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Abstract expressionism finds home in Beaumont

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A studio visit with Howard Sherman
Houston artist Howard Sherman discusses how he experiences as a cartoonist before his large, mostly abstract paintings. Video by Douglas Britt.

HOWARD SHERMAN: EATING YOUR FRICTION

- **When:** Through Jan. 14
- **Where:** Art Museum of Southeast Texas, 500 Main; 409-832-3432

Visit Howard Sherman's studio via video on blogs.chron.com/artsinhouston.

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And the seduction just about always pays off. From 20 feet away, Sherman's paintings make you want to come closer. From 20 inches away, they make you glad you did. There's no single optimal viewing distance because the rewards his paintings offer and the questions they raise keep changing as you move back and forth. The show's title painting is a whirlwind of seemingly flung paint, crisp lines, cartoon characters and foggy *pentimenti*. It all adds up to describe something both incredibly specific and utterly elusive.

"Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash," de Kooning said in 1960. Sherman's paintings offer that same kind of glimpsed encounter, but in a way that feels contemporary.

Maybe that's because, like many of today's artists of a more conceptual bent, he sees himself doing what DJs do, "taking all that history" — the history of 20th-century painting, in Sherman's case — "and really remixing it and

BEAUMONT — Houston painter Howard Sherman's first solo museum exhibition, *Eating Your Friction*, seethes with the ambition of an artist on a mission, as he puts it, "to take painting into the 21st century."

But does it pass the Beaumont test? That is, can you justify driving the 90 minutes or so it takes to get to the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, a fine but small museum without a lot of space to show off its permanent collection, which means you're making a three-hour round trip to see 14 paintings and not much else?

Yes, it does, and yes, you can, if you want to see explosive, commanding work by a painter at a pivotal moment in his career.

Sherman's paintings conjure up the glory days of first- and second-generation abstract expressionism — and some of the better moments of 1980s neo-expressionism — without wallowing in them. There's nothing nostalgic or mannered about these brash, elegant canvases, which are as deeply felt as they are carefully thought out.

Their formal rigor might not be immediately obvious. At first glance, the show looks as if it could have been knocked out in an hour. But warp-speed velocity is just one of these pictures' illusions.

You may wonder why Sherman haphazardly slapped a scrap of squiggled-on paper to *Xeroxing an imitation of your copy* and affixed it to the canvas with masking tape, leaving a smudgy fingerprint on the bit of tape — until you realize that it's all painted. And that's just one trompe l'oeil detail in a painting that's more than 9 feet tall.

Bigger isn't always better, as recent developments in painting have made clear, but it often is for Sherman, whose gestural style benefits from plenty of breathing room. Two of the show's best paintings, *The healthy skeptic* and *The power of an enduring conversation*, are also 9-footers, and they're both wonderfully expansive. When I first saw *The healthy skeptic*, it reminded me of encountering Willem de Kooning's *Easter Monday*, from 1956 — not because of any superficial resemblance, but because it provoked a similar thrill of coming across an instant classic, a huge painting filled with magical little moments.

But while many of *Easter Monday's* details came from newspaper transfer — the reversed images left by papers de Kooning covered the painting with to keep his oil paint from drying — *The healthy skeptic's* are painted or drawn in by Sherman, a former newspaper cartoonist.

Drawing continues to play a major role in how Sherman solves a picture's problems, girds its structure and smuggles in hints of figurative content. But he's letting paint — whether it's applied with brushes, rollers or other tools — do more of the heavy lifting than it did two years or even one year ago.

He's also showing more economy and restraint without losing the sense that he's giving his paintings everything he's got. There's a rightness to the combination of splashes, drips, rolled-on paint tracks and doodled insects that makes *The power of an enduring conversation* seductive rather than off-putting despite its large areas of Gatorade green.

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putting your own twist and mutation on it to take it somewhere else.”

It's well worth taking yourself somewhere else — Beaumont, to be specific — to see where Sherman takes you when you get there.

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