

Allison Schulnik Sculpts Sad Clowns Out of Paint

by Benjamin Sutton



Allison Schulnik's oil paintings are populated by feral pets and similarly disheveled clowns, many surrounded by thickets of immense and bright flowers, others looking lost against indeterminate color fields. These competing tragic, comic, vulnerable, beautiful, ugly and mighty figures are sculpted as much as they're painted: each of Schulnik's mesmerizing compositions—especially the big ones, which are *really big*—is heaped with a small fortune worth of paint, much of it formed by hand into bas-relief sculptural shapes like blooming flowers, makeup-caked faces and patchy pet fur. In her first exhibition at **ZieherSmith**, *Mound* (through December 17), the young Angeleno compliments her impressive paintings with small ceramic objects like an emaciated cat, a disfigured clown's head and alien-looking blob creatures. Many more of the latter appear in her newest claymation short, "Mound" (all works from 2011), a four-and-a-half minute video that took her eight months to shoot. Full of melancholy hybrid characters in a constant flux between being and unshaped potential, they're very clearly related to the creepy clowns in the paintings, all hunched bodies, big, sad, sunken eyes and ambiguous grimaces. Like their liquifying claymation cousins, the painted figures seem always at risk of dissolving into their surroundings or being swallowed up by the blooming flowers around them (which might explain their pained expressions).

On the other hand there's such an incredibly palpable, tangible mass to the painted characters and flowers that it's a wonder the most thickly applied forms don't drop right off the canvas. In the smaller still life "Oval Flowers," for instance, a pair of burgundy, rose-like buds push out from the canvas, as if by the time the exhibition closes they'll have grown right off of it. Schulnik foregrounds touch and texture through this visually arresting style of application. From the hand-formed contours of the creepy-cute glazed ceramic sculpture "Purple Cat-Possum," to the fingerprints moulding characters in "Mound" and massive rings of layered paints in the eight feet-by-twelve feet canvas "Flower Mound," each piece is as much about portraying an expressionist space and the figures occupying it as it is about the weight, pliability and texture of Schulnik's materials—one's reminded, for instance, of Jim Herbert applying his paints by the handful. Her use of many hand-sewn textiles in "Mound" suggests possible forthcoming formal explorations in a new medium. For now, though Schulnik remains very much at the forefront of a type of (neo-)neo-expressionist figurative painting that's very widely practiced in New York at the moment, but is not at all what comes to mind when we think of conventionally "Los Angeles" art. The visual pleasure provoked by such hulking masses of paint lends a sad beauty to the melancholy figures they depict.