

Reviews

Marcelle Wiggins at Gregory Kondos Gallery

Like moths drawn to a bulb, painters in the latter half of the twentieth century found themselves attracted to machine-made imagery and mechanical forms of reproduction. It was a way to push boundaries and fight what they feared might be obsolescence. They needn't have worried. The "death of painting" turned out to be one of the biggest canards of the 1990s. Painting reinvented itself over and over simply by absorbing the vocabularies of pop and later digital imagery—all without losing its essential character as a hands-on medium.

Marcelle Wiggins takes a different approach. She's a painter who went digital ten years ago with the goal of bringing historical styles of abstraction and representation to the computer.

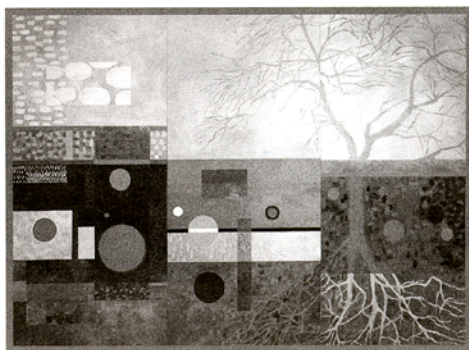
It wasn't something she planned. Prior to trading brush for mouse, Wiggins was turn-

ing out heavily impastoed pictures in a Hans Hofmann mode with nods to Joan Miro and Oliver Jackson, two Northern California abstractionists with whom she studied at California State University, Sacramento. Her trademarks were boldly colored geometric shapes on large canvases peppered with recognizable imagery, a good bit of it phallic. They were very good paintings, good enough, in fact, to probably sustain a career.

But a demonstration of Adobe Photoshop led her to join the digerati full time. She acquired a room full of computer gear, mastered the software and began showing her own students how a "painterly" touch could be injected into a medium that's known more for cartoon graphics than what iconoclasts continue to call fine art. The result was a hybrid: pictures that looked both painted and machine-made—but unlike anything seen in either realm.

Then, about a year ago, Wiggins got

Marcelle Wiggins, (top) *Trim*, 2004, oil on canvas, 72" x 48"; (bottom) *Conversion*, 2004, acrylic on canvas on board, 3 panels, 80" x 108", at Gregory Kondos Gallery, Sacramento.



hungry for the tactile experience of paint and returned to slinging pigment, but with a few twists. For source material she downloaded satellite images of her surroundings and painted them on canvas in a way that emulated the multilayered image-building logic of Photoshop.

The results of this cross-pollination were seen in *Under Surveillance*, a show of eight paintings (oil and acrylic), a single digital image and a Macromedia Flash movie. On a personal, spiritual level, the pictures are about memory, loss and deep emotion—not John Ashcroft's attack on civil liberties as one might think from the title. Functionally and, perhaps most significantly, at this historical juncture, they are a visual record of Wiggins's attempt to bridge the ever-narrowing gap between the real and the virtual to define what can be had when an artist fluent in both realms jumps back and forth between the two.

Conversion, the show's centerpiece, is a large triptych that blends symbolism, geometric abstraction and plein air painting for a Piet Mondrian-meets-Albert Pinkham Ryder effect offset by pixel blobs (à la Chuck Close) that define volume rather than figures and faces. Split horizontally, the picture is dominated on top by a tree silhouetted against clouds, while the bottom pits circles and rectangles against tree roots. The juxtaposition of warm organic and cold geometric is an apt metaphor for the head/heart dichotomy that seems to run throughout the exhibition.

Executive Airport, a painting derived from an aerial view of a municipal landing strip, is a riotously colored, multilayered accretion of intersecting rectangles, circles, stripes and airplane parts that reads like a quashed 3-D photograph. Its "impossible" compaction of space coupled with explosive color sums up the tension between the anything-goes ethos of digital art and the expressiveness and tactility that can only be achieved with paint.

Complex and compelling as these and the other paintings are, the effects on which they make the case for polyglot art are not unique to the collision of painting and computer art. Symbolism, surrealism, hyperrealism and outrageous distortions of perspective in landscape didn't exactly begin with digital intervention.

So what gives here? The answer, I think, lies in *Branches*, the single digital work that Wiggins submits. It defines better than anything her desire to create a credible and unique fusion. As with *Centerpiece*, *Branches* pairs a realistically painted tree against a montage of multicolored rectangles and squares and strategically placed circles rendered in orange and yellow. On top she "draws" organic shapes (trees and leaves) in a loose, jagged Etch-a-Sketch line that tells the viewer in no uncertain terms that it is computer-generated. Granted, this is a shopworn device, a postmodernist cliché; but in Wiggins's hands it's

an effective visual obbligator that unites the image's disparate elements. And while this picture does not contain what Peter Frank (*Artweek*, March 2004) termed "surface incident," its absence is not an issue. In

fact, it's the picture's very absence of texture coupled with its pictorial depth that makes it so alluring.

In the end, *Under Surveillance* shows that it is possible to go home again, but that progress means moving forward. My guess is that Wiggins knows this all too well. The fact that she selected *Branches* to advertise the exhibition indicates that she's well aware of the ground she's broken and the path she needs to take to more fully realize her unique, personal vision.

—David M. Roth

Marcelle Wiggins: *Under Surveillance* closed April 2 at Gregory Kondos Gallery, Sacramento City College.

David M. Roth is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.