

shane guffogg

by shana nys dambrot

Jun 2008



Using the idea of illumination as a literal and metaphorical framework for his work, L.A.-based artist Shane Guffogg makes oil paintings with radiant, fairly humming surfaces, replete with the caprices of refractive light trapped inside their own skin. His paintings typically feature 70-80 layers of translucent colors that have been mixed with a glazing medium, which causes them to seem incandescent, aglow from within as if by lamplight. Vertical shafts, swirling ribbons, and sprays like the shimmering tails of shooting stars generate a trembling dissonance. They are unruly but regal paintings with a balanced asymmetry, anchored in place by longitudinal pales more like eruptions than pillars, with ragged edges like clouds when the sun's rays break through. This effect is only intensified by the restless tectonic shifts between the background, foreground and middle ground. Despite their labor-intensive process, the works seem deeply intuitive and retain their spontaneity, like flies trapped in amber.

Asked what's on his mind when he's painting, Guffogg gives a characteristically mystical answer:

"Everything and nothing; a blending of the conscious and subconscious, like the twisting of rope. If I do think about someone, a place or event, it is intertwined with an emotion and possibly a color. A memory is a starting point for a painting, but as the painting progresses the surface becomes more about itself."

Guffogg's calligraphic mark-making process records the artist's own physical involvement, and forms the basis for the patterns that float over the surface. According to the 45-year old artist, it is an act in which the subconscious "creates its own consciousness." He has long been interested in the way perceptions are processed and sorted, consciously and subconsciously, the way meanings are assigned by the psyche to events and images, and the way memories are created and deployed. Attuned to this transfer, Guffogg starts the patterns in the top left corner and moves across as if he were writing a letter. Channeling his storytelling impulse through the language of abstraction, his works invite viewers to bring their own far-flung associations into the equation, enumerating the things his shapes "could be:" a butterfly, a Polynesian mask, tattooed skin, ghostly apparitions, fire pits, brocade fabric, spray paint lines, something ancient and oracular. "Cave paintings are something I constantly look at for their mystery and beauty. Their voices have transcended their documentation of a world that is so far removed from who we are now, but still resonates with us thousands of years after the fact."

In the context of this atavistic exchange of histories, it makes sense that he would find himself at the center of a community artist's collective. Popular downtown art hub Pharmaka was spawned organically when Guffogg ran into John Scane and Vonn Sumner at a Christmas party in 2003 and "before I knew it we had leased this space downtown." Now Pharmaka with its program of exhibitions, panel discussions, pod-casts and the like is at the heart of the neighborhood. Among its newest endeavors is its "greening the gallery" project initiated via Richard Byrd and the Discovery Channel show, *Alter Eco*. As for the demands of Pharmaka on his studio work, Guffogg believes it sustains and resonates with his painting practice. "The illumination I employ in paint is a great visual metaphor for what is happening at Pharmaka and the corner of 5th and Main. There was a need to look at art in an honest way and try to understand its place in our society. The conceptual platform was built with the idea that art matters and it grew from there."

"The Rhyme of Reason," 2007, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"
 Photo: Jim McHugh

Shane Guffogg's work could be seen most recently from January 19 - February 16, 2008, at Leslie Sacks Fine Art, where he will have another solo show in January 2009. 11640 San Vicente Blvd., in Brentwood, Los Angeles, CA 90049 (310) 820-9448 www.lesliesacks.com

*Pharmaka will host "Rebel Legacy & The Abstract in Latino Art" this summer. The group show is curated by Kathy Gallegos, Director of Avenue 50 Gallery. From June 12 - July 13, 2008 at Pharmaka 101 West 5th St., Los Angeles, CA 90013 (213) 689-7799 www.pharmaka-art.org
 For more information, visit: www.shaneguffogg.org*

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MAY 2010

The Arts Issue

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We hope you enjoy this month's issue and feel free to let us know what you [think](#).

–The Bunker Hill Magazine Staff

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The Painter's Manifesto



Shane Guffogg, painter and co-creator of the Downtown Art Walk
By Jennifer Hadley

Part philosopher, part writer, Shane Guffogg is, first and foremost, one of downtown's most prolific painters.

