

Art Reviews

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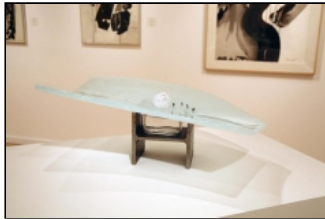
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Overgrown Zen Garden

AKA Zen unminimalizes itself

Rani Molla



Meris Barreto's traditional Zen imagery isn't the only angle taken by AKA Zen. - Meris Barreto, "Free Flow"

Crazed on caffeine, mired in deadlines and armed with enough power cords to make rash decisions, a personal relationship with Zen escapes me. Conceptually, on the other hand, and very basically, it proffers wisdom through meditation. By extension, it incorporates clean lines and a clear mind. In AKA Zen, David Richard Contemporary co-owner and the show's curator David Eichholtz has assembled such a vast collection of Zen ("not a strict Buddhist reading," he tells SFR), it almost overpowers the simplicity of the concept behind i-almost.

The show is brimmed by works in numerous mediums, by nearly 20 artists and from multiple time periods. Indeed, the show accesses the philosophy in four ways—Zen, mediation, nature, and minimal and reductive forms—and sprawls over four rooms. The interpretation is nothing if not thorough. But can there be too much Zen? That's not to question the content, which gracefully fits the conceit and, when viewed, two by two or even room by room, also fits elegantly with the others.

The astounding array boasts myriad blockbusters (perhaps a word having less to do with exploding and more to do with profound understanding of how not to do so would be better).

Meris Barreto's works, located in the front Zen room, most clearly invoke traditional Zen design: simplistic and sating, with clean lines and cool colors. In "Free Flow," a banana leaf of cast glass rests atop a sleek H-shaped metal structure. For the reception, Barreto rested snowballs plugged with metal, movable type on the piece. As the snow melted, the letters scattered at random for one to create words (Boggle for the Buddhist set). Made of the same general materials, her "Run and Hit" is a series of 10 square, green glass panels banded together with metal. On one side, an extended haiku describes Barreto as a schoolkid being hit by a car ("It was bad timing/Me running home after school/Looking left not right/Autumn glare and Ford Fairlane/Bones remember forever"). A metal BB, inexplicably lodged in one of the panes, sends a shatter pattern through the others. This doesn't seem very Zen, but the artist's statement says it represents a Buddhist slogan about life's randomness ("Life is living us").

The work of Merion Estes, located in the meditation room, plays out like an acceptable update on Katsushika Hokusai's iconic 1800s woodblock print "The Great Wave Off Kanagawa." Estes' collage and photo-transfer pieces depict implacable meldings of familiar landscapes, with vivid texture and a dreamscape color scheme. Neon-colored minimalist shapes act as meditative focal points in the works' centers.

Located in the far, nature room, "Natsu no Owari (End of Summer)" and the adjacent "Zenkou (Afterglow)," recently made by Harue Shimomoto, are fused-glass pieces hung in staggered clusters from stainless steel wire. The result is something like Counter Culture's haystack fries that forgo the grease for glass—and bear the ensuing clarity of body. The sherbet-colored waffles en masse create a spindly bloom, light and clean like the tendrils of a dewy flower.

Next to these works, Leon Berkowitz' "Chanakuh #3" is a complementary take on the same palette. Simultaneously shiny from a distance and imperceptibly rough as a pear's skin up close, the oil on canvas could be the closest approximation of a Santa Fe sunset (which I hear has inspired a lot of Zen), were it of one.

Room by room, the works in AKA Zen are singular paradigms of Zen, and are largely beautifully executed and wonderfully selected. All together, the sheer number of styles, sentiments and pieces can be overwhelming. But too much Zen is probably better than too much coffee any day.