



Michael Kessler: *Wall Cluster*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 79" high.

Biomorphic Alchemy

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

MICHAEL KESSLER
New Works.
Gallery Bienvenu

DEEDRA LUDWIG
New Works.
Le Mieux
New Orleans, LA

ABSTRACTIONS ARE DISTILLATIONS. They show the essence of a given subject matter, creating layers of meaning. The purification of subject matter inherent in this formal language

lends itself well to the exploration of ideas of the natural world by Deedra Ludwig and Michael Kessler, shown in exhibits at Le Mieux and Gallery Bienvenu, respectively. In addition to well-documented press and exhibition records, both share an interest in biomorphic form, the abstraction of the natural world recognizable in the works of Miró and other artists of the early to mid-twentieth century. Each distills information from the natural world with an alchemical manipulation of materials, transforming their media into a wealth of layered, nuanced imagery evoking the delicately balanced fragility of existence. Their work shares an interest in the sublime, the terribly large unknown that encompasses the world outside us, familiar to Romantic landscape painting.

Kessler lacquers acrylic paints – a medium with a highly industrial history – on panel, resulting in smooth, opaque and transparent layers. This choice of media signals a difference in the concerns between his and Ludwig's work. But, he, too, says in his statement that "nature provides the basis upon which my work exists." In a sense, he also tries to reconcile nature with paint, but does so by manipulating his acrylics into images that balance organic with geometric, creating a sense of yin and yang. He masterfully crafts his paint with modified tools, disguising paint as the record of time preserved in the land: earth, bones, water ripples. In a sense, he recreates portions of the landscape on panel through a dazzling alchemical transformation of common paint.

Though inspired by the landscape, his aim seems not focused on preservation as much as rumination. Colors of sand and blackened earth are divided geometrically, and dark paths curve under and over rectangular separations of the picture plane in the oblong panels of *Wall Cluster*. Compositionally, the work could read like a film strip. The movement of the lines records a meandering path, and in front of this large scale work, the viewer paces and visually traces this path through time. The large scale also gives a sense of the sublime; it encompasses the viewer in it back-and-forth stillness and movement. These panels also recall glass slides beneath the lens of a microscope, images of a sample

of a living entity frozen for the contemplation of the viewer. These are blown up to scale in which a person could fit inside – they are not microscopic themselves, but enlarge that tiny experience to perhaps its correct magnitude. Translucent white paint over a dark background in *Bismuth* convincingly references X-ray imaging, as though Kessler has given us a peek into the inside of the natural processes and structure of his abstractions. Other areas of masterfully manipulated paint seem to be fossils frozen in petrified earth.

Smaller scale works are at times layered with clear resin, giving what Kessler has said, in an e-mail, some viewers have described as a "gem like" quality. This layer adds another dimension to the pieces, which invite a different intimacy than close scrutiny of the surface of the larger work. In the small scale, the viewer is given a whole to closely consider, impossible with a larger size. Little paintings are like small jewels among the "fossils" embedded in Kessler's large pieces, and their tiny shininess provides a balance to the scale of the bigger work.

Both Ludwig and Kessler invite the viewer into essential places. Their images are of elements that are often overlooked but are intrinsically of our world. Both deal with landscape as a starting point for their abstractions, but Ludwig focuses more on the preservation of places, while Kessler asks us to consider our place in their delicate balance. The viewer is given pause in front of the paintings, searching for the wealth of information buried within the layers of each. It is this pause, an invitation to linger and quietly contemplate, which seems most important to the artists and their work. □