I know nothing about the art world. Zilch. But I do know a little bit about words, so although I'm uneasy about interviewing Shane Guffogg – L.A. Native, kick ass painter, and founder of Pharmaka – my fears of interviewing him are slightly assuaged by reading the home page of his website (www.shaneguffogg.com). The first lines read: "For me the art making process is a physical act of memory and the psychological manifestation of the act of my physicality." Hot dog. I may not know jack about art, but I live for words. Shane and I are going to get along just fine.

I meet with Shane on Monday morning at his studio/home/drawing room/art collection storage spaces (which are actually several residences in one complex near Santa Monica and Western). Canvases of works-in-progress line the walls (including one which, I decide, is what my emotional state would look like if it were a painting). Other works lean against the wall towards the back of the studio.

To break the ice, I tell him that I'm an ignoramus when it comes to art, but that I

enjoyed the copy on his website. He confirms that those are indeed his words, not the words of a hired gun. Right on. An artist and a writer; at least we share one thing in common. As much as I secretly want to dissect the rest of the words he's written, I'm on assignment, and need to get down to business. My business in this case is learning more about the art world Downtown, from arguably one of the most influential and intimately connected players in its history.

This takes us back to 2002, which is when Guffogg tells me he began to notice an unsettling trend in the art world. "The vision of the art world was not being guided or dictated by artists. It was being dictated by those who have power and money," he explains. Sounds like a pretty sweet conspiracy theory to me, but Guffogg apparently wasn't the only art world insider with these sentiments.

In 2003, Guffogg, along with artist John Scane and art dealer Adam Gross, sat down to dinner and began waxing philosophic about the state of the art world in L.A. "The art world, what was going on; it had almost been hijacked by corporate sensibilities. Suddenly art had become this money making machine. What could we do about it? Nothing. But we needed to have this dialog about it."

So they continued the dialog, every Tuesday, and each week, they invited another artist to participate in the discussion. "Painting is one of the most ancient forms of communication. We were trying to figure out if it was still a valid form of communication. These were big questions we were asking ourselves." (I'd have killed to have been a part of those meetings, as that philosophy degree I have might actually have gotten some use.)

By the time the group grew to seven artists and two dealers, Guffogg and company decided that although these were all very good questions to be asking, they served no purpose if they couldn't be answered. Therefore, Guffogg set about to answer them, via writing what would eventually come to be known as The Manifesto. The Manifesto not only attempted to answer these and other questions, but laid the foundation for what would ultimately become known as Pharmaka.

"Historical movements arise from necessity," reads the first sentence. "In our fast moving world, the stillness of painting is more relevant and more necessary than ever. The quiet moment between the viewer and artwork bears witness to a tradition as old as our creative instinct. It has always been the duty of the artist to recognize and interpret the issues that impact us, and as painters we share in this responsibility – but we must also remain faithful to this tradition. Straddling these divergent streams that divide the old and the new, tradition and revolution, we have come together as a group, PHARMAKA, to embark on the resurrection of what some have called a dying or anachronistic art: painting."

The Painter's Manifesto

Sweet. Sounds like a piece of cake. But how, pray tell, were the members of Pharmaka going to accomplish this? Well, apparently, if you're artists, you start by having your first show, which is exactly what Pharmaka did, with a twist. In January of 2004, the group launched three simultaneous shows throughout Los Angeles. Suffice to say, the turnout exceeded their expectations. "We had about 2,000 people attend the opening downtown," Guffogg says.

With numbers like that, and with the Manifesto in place, the next logical step was for Pharmaka to open its own gallery downtown. Though Guffogg admits it was a risky move, a space opened up at the less than desirable corner of 5th and Main, and the price was right (free rent). Pharmaka went for it. With help from architect Christoph Kapeller, the building at 101 W. 5th was transformed from a complete dump to stunning gallery, which would open its doors in 2005 as an artist-run exhibition space and serve as the home base for Pharmaka. Incidentally, by this point Pharmaka had become a "501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to building a creative and sustainable community in Downtown Los Angeles through contemporary art exhibitions and cross cultural programming."

