

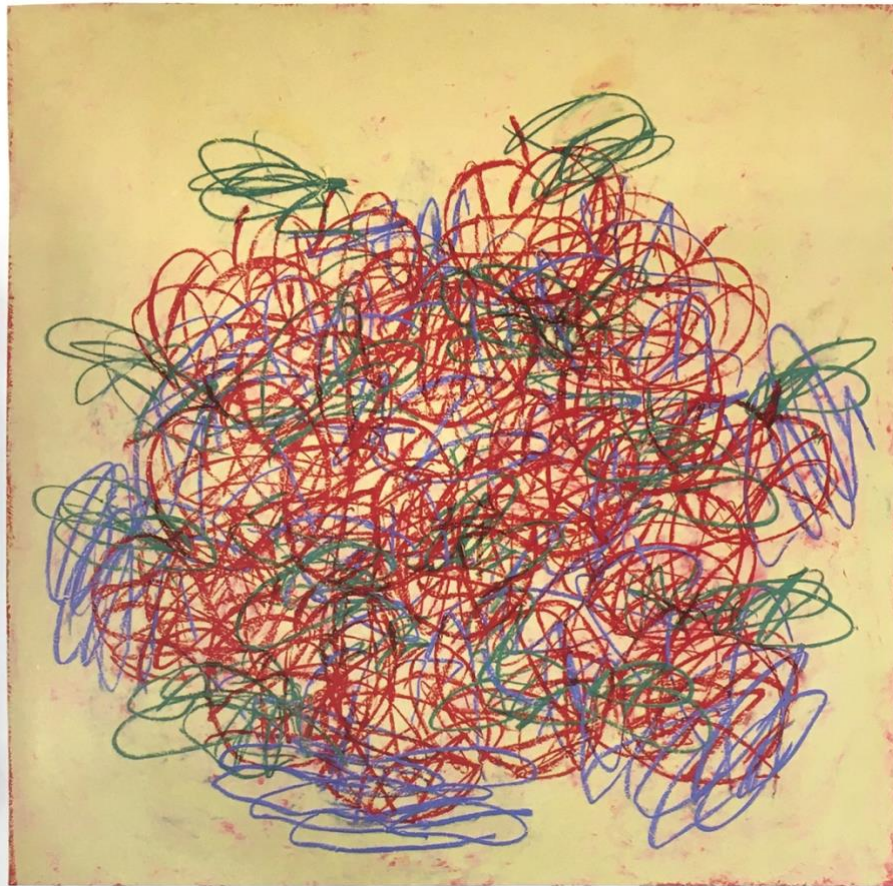
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In Twinned Exhibits, Louisa Chase Feints with Paint and Pastel

By **Bret McCabe** | Posted 5/28/2003



Cherry Jubilee: Louisa Chase's "Bowl of Cherries" is abstract and expressive, without pausing long enough to be either.

Louisa Chase: New Paintings & Louisa Chase: Works on Paper

It's difficult to tell where Louisa Chase is coming from with her recent work. Exercising a skittish vocabulary in Crayola color schemes, Chase's paintings on view at the Contemporary Museum and works on paper at Goya-Girl Press gleefully slide between abstraction and expressionism, never pausing long enough to be either. Like a camera focusing between the fore- and background yet defining neither, Chase's color collisions

converge to form recognizable objects that immediately dissipate into palette puddles and fleeing lines. It's almost impossible to tell if she's calculatingly confounding categorization, or if she just doesn't care.

Kudos if it's the latter rather than the former; it'd be disappointing if work this mirthful came from the head rather than the heart. Emerging during the late-1970s return to painting, along with the painters who blossomed into the shooting stars of 1980s neo-expressionism (Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Anselm Kiefer, Robert Kushner, David Salle, and Julian Schnabel), Chase never entirely fit the bill. What then read as a less nakedly ambitious and aggressive approach to her materials and subjectivity has over time matured into a personal, pliable vocabulary, one she can use in printmaking and etching as well.

A handful of such etchings are included at the Contemporary, but her large-scale paintings bear the fruits of her journey most instantaneously. For each of these oil and oil stick works, Chase has liberally covered an entire canvas panel in layers of colors, yielding a dense, monochrome base onto which she applies her oil stick lines and squiggles. Up close, these bright, and for the most part warm, color combinations swirl in painterly gestures; it's only as you back away from them that their titles gel with their images. A flurry of white lines over pale blue coalesces into pillowy billows in "Cloudy"; nearly camouflaged black arachnids lurk in jittery, white-on-blue crosshatching in "Spider's Nest"; a black-and-yellow morass becomes a restless, funneling force in "Swarm." It's a sly strategy, less *trompe l'oeil* smoke and mirrors than suggestions of actual things, made in a vocabulary easily mistaken for scribbles.

While the oil pastel works on paper at Goya-Girl Press may be less imposing than the large paintings at the Contemporary, it'd be a brash mistake to wave them off as mere studies. Everything about them suggests such--the smaller scale, the compact compositions, as if they were dashed off on the fly--but there's something about them that's more inviting. Setting these smaller works on plain white paper really highlights Chase's technical dexterity. The economy of motion that goes into the bent black lines that crudely suggest her spiders, or the red-and-green globs that become fruit in "Bowl of Cherries #2," are better appreciated when they're not competing with the layers of hues upon which they're applied.

Yet this skill isn't merely in the service of her larger, denser idea. Chase's works on paper capture an anxious emotional surge that the larger works don't, and that's

always been the weak link in her otherwise formidable arsenal. Her subject matter favors the natural still life, an out-of-fashion choice at a time when contemporary painters are turning toward up-to-the-nanosecond mechanical reproductions as image sources (from Gerhard Richter to Carl Fudge) or tackling art history with baffling painterly technique and a precocious wink (i.e., John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Richard Patterson). It's a defiantly idiosyncratic route for Chase to take, one that's enabled her to develop her delightfully impressive vocabulary, but this orthodox turn doesn't always pay off emotionally at the end of the work. It feels more than a little safe.

It's the lone knock against Chase's new work, but one that's not easy to overlook. And it's too bad, because her technical command of the medium is refreshingly human at a time when many painters are attempting to eliminate any trace of the hand in their vocabularies. While market forces definitely affected the direction of painting during neo-expressionism's '80s explosion, leading down intellectual cul-de-sacs and wild tangents only poststructuralists cared to address, what was most intoxicatingly invigorating to see was that those artists loved paint. They loved to smear it, fling it, apply it with wide brush strokes, drip it, layer it, and put it on anything they could get their hands on. They loved it for its gloopy sensuality, its velvety viscosity, that it was something you had to dirty your hands with to make it do anything you might want it to. And while it's an art-world tall tale to imagine that some artists (e.g., van Gogh, Francis Bacon) were so off in their own worlds when working that they may have, purposely or not, eaten their pigments, passionate paintings can make you want to *lick* them. Chase's output has never been entirely mouth-watering, but she has always acknowledged that there's more to the head than just the brain.