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'Wow!' follows 'Huh?' where art imitates art

BY MARGARET HAWKINS

Painter Ed Ruscha once defined the difference between bad art and good art by saying that when you see bad art your reaction is to say, "Wow! Huh?" but when you see good art you react by saying, "Huh? Wow!"

That's a pretty efficient system, especially since it works sometimes. Take "Inherent Order" at Zolla Lieberman Gallery, a show of abstract paintings by Anoka Faruqee and David Driscoll that first elicit a frankly "Huh?" reaction.

Both artists make paintings that initially appear to be produced through some mechanical, photographic or digital system that creates programmable patterns. It sounds boring, and it would be expected that both artists actually make their apparently photographic surfaces in low-tech, old-fashioned ways but with a precision that approximates mechanical reproduction. The artists go to all this trouble for the purpose of contemplating and commenting on mass-produced imagery, but also maybe just for the mesmerizing pleasure of creating pattern itself.

Faruqee presents what she calls twins, pairs of paintings that look almost the same but which were produced through opposite processes. In one especially beautiful pair, she first created an organic expressionistic abstraction by pouring green and yellow paint onto a canvas and allowing the serendipity of accident and nature to form a flowing design. She says it takes her "a few minutes" to make such a painting, but in its twin she spends hundreds of hours re-creating it using precisely color-matched, fingernail-size pixel shapes painted on a grid so that the image appears digitized.

The idea, she says, is to explore the relationship between the original and the copy, since most artworks or images exist in multiple versions now. Her work examines the difference and the sameness between versions while exploring the value of the actual time and labor involved in making each. Looking at these phenomenal efforts reminds us of the labors of the monks who copied manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* or, more recently, the work of Karen Reimer, the Chicago conceptual artist who embroiders imperfect reproductions of mundane printed objects.

Influenced by digital photography and weaving as well as Islamic tile art, which, for religious reasons, is non-representational and highly patterned, Faruqee manages to raise questions about the ultimate and most complex process of reproduction, the reproduction of DNA both in nature and through cloning.

Understanding how Faruqee goes about making these paintings opens our eyes and makes us look at them with wonder rather than boredom. It's incredible how much labor and time has gone into each copy -- Faruqee uses medical syringes, for instance, to mix exact color duplicates -- and still her copies are obviously different from the originals. This is the idea, of course, to demonstrate the uniqueness of every living and non-living thing, and to show the perfection that resides in the minute variations we might first perceive as errors.

Driscoll is exploring similar territory in his pattern painting, but on a more sensual though still conceptual level. Driscoll's big paintings look at first like photographs of natural surfaces, but with a radical shift in scale: one could be a highly magnified view of an elephant's skin, for instance, while another could be an aerial view of a mountain range.

They are not. Rather, Driscoll's surfaces are real, created by the chemical and physical reactions among the materials he mixes on the canvas. It's a fairly conventional combination of painter's materials that he uses, including oil paint, varnish, industrial solvents and dry pigments, but he puts them together in a most unconventional way.

Driscoll says he's interested in "certain physical characteristics of paint that largely seem to have been ignored or under-explored." He exposes these characteristics through pouring paint and solvents in multiple ultra-thin layers onto panels that are enclosed in a sealed tank. The materials resist and combine with one another in chemically predictable but not hand-controlled ways. Thus his work is both handmade and not manipulated, something like a science project where he does not control the results but simply observes them.

The resultant surfaces suggest geology, biology, weather systems and the underlying pattern-making forces in nature that connect them all. As Driscoll says, "The surfaces of these paintings evolve in the same way as any other surface in the physical world."

Wow.