

What one artist just felt like doing one day

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CHRIS CRAN AT CLINT ROENISCH GALLERY

I ask painter Chris Cran - whose shimmering, graphically delicate but exacting paintings deal with a myriad of subtle optical issues - if he thinks of himself as a visual satirist? I figure all that allusiveness in his pictures - to optical art, to pop art, to photography, to portraiture - pegs him not only as a virtuoso manipulator of genres, but as their gleeful analyst and demystifier.

He doesn't deny it exactly, but points out, with a certain Cran-ish wryness, on the phone from his studio in Calgary, that "there's the pleasure of them too." For a painter whose work seems so elaborately planned and carefully worked up, it's disarming to hear him stress that part of his practice "is simply asking myself what I feel like doing today."

Bright Spiral Standard, Cran's exhibition of new and recent paintings, is now at Toronto's Clint Roenisch Gallery. It's a dazzling sojourn in sophisticated visuality. And fun, too. I ask Cran what Bright Spiral Standard means. I've assumed it is some term in particle physics or something that lies equally beyond me. "Oh, it's just made up," he tells me. Made up? "Yes, Clint [Roenisch] just took it from a box of nails sitting on a shelf above his desk."

But as playful as Cran can be - which is plenty playful - there is solid rock (and pure gold) beneath all the waggishness and the painterly *joie de vivre*. Take his exquisite painting *Nice Frame*. The painting, which Clint Roenisch refers to as one of Cran's "management of glare paintings," does indeed have a nice frame - all gilded and ornate. It holds, beneath its heavy coat of clear, golden gel, a highly abstracted muster of silvery conic shapes (Cran's silver paint is one of his trademarks). At first glance, the painting reads like a Ucello (the silver vortices look like armour). Then it begins to resemble an early Marcel Duchamp. It's only a moment later that you finally settle into Cran's whirling, metallic, top-like configurations spinning in his shallow, shadowy space. Five hundred years of art history held tight within a 32 inch by 28 inch window! It is the oddness of Cran's paintings that is so compelling. His enigmatic *Sailor*, a sort of nautical portrait begun around 2000 when he was teaching at Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in Saskatchewan, gradually gathered itself together over the past nine years, mostly as the product of Cran's question to himself: "Does my hand have its own intelligence?" Clearly it did, and the painting acquired its final touches (a small white triangle which could be the sailor's collar or a sail in the distance) just this year.

Much of Cran's work trades in his remarkably inventive referencing of disciplines adjacent to painting: photography, for example, and commercial illustration and printing processes. Cran actually manages somehow to paint halftone images, for example, and is genially willing to explain how you can make a painting flicker back and forth from its negative to its positive image just by controlling the light that resides in pigment (especially silver pigment). "Horizontal strokes catch and hold light," he tells me, "whereas vertical strokes let the light drop." When you combine the two into curves and arcs of paint, you can "torque" the light and create volume.

House Head, reproduced here, is typical of Cran's deadpan virtuosity. The stern, bottom-line visage that floats softly behind Cran's distancing vertical stripes, has been overlaid by Cran's simplified, pictographic house so that the "house's windows register as the man's eyes. It's an optical fandango and a work of high labour-intensity (I had to pump a little more glint into the guy's eyes so they wouldn't get lost behind the house...)." I ask Cran whether he cares if viewers read the painting as a man thinking about a house or as a house having obliterated a man or something like that. "I'm making a mute apparatus," he replies with his usual geniality. "It's been left there for people to apply their thoughts and words to it."