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March 2011 Review



"THE ABSURD VEHICLE," 2006-2011

Christian Eckart

MIXED MEDIA

(ALUMINUM, STEEL, STAINLESS STEEL, POWDER COAT, WHEELS, ETC.)

120" x 161" x 161"

PHOTO: NASH BAKER, COURTESY McCLAIN GALLERY

HOUSTON

Christian Eckart at McClain Gallery

Christian Eckart's recent exhibit "The Absurd Vehicle and Other Propositions" at McClain Gallery presented hybrid works that the Canadian-born artist described as "feminizing minimalism." Eckart, who now lives in Houston, uses a variety of fabricators to build his pieces, but he is anything but a hands-off director of arid productions. The work, though made by others, is redolent of technique and high-tech craft, but is at times voluptuous, almost carnal. He studied with Robert Morris at Hunter College in the mid-1980s, and has long looked to earlier practice for inspiration, re-interpreting historic tropes, and claims to follow the "precepts and formal designs" of the Russian constructivists and Baroque cathedral painting. Eckart has maintained a steadfast interest in what he refers to as "the human hunger for the spiritual, or transcendental." Underlying everything is his rather anachronistic pursuit of the sublime. His work is in many collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and Museum of Fine Art, Houston.

Hexagonal Perturbation (2010) and similar pieces on view at McClain are fabricated in billet aluminum, presenting fields of undulating geometric reliefs that erupt in seemingly anomalous complexity.

Designed with the assistance of a computer programmer he has worked with for some years, their shapes are difficult to apprehend, seem to flit in and out of focus, compelling the viewer's gaze and attention. A larger piece, *Dichroic Hexagonal Perturbation* (2011), made of mirrored glass and metal armature, casts blue and yellow beams on its surroundings, reflecting the viewer in pale, disconcerting ways. It uses light, but differs from the works of artists like James Turrell, as the piece keeps the viewer locked in the materiality of the object. It is instead the object's shape, its idea, which is fugitive. *The Absurd Vehicle* (2006-2011), some years in the making, is an apparent departure from Eckart's history. Car culture is at play here, and perhaps a nod to the *intonarumori*, the mechanical tone generators used by Russolo and Marinetti to perform Futurist music almost a century ago. A large muffler-shaped oracular horn surmounts a round carriage of dual wheels. Arranged in a circle, they can go nowhere. Or perhaps spin on the wheel of dharma? The piece recalls Eckart's early gilded icon-like works that he called *Andachtsbilder* (devotional images). Frames of tortured shape, they are empty in the middle, no image to find solace in but the void.

—SCOTT ANDREWS