



ARTS & THEATER

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Art review: Artist's unusual work redefines painting in 'Las Cosas Que Pintan'

HIGHLIGHTS

Verge gives us an unconventional "painting" show. It expands the viewer's notions of painting into conceptual realms. The exhibit also includes several paper tapestries.

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Walking into "Las Cosas Que Pintan/Painting in an Expansive Field" at Verge Center for the Arts, you might expect to see paintings.

Instead, you enter the room through a large geodesic structure made of bamboo. At its center, a metal bowl and a light bulb hang, emitting a low roar that makes the sculpture and the room around it vibrate.

To your left, there are canvases on the wall, but they are blank, save for round speaker holes in their centers. Moving close to them, you hear voices describing paintings by four artists. By listening to the disembodied voices, you are supposed to imagine the paintings and guess who did them. This is a test I completely flunked. It would have helped if I knew which artists to choose from.

On the back wall of the gallery, a video plays out. In it a man carries a blank canvas on his back and walks through a natural park in Berkeley. As he walks, the shadows of trees, grasses and weeds appear on the canvas. At intervals he stops and allows the shadows to form ghostly ad hoc compositions.

All of these works by Argentinian artist Juan Sorrentino expand our notions of painting into conceptual realms, each using sound as a component or in some cases as the main actor.

Sorrentino, who was born in 1978, has an extensive, international exhibition history with shows in Italy, Spain and South America as well as elsewhere the United States. An artist, musician and composer based in Cordoba, Argentina, he is known for his electronic, acoustic, multimedia works and installations.

I'm not sure what "Respiro," the bamboo/sound installation, has to do with painting, but it is a mysterious and moving piece that breathes and pulses like a heartbeat.

The "Sound Canvases" are fun (if frustrating for this listener), and the video, "Sin Titulos/Untitleds (California)" has a kind of poetic resonance as the man bears the burden of a blank canvas on his back.

In contrast to Sorrentino's exploration of painting, which violates the conventions of the medium, Berkeley artist Miguel Arzabe gives us an actual painting, a hanging canvas thickly coated with paint from tubes given to him by artists who have decided to quit painting. It's a pleasing painting, so fresh that it has that wonderful smell of oil paint, but there is more to it than that.

On the back of the canvas, Arzabe has projected images of paint being squeezed out of tubes in orgasmic ejaculations of luscious, oily pigments. While the piece has an underlying sense of anxiety and loss – the artists who owned the paint have given up – it is also humorous and celebratory as well as being a kind of homage to the artists who gave him the paint.

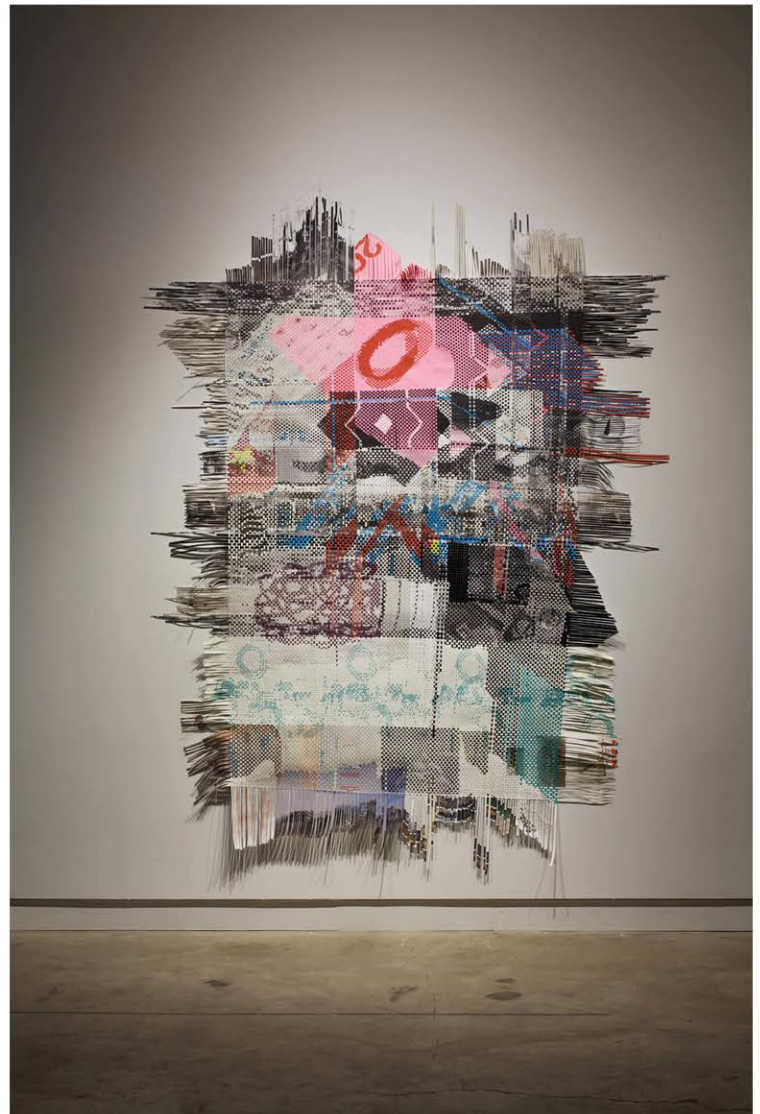
Arzabe, who was born in 1975 and has shown in Paris, Montreal, Mexico City and a variety of West Coast museums, also shows a large piece called "Cultural Fabric (SF)" which is a weaving made of shredded art catalogs, posters, brochures, etc. collected from art exhibitions he has attended. Here, he transforms cultural ephemera into a finely crafted weaving that calls up associations with American Indian textiles and folk art.

There are also several small paper tapestries made of reproductions of works by pairs of famous artists – for example, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Clifford Still. They are delicate and delightful abstractions.

In "Not Painting Paintings," a series of single-channel videos, he gives us swirling "paintings" that grow and spread out on the screens like roots reaching into the earth. In one titled "Anxious," which is mounted on the wall, he offers a seductive, meditative film of birds landing on and scattering away from the Berkeley Pier, here distilled into an abstract, geometric form in contrast to the sunlit waves of the bay and the birds' wings flashing in the sky. For me, it is the strongest piece in the show, which was assembled by Bay Area curator Aimee Friberg in conjunction with Verge.



Tubes, 2015, oil on canvas, 78 x 60 inches, HD video, color, no sound, 5 min 40 sec



Cultural Fabric, 2014, paper ephemera from Bay Area art institutions, 114 x 87 inches