusions.

The ballooning forms of "Pressure from a Princess," for

instance, hog the canvas like a stack of fluffed-up pillows and, with the prompting of the title, bring the old "Princess and the Pea" fairy tale to mind. But the uppermost shape in the stack is tinted a billowing pink that also evokes a rather too-large rump — adding a lovely bit of irony to the association. Naturally, none of this is stated by those few spare forms, but the idea definitely sparks a fire under them.

Let me add that not all Bemm's colors are pale. In the larger canvas "Just Below

Grade," he tweaks his palette into more acid hues with a tangy mustard yellow and pickle green that stretch against a flat, dull beige so unexpected and so enormously satisfying it's hard to tear your eyes from it. The image strikes like a chord on an exotic instrument.

Often during the past decade I've heard people lament that painting is dead. Don't you believe it. The proof is on the walls at Ballard/Fetherston Gallery through July 15.

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LARRY BEMM



Besides pale colors, up-and-comer Larry Bemm also uses more acid hues, such as the tangy mustard yellow and pickle green in "Just Below Grade."