But Guffogg wasn't just painting, curating, and launching Pharmaka from '03-'05. He also had his pen in yet another pot of ink – helping Bert Green organize and launch the now crowd-pleasing Downtown Art Walk.

In 2004, "Bert and I were talking. Gallery Row was up and running. But we still needed to figure out how to get people Downtown." The idea of the Art Walk was born, and before Guffogg knew it, "We had about 12 people come, and eight of them were in Pharmaka." I think for a minute that Guffogg is joking, but he's not, even though he's laughing. Yes, the first Art Walk in Downtown would be completely unrecognizable when compared to the thousands the event brings in every month now, more than five years later.

Although Guffogg recently resigned from the Board of Directors of the Downtown Art Walk, and admits that the recession has taken a toll on the art world in downtown, he still feels that the future of the art world in Downtown is bright.

"[When] you create an artistic movement Downtown...you create a destination place. Which is what happened. It is unfortunate that with the recession, it became very hard to sustain it. I think it's going to come back again, but I think it's going to have to wait for another economic cycle." All the same, when that cycle does come back around, L.A will be poised to take over as a heavy hitter in the art world, he predicts.

In the meantime, Pharmaka lives on, though without a permanent residence in Downtown, and Guffogg is eagerly preparing for his next solo exhibit, scheduled for May at the Leslie Sacks Gallery in Brentwood. After all, he is first and foremost a painter, something he documented years ago in The Manifesto. "As people we experience the world through the deceptively simple act of being. As artists, we speak of a world that is seen through open eyes and interpret it for the world to see. But as painters, we paint."



MAY 2010 *The Arts Issue*

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SHANE GUFFOGG

January 19 - February 16, 2008 at [Leslie Sacks Fine Art](#), West Los Angeles

by Bill Lasarow

While it was still shopping season you probably stopped for a few minutes to peer into a store window's catchy display. But did you take a few extra minutes to really sort through the layers of visual information? You might have caught a view into the depths of the floor space behind those mannequins. Perhaps there was signage posted there, or decoration painted directly on the glass. And you might even have registered the reflected images of the street action facing the tableau. We encounter the ordinary with filtering lenses that reduce a complete visual experience so as to extract the cultural message we regard as "important." Forgive my cynicism if I suggest that our hierarchies of what is important would be made healthier by simple inversion (like so many art folks, I can't stand succumbing to the moronic seduction of commercial messaging). But they would at least be richer by just staying alert to the multiple layers of information before us.

Shane Guffogg is all about making us stay alert.

The quick version of his paintings is that a twisting ribbon of an automatist gesture is superimposed on a field of little Rorschach blots that read vertically like Asian calligraphic characters. Ghostly smoke rings hover against Victorian wallpaper. If this decisively abstract painter is out to represent anything, it's that the major ideas which have held sway in the modern and contemporary era can be collapsed into a unified vision irrespective of

their clashing disharmonies. Unlike so many of his peers, Guffogg is a unifier not a divider.

There was a decade-long stretch in which Guffogg steadily packed on and mastered control of new component layers applied with increasing complexity that reached a crescendo with an image such as the absorbing "Spanda" in 2003. Vertical shafts of golden light activate an aurora borealis effect on a web of yellow linework. A waterfall of blue patterns softly occupy the foreground. Executed in varied tones, the pattern washes over the linework without holding it back, and provokes a bracing double take as you try to distinguish the physical from the optical properties of the paint. It gives no more opportunity for your eye to rest than a Jackson Pollock. But it's orderly and controlled elements firmly root Guffogg in the kind of rationalism that an earlier generation sought to shed.

His current work reinforces this impression by lowering the voltage and more closely tying things into a structure that feels like it wants to live together. Before, his paintings were being increasingly compelled to blow apart in their own Big Bang. The current year's "I Remember" is like looking at a wall rather than into deep space, and you gaze right through the feather light ribbon. The pattern is aggressive, but as repetitive as a monk's chant: neither dramatic nor narrative. Attention falls primarily on the swirling line, which is calibrated between being as distinct as a portrait and as ephemeral as mist. You go back and forth from mellow introspection to grasping after a specific identity that announces but refuses to resolve itself. We are still too early in this game to regard this work as emeritus, but it is precisely the kind of step back that, rather than signaling a retreat, indicates a growing authority.

