

Art in America

Valerie Hegarty

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

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Valerie Hegarty is known for work that gently ribs art historical precedent. About five years ago, she was making irreverent hybrids of paintings and sculpture: a framed landscape resembling Bierstadt, for example, sprouting fake leaves and branches. Hegarty has a muscular style, and her installations seem to twitch and eat away at the walls. At Nicelle Beauchene, she took on modernism in seven discrete wall reliefs and three free-standing sculptures. Riffing on Sol LeWitt, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, Hegarty pays anything but straightforward homage to these modernist icons.

Titled *Cosmic Collisions*, the show (all works 2010) opened with *Space Cubes*, consisting of unevenly stacked, craggy and deformed boxes made of foamcore and cardboard that could almost represent the empty spaces of LeWitt's grid sculptures. Bubbly, murky black surfaces make you wonder if someone went at them with a blowtorch, but what first appear to be pockmarks are actually painted stars. The stars are a clue that, on one level at least, the show's title was literal. Or was it a metaphor for the goal, fraught with paradox, of representing the immaterial in concrete form? Either way, Hegarty's show addresses - without exactly spoofing - modernism's yearning for a universal, "pure" abstraction.



Not all of Hegarty's "collisions" are a complete success. *Pollock's Flying Carpet*, for example, a crumpled, paint-splattered sheet of shellacked paper 5 feet square, looks like a warped action painting that's about to fly off the wall (as its title suggests). Yet the execution has none of the raw energy or looseness of the paintings that inspired it, raising the question of whether Hegarty should have taken on this particular modernist deity in the first place.

She is more compelling when the artist she has selected is a departure point rather than a punch line. The foamcore-and-canvas construction *Starry Rothko*, while heroically scaled at 7 by 5 by 2 feet, has been so crushed and shredded that it seems barely stable on the wall. Ambiguous paint marks on its surface could be either constellations or bullet holes. In targeting Rothko's sanctified reputation, Hegarty brings her hero back to earth, reminding us that "genius," "purity" and "heroism" were qualities that came at a price.

- Claire Barliant