

DAVID B SMITH GALLERY

Ricky Allman

Surface flaws render light reflections unreliable

David B. Smith Gallery
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Exhibition Essay by Leanne Haase Goebel

Ricky Allman's paintings on view in this exhibition at David B. Smith gallery are neither dystopian or utopian—they fall somewhere in the middle—dark, yet hopeful. The series seems cavernous, as if Allman has gone underground to secret bunkers, perhaps the abandoned silver mine beneath Area 51 or the rumored tunnels beneath Denver International Airport. Yet, these are paintings of structures of massive scale, built against and atop mountains, bereft of human presence, scale signified by flocked white pine trees. It's a 180-degree shift for the Utah born artist who began his art career painting doomsday.

Raised as a conservative Mormon near Provo, Utah, Allman confesses that as a young boy he didn't think he would live to be twenty. He literally believed the world was going to end. And that ominous fear influenced his early works as a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he began painting apocalyptic imagery based upon his theological upbringing, the geographical environment, mountainous landscapes and Mormon architecture.

"At the time, I didn't want to admit how biographical it was," Allman said. "I've made sense of a lot of that information and I'm now fascinated with the future and what possibilities there are."

Allman now spends his time listening to science podcasts and reading books on technology. He is fascinated with the power of the human mind and the merging of science and technology. Whereas before his work was informed by the hopelessness instilled in him by his religion, and the bizarre view of the future that faith taught him, today he is more hopeful and imagines scenarios of possibility. Evidenced in his landscape paintings of imagined fantastical landscapes that combine organic forms and geometric structures.

In spite of the fact that art was mostly absent in his upbringing, Allman began drawing and doodling as a boy. He didn't know anyone who was an artist and it wasn't until college that he took a few art classes. His teacher's encouraged him. He left Utah Valley State College with an Associates Degree and moved to Boston where he earned his BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art, where, as a senior, his painting style began to take hold: a

frenetic, expansive, chaotic visual language built on duality and structure. At the time it was solely apocalyptic and rooted in destruction.

Today, he would find it strange to illustrate those same ideas because as he was painting works that were autobiographical, he was also beginning to question the theology of his faith and upbringing. While Allman admits there remains a dark side to his painting, he states that ultimately he is an optimist. A maximalist, he puts everything into each work, letting loose any restraints on the level of detail or number of structures he allows in his paintings. This current exhibition features paintings that are whiter and more industrial than previous works.

And while he has tried some sculptural installations based on his paintings, and even started a video, he sticks with painting, he says “because the viewer automatically gives up any pretense of seeing a real space when they look at a two dimensional surface.” His work is about the manipulation of space, but is also deeply influenced by the science fiction films of his adolescence like *Back to the Future*. Also evident in his work is an exploration of density, urbanism and places like Taiwan, where they are building skyscrapers up the side of mountains, that the artist finds to be simultaneously disgusting and fascinating.

Now living in Kansas City, Missouri, mountains remain an important element for the painter, who considers them protective. But they also help him investigate the extreme scale of expansion and building, and contrast with the high structure and finite detail of the other elements of his painting, allowing a looser, more painterly touch.

Allman works on multiple canvases at one time, but each painting starts differently with merely the spark of a compositional idea. He prefers acrylics, which dry quickly, but there is a lot of prep work necessary, as the canvas gets layered with gesso, underpainting and gel mediums. The artist conceptualizes the basic structure and the architecture of the painting, but then leaves the detail to intuition, filling in and refining. His color palette tends to cycle. In graduate school, he used intense, vibrant color everywhere. Then he took all the color out and did gray and white paintings, using color selectively, “so it could function in a more active way,” he said. The paintings gradually got more and more colorful again and he has since pulled back to a more subdued palette with more earth tones. A wider variety of influences now affect his palette. A trip to Amsterdam this past summer brought in the palette of that city: lots of red brick with black and white trim. His studio in Kansas City is in an old industrial neighborhood with sparse bits of color here and there.

What Sarah Sze creates in three-dimensions, Allman manages to spew across a canvas more like other RISD alumni Julie Mehretu and Benjamin Edwards. Where Edwards seems more focused on cities and Mehretu on cosmopolitan mapping, Allman blends together industry, urban structures and grandiose natural environments into something that is both science and fiction.