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In Howard Sherman's *Topical Growth Hormone*, the composition is divided by hard edges whose boundaries are then violated by a sprayed, thick squiggle
 HOWARD SHERMAN AND MCMURTREY GALLERY



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ART

Urban flair

Howard Sherman exhibit mixes high art with low culture to an intriguing effect

By DOUGLAS BRITT

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The paintings in Howard Sherman's exhibition at McMurtrey Gallery, *In my mind, you're inflatable*, rely heavily on graffiti in that they incorporate spray paint and often have a vandalized quality to them. Some of the more dissonant images look like turf battles between warring painters whose gestures, drips and spatters encroach on each other's territory.

But they also involve graffiti in the sense that the critic Robert Hughes, in 1994, used the word to describe what he found in Cy Twombly's scrawled paintings — something "more muted and pastoral: harmless scratches, small obscenities, chalk on Roman distemper."

Like Twombly and any number of neoexpressionists, Sherman mixes high modernism and low culture in his paintings. You wouldn't be surprised to find one of his doodles on a bathroom stall. But while, in Twombly's case, you might need to brush up on ancient Mediterranean history to understand some of his titles, with Sherman you're better off typing keywords into the search field on urbandictionary.com.

The paintings' broad themes deal with various manifestations of sex and consumerism set against a blighted abstract cityscape. Sherman keeps the figuration enigmatic, so it's difficult to discern what, if any, message or meaning he ascribes to them. Depending on where your mind is, the cartoon-doodled body parts, syringes and teeth that insistently lurk among the colorful brushstrokes, drips and spatters may register as purely formal elements that help anchor Sherman's compositions or send you in the direction titles such as *Paralytic Hooker* inevitably point.

Of course, finding a gold tooth in a painting and realizing it belongs to the pimp in *Gold Rolex for a Strong Pimp Hand* is one thing; deciding what Sherman has to say about pimps is another.

I'm not sure how crucial it is that we know. Sherman, who drew a syndicated comic strip from 1993 to 2001 before earning a master's degree from the University of North Texas in 2006, may simply be using his own history as a starting point for his paintings, or perhaps he's just listening to hip-hop while he creates them.

At any rate, while deciphering the figurative elements is one of the pleasures of looking at this brash, energetic work, a bigger one is seeing how Sherman integrates them into a rich, abstract painterly vocabulary.

In *Topical Growth Hormone*, areas of bare canvas enliven an image dominated by dark purples, blacks and fiery yellows. Crude and elegant lines mingle with what look like collaged shards of painted canvas but are, in fact, just paint. The composition is divided by hard edges whose boundaries are then violated by a sprayed, thick squiggle, under which smudgy whites partly obscure earlier traces of the painting's history.

Something similar happens in the more nocturnal *Donkey Punching Bastards*, an unabashedly lovely painting despite its title. In all the show's pieces, you get the sense that Sherman is throwing everything he's got at the paintings, but in these two images, the result seems effortlessly improvised.

Instructions for Base Tanning, the only monochrome in the show, evokes Twombly's erased blackboard paintings, but with erotic lines drawn in, smeared out and drawn in again with a joyful energy that feels masterfully choreographed.

I'd be pleased to see several paintings in this important show enter a local museum's collection, but none more so than *Gold Cards Buy Gold Crowns*, in which Sherman's marks, scrapes and erasures conspire to give the image a mysterious spatial and temporal depth. The extensive

RESOURCES

Howard Sherman: In My Mind, You're Inflatable

- **When:** 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, through Feb. 16.
- **Where:** McMurtrey Gallery, 3508 Lake
- **Information:** 713-523-8238

use of white lets the composition breathe, and Sherman's *pentimenti* reveals evidence of the painting's earlier stages while suggesting presences beneath a surface you can't help peering through. The painted shards not only activate the space but positively dance while two de Kooning-like whiplash lines zigzag across the lower right quadrant of the canvas. One line is the other's shadow, and the 3-D effect is riveting. Pieces of *trompe l'oeil* duct tape, along with Sherman's restraint, hold everything together.

You can lose yourself in this painting. I hope to see it again this fall, when Sherman has his first solo museum exhibition at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas in Beaumont, a show which, based on the evidence of this one, cries out for a road trip.

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