

By DAVID COHEN

The phrase "mystical decoration," by no means a pejorative, can be used to link painters as diverse as Hunt Slonem, with his expansive, whimsical and diffuse paintings of birds, butterflies, and saints, and Richmond Burton, whose eye-candy abstraction probes a tantric psychedelia at the heart of organic systems and repeating patterns.

RICHMOND BURTON

Cheim & Read

HUNT SLONEM: RECENT WORK

Marlborough Chelsea

REED DANZINGER

McKenzie Fine Art

This month and next, painting that is sumptuous in unabashedly pretty effect but nonetheless spiritually edifying in intention holds sway in the galleries. Robert Kushner's flower paintings on sliding Japanese doors at DC Moore also qualify. And Caio Fonseca, who will show next month at Paul Kasmin, taps a similar aesthetic of decentered design and whimsical arabesque. While all these artists are happy to tease the viewer with an element of campiness, what is more compelling and intriguing about them is that they usually back away from overt irony.

Despite marked differences in temper and taste between Mr. Burton and Mr. Slonem, there are surprising commonalities: repetition, passivity, and use of the grid. But, then, Mr. Burton has a Zelig-like capacity to blend with many artists his work brings to mind. Take the five recent

hemmed in by radically cropped, pulsating orange leaves. By Mr. Burton's standards, the images in this room are unusually iconic, as redolent of Georgia O'Keefe as of Lee Krasner (with whom his name is often linked). Though much is in flux, the forms are centered in a way that intimates a higher order of stasis.

The grids, meanwhile, caught on the diagonal, work in an opposite direction, insisting on alloverness and the possibility of endless repetition. Horizontal in format, they intimate vistas, a shift in scale from the microscopic. They are more muted and restrained in color, but are still a long way from reduction or ubiquity. What animates these compositions is a sense of the grid transgressed, waves of pattern and nascent forms suggested by the contractions and expansions of the latticework. The organic is seen to grow from geometric decay.

The diversity of this show could equally demonstrate restless formal curiosity or a hedging of stylistic bets. A third space shows yet another line of inquiry: "Freak Out" (2004) is a con-fected, densely packed composition of yin-yang and comma motifs. A washed-out feeling in the color and surface lends the canvas the remoteness of printed fabric.

Like Karin Davie and Bruce Pearson, Mr. Burton is happy to play with connotations of retro décor. You then start to notice similar traits in works that had initially seemed more earnest. "Solex," which can't have been divided into three sections for logistical reasons, comes to seem a knowing nod in the direction of fin de siècle screens. The work, by signaling applied art and playing with ideas of

do with the way repeated forms like the rabbits in the aptly named and subtly punning "Charm" (2004) poise themselves between expressive naïveté and stencilled uniformity. In a work like "Ascension" (2004) the multicolored, primitive faces fill out the flanking segments of canvas with childlike glee, as if actually done with a giant rubberstamp.

At the reception desk of Mr. Slonem's show at Marlborough Chelsea, there is a press package inches thick that is filled with fashion and décor shoots in the artists's grandiose residences, including his sprawling studio in West Chelsea's Starret Lehigh Building. One sees immediately that canvases are at the service of ambience, not the other way around.

It may seem unfair to overinterpret a wall of several dozen Picabia-inspired imaginary portraits of saints that look far more impressive than any single canvas in the mélange. Yet this signals a truth about his more ambitious paintings, including those in the present show: Bigger and more is not only better but essential. Essence in overload, however, is a contradiction in terms, and therein lies the mysticism: When you are dealing with décor rather than image, where lightness of being takes precedence over strength of expression, an aesthetic of accumulation makes more sense than one of clearing away. It is the Zen of more being more.

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Apropos of overload, the charming, exquisite, labor intensive, allusion packed, technically exhilarating work of painter Reed Danziger at McKenzie should not be missed. It is true, alas, that she disproves the inverted

paintings in the main gallery at Cheim & Read: These works, which reintroduce the grid motif banished from his imagery in the mid-1990s, relate equally to the tight, obsessively realized pattern making of James Siena and the ferociously expressive nested lines of Terry Winters.

At first, this new series seems a radical departure from the body of work that confirmed Mr. Burton as one of the most exuberant and epicurean of abstract painters. Yet three other pieces, created concurrently and presented in Cheim & Read's chapel-like front gallery, recall the boisterous, curvaceous, florally inspired motifs of his "I am" series of the early 2000s.

"Solex" (2003), a 5-foot-square arrangement of three panels, has what can read subjectively as a brilliant yellow stamen chased by filaments of turquoise and purple and

genre hierarchy, retreats from claims to higher authority.

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Hunt Slonem is a patrician savant almost in the same class as Francesco Clemente: Immensely prolific, beloved in the world of fashion, unfazed by scale, at once fey and egotistical, he is sparing with his magical touch, seeming to inculcate nonchalance, if not cack-handedness, as an aristocratic virtue.

Mr. Slonem's work is often impressive even if rarely — on internal formal terms — very satisfying. In a way, his activity is more performative than productive: Painting as verb as much as noun. Each work is a further installment of a unique personality, rather than a thing in itself.

Ms. Slonem's virtuoso touch isn't to do with the loading or inflection of his brush. His brilliance has more to

Miesean aesthetic that serves Hunt Slonem. In her case, moving to a second or third panel (she works her exuberantly minuscule forms in oil, shellac, pigment, and other media on paper mounted on board) is like taking another dose of overdose. Caveat emptor — she's worth a shot.

Richmond Burton at Cheim & Read until October 23 (547 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-242-7727) Prices: \$40,000-\$65,000.

Hunt Slonem until October 23 (211 W. 19th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, 212-463-8634) Prices: \$10,000-\$60,000.

Reed Danziger at McKenzie Fine Art until October 9 (511 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-989-5467) Prices: \$4,500-\$6,000.