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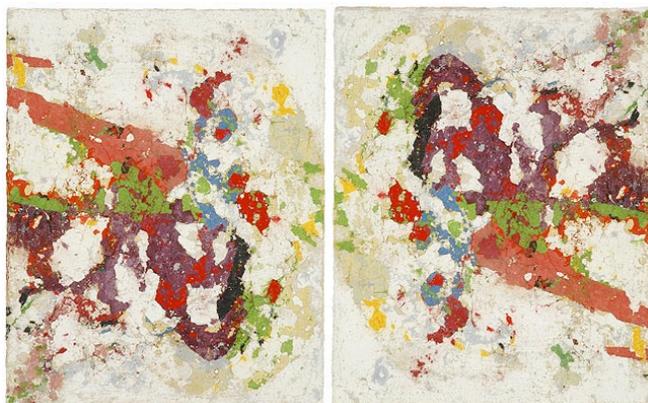
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VISUAL ARTS: Layers of depth come undone

By Catherine Fox
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Verdict: Delectable and resonant abstractions.

If you have an appetite for sensuous experiences, head to Marcia Wood Gallery. Rainer Gross' paintings are scrumptious.



Rainer Gross, *Pronto Twins*, 2007, Oil and pigments on linen,
16 x 20 inches (41 x 51 cm)

The New York-based artist has developed an unusual technique to make these abstractions. Gross paints six or seven layers of different-colored pigment suspended in water on one canvas. These are neither one solid color nor a pattern, but each layer covers the last altogether. Then he applies a 1/8-inch-thick layer of paint on another canvas of equal size. He presses them together and leaves them overnight. When he pulls them apart, the parts of the surface of one stick to

the other. The two become virtually mirror images.

Gross picks names out of the phone book for titles and shows the works singly and in pairs. Much is made of this process as a conceptual endeavor. You could see it as a riff on originality or chance. Gross has ceded control, withdrawn his hand, trusting fate. To my mind, the result is more important than the process. The technique produces a gorgeous surface, crusty and complex. Too bad the texture is hard to capture in photographs.

The water evaporates, leaving the tactile, crumbly pigment, which clumps, clots, crackles, speckles and skitters on the canvas. The colors beneath the painting's epidermis --- a wonderful array --- emerge, sometimes asserting their presence, sometimes playing peekaboo.

The looser, more random-looking compositions outflank those that feature large swaths of color. "Balaba Twins," a splotchy, allover design, is lighter on its feet than "Addington Twins," a stack of blocks that is ponderous and static. The looser ones resonate with all sorts of associations as well. They might suggest topographical maps, in which you might sight an archipelago or a drought-cracked plain. Others bring to mind a landscape or an age-battered wall, its peeling paint revealing previous lives. Gross likes their open-endedness. Still, these paintings don't need a narrative hook. Their visual power is more than enough.