SHANE GUFFOGG

January 10 - February 16, 2009 at [Leslie Sacks Fine Art](#), West Los Angeles

by Margarita Nieto

"The paintings are really an excavation of my thoughts, with the original calligraphic markings being the most accessible part and the final surface of the painting becoming the deepest part of the excavation. Thought creates form and form creates thought."
--Shane Guffogg, July 22, 2008

At first glance, the eighteen works that comprise Shane Guffogg's "Communion" exhibition seem to be streams and swirls of color flowing off the canvas. In "Nodus Perpetuus et Copula Mundi II (The Eternal Knot and Link to the World)" electric blue lines (the Eternal Knot) swirl on top of red coils that cover a darker ground of cobalt blue. In "As Above, So Below" wide, curved reddish lines seem to be infused with a mysterious source of illumination. The dark red ground that lies beneath suddenly becomes more intense as the light strikes the surface. Feathery blue symbols cover the surface just below the reddish lines. We become aware that the deep red now emerges in strong broad lines, penetrates into the canvas, and is more vivid as the light plays across the surface. These interrelationships between light, color within and beyond, lines and curves elucidate Guffogg's interpretation of what painting is: a re-reading of "illumination," a Renaissance philosophical concept that entailed seeing at once both intellectually and spiritually.

Such luminosity seduces the eye, shattering any desire to analyze as it arrests one's gaze. Now we become conscious of the lines. Under the shifting light, the surface gives way to lines, squiggles and curves. Calligraphic references? Fragments of obscure and ancient scripts? As we try to relate these lines to a recognized form, we slowly begin to disassemble a painterly language that is essentially abstract.

Born in California's Central Valley, now based in Los Angeles and a founder of Downtown's Pharmaka gallery, Shane Guffogg interned with Gary Stephan in New York while still a student at Cal Arts and worked as an apprentice assistant to Ed Ruscha from 1989-1995.

A seasoned traveler, his wanderings have extended beyond geography to mythological considerations of ancient cultures, the West, Asia and cultural periods, i.e. modernity, the classical, the Renaissance and the contemporary. He has discovered through these

explorations that painting expresses what oral and written language cannot: in his paintings, he has inscribed hidden and visible signs, symbols and patterning that reference spirituality, and the hidden yet present dimensions of Quantum Physics and Super String Theory. Scientific references notwithstanding, Guffogg's way of seeing is not predominantly a physical but rather a spiritual journey. The imagery traces the painter's process in creating the work. We have the option of going along for the ride in our encounter with it.

The complexity of these paintings is reflected in their working process, which demands time and introspection. "Sacred Totality," for example, took more than a year to paint and consists of some sixty to seventy layers of transparent glazes and oils. Cadmium red dominates the work. Waves and curved lines are still reddish as if drawing from the ground, but a golden contrast through light and glaze vibrate across the surface. Allusions perhaps to the vibrating strings that cosmologists have identified as the "matter" of the eleven dimensions of reality that comprise our world, but which are hidden from our perceptual capacity. Or yet again, their rhythmic presence subtly opens up the depths of the surface seemingly allowing a glimpse into the depths of the painting. In "Beauty and its Creation I" the orange-red surface is diffused by white patterning that approximates graffiti. The underlying green curls and waves are a delicate counterpoint to the white graffiti-like lines. There is an interplay between color, line and light, a dialogue underscoring the basic contradiction that is painting: these static images move and dance as the light penetrates the surface.

Fed by the myriad images of our technological culture, film, TV, computer images, and thoughtful as to their implications, the finality of that two-dimensional world becomes the painter's challenge. His response is, as the title "Communion" suggests, a sharing, "a mystic interchange of ideas. . .innermost and spiritual. . .bringing strength and solace between man and nature." By embedding these richly referential calligraphic elements in the layers and depths of his paintings, he allows them to emerge from and into color and light, those primary sources that both give and enrich our lives. This presents a conundrum of sorts, for in so doing, the flat surface we define as the canvas acquires great depth, and what we presume as two-dimensional becomes instead, a three-dimensional experience for both our eyes and our inner being.