

Ward Schumaker's hand-painted book real page-turner

Kenneth Baker



Pages from "Beneath Krakatoa," a book painted by Ward Schumaker. Photo: Unknown

White gloves on a table in an exhibition offer an invitation to don them and page through a series of artworks on loose or bound pages. Like too many visitors, I skirt that invitation more often than not.

But once I started to page through Bay Area artist [Ward Schumaker](#)'s albums of painted sheets at Jack Fischer's new Potrero gallery, I could not stop.

Seldom will you encounter contemporary art in any medium of such relaxed, fearless confidence. Schumaker has not merely registered but digested the graphic aesthetics of [Philip Guston](#)'s 1960s work - early and late - plus the best of Terry Winters, Cy Twombly and Anselm Kiefer.

Most artists whose work summons such references - with all that they imply of feeling for color, materials, mystery and surprise - cannot withstand the comparisons that inevitably follow in viewers' minds. Schumaker need not worry.

Here and there he takes on the additional challenge of incorporating words into the books. Surprisingly, for the most part, the text does not interfere, nor does it disappear by settling down into obvious meaning.

Very rarely does a critic encounter new work that immediately rewards a lifetime of learning to look. No one who cares about seeing as a sensation of life should miss this chance to inspect Schumaker's albums.

Even absent the books, Schumaker's show would stand out by the authority and variety of work it contains. He confronts head-on the absence of credible conventions or pretexts for composing a painting from zero and strides forward. Inevitably, stumbles occur, but seeing the effort alone will give heart to fellow artists and everyone open to it.

Ward Schumaker: Years of Pretty: Paintings, sculpture and collage. Through Oct. 12. [Jack Fischer Gallery](#), 311 Potrero Ave., S.F. (415) 956-1178, www.jackfischergallery.com.

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