

Burnaway review of "Oh So Fail"

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From Burnaway.org :

Alex Kvares's Oh So Fail Thursday, December 3, 2009 By Charles A. Westfall Alex Kvares, Karen 2. Photo courtesy Beep Beep Gallery; please click to zoom. There is something charmingly old-fashioned about the best drawings

in Alex Kvares's Oh So Fail,

now on display at Beep Beep Gallery. Of course, that's not intended as a backhanded compliment. I was surprised to find myself so enchanted by these quiet, neatly framed little works. I had seen images of the work online, but, as I walked into the gallery space, my preconceptions underwent a transformation. The loose, muted, and somewhat pedestrian image I had drawn in my mind was suddenly reduced to something tight, clean, and deliberate, like a picture pulled into focus. It's been a while since I've seen work that felt so in tune with its own scale.

Alex Kvares, One Way to Deal. Photo courtesy Beep Beep Gallery.

The drawings are composed of thousands of tiny, multi-colored hatch-marks carefully placed one beside the other. The imagery is of two types, portraits and landscapes. (This is a slight simplification, but it's one that Kvares endorses, so I'll run with it.) In addition to the subject matter, significant formal differences exist between the two series. The portraits are more graphic and function the way you expect a drawing to function, with the pencil marks as "figure" and the white of the paper as "ground." They're well put together, immediate, and easy to like. But they fit a little too comfortably into what I would call a fecalface.com aesthetic: They have a sort of hip, West Coast graphic design feel that leaves me a little wanting. Alex Kvares, New Academy 2. Photo courtesy Beep Beep Gallery.

But the landscapes … those landscapes! Built in the same way as the portraits (colored pencil, etc. on paper), they produce a very different and, in my opinion, more substantial effect. With a more overall treatment of the surface and an increased density of marks, the landscapes function like little windows into a kind of strange, almost charmed, post-pointillist world. They demonstrate the kind of spatial and coloristic virtuosity that would have made Seurat proud. In Kvares's works, however, the romance of Seurat's Parisian parks has been traded for a more enigmatic, though no less enchanting, glimpse into a hushed, disintegrating Cold War landscape. Abandoned laboratories, gymnasiums, and bomb shelters slowly evaporate among the trees and forests of old-world Europe. The whole scene shimmers, hovering between the material and immaterial.

The works are not "windows" in a completely traditional sense. Where a Vermeer, for example, draws you into the space—the represented space—of the image, Kvares's landscapes draw you in until you run smack into the surface of the paper, where you can see and feel the way each tiny mark (each "stitch", as Kvares calls them) has been pushed onto that surface. It's not entirely unlike your first experience with Ben-day dots, but one that seems more meaningful, where all the tiny marks speak, not to some sterile algorithm, but to an almost Zen experience of disintegration. They speak to the intricate beauty of human activity in the face of total and imminent failure. Perhaps this is the failure toward which Kvares invites us: Oh so fail.

The final days to view Alex Kvares's Oh So Fail are this Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, from 12-6PM, at Beep Beep Gallery.