

Disruptive Influences

Don Suggs is all over the place — in a good way

BY HOLLY MYERS

trim, energetic figure with white hair and startling indigo eyes, Don Suggs has the verbal ease and subtle theatricality of one who's accustomed to standing in front of a classroom. (He's been teaching steadily since the early 1970s, at UCLA since 1982.) His spacious Atwater Village studio, though packed with books, tools, materials of all kinds, mountainous bins of plasticware, and a contraption the size of a small room designed to spin a canvas horizontally while the artist applies pigment from a mattress-lined perch above, is minimally stocked with chairs, and we make little — in fact, no — use of them over the course of my nearly four-hour visit, which comes to seem emblematic. "To undertake a conversation with the art of Don Suggs is a lengthy and open-ended commitment," as *Weekly* critic Doug Harvey, co-curator (with Meg Linton) of Suggs' midcareer survey at Otis, writes in the show's catalog. Indeed. And if he's not going to relax into the security of any one particular mode — the title of the survey, "One Man Group Show," gives you some idea of what you're in for — he's not going to let you get any too comfortable either.

The earliest painting in the show — a clean-cut, column-shaped canvas involving a sequence of interlocking circles, made the year that Suggs received his bachelor's degree from UCLA (1969) — suggests an artist well on his way to a respectable career in hard-edged geometric abstraction. He shifted to sculpture in graduate school (also at UCLA), then back to painting, cycling over the course of the next decade through a virtual handbook of late-20th-century painterly vocabularies: hard edge, neo-expressionism, appropriation, photo-realism — sometimes in the space of a single canvas. Throughout the 1990s, he worked mostly in photography. Around the turn of the millennium, he moved into found-object sculpture — hence the prodigious collection of plasticware (kiddie cups, dog-food bowls, cactus-stem margarita glasses and the like). Lately, he's back to clean, elegant abstraction: concentric-circle paintings, albeit with a twist — more on that in a moment. Throw in the four books and one large-scale, text-based installation he's produced in collaboration with poet Paul Vangelisti and you have a remarkably diverse body of work.

"There's a logical progression to all the changes," Suggs says, "but it can be difficult for people to follow unless they're paying attention or they're particularly tolerant of variety. And there isn't that much tolerance out there for variety, I've found. People want to think of artists as trademarks, and that's really the wisest way to go: to get a good trademark and just stick to it and refine it and go on a gradient and eventually people will pay attention to you for your tenacity. That makes a lot of sense. I never espouse my way of doing it to younger artists, I just say there are basically two kinds of career choices you can make — well, there are many, but two big ones: whether you're going to take the path of consistency and slow building or you're going to make a career basically based on inquiry, which is relatively unconstrained. If that is the case, it is unlikely that you'll be able to stick to one thing."

One word that comes up again and again, both in our



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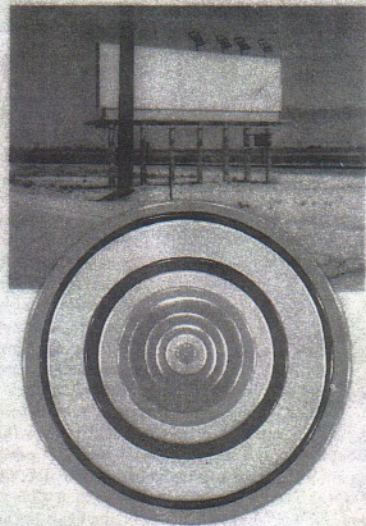
Right: American Feast #1/Corny (2007)

conversation and throughout the show's catalog, is *interruption* — which may be the closest thing in Suggs' heterogeneous oeuvre to a central preoccupation or theme. His aim, in most cases, is to throw some kind of monkey wrench into his viewers' visual and cognitive experience, thereby tricking them into taking a closer look.

Referring to a series called "Proprietary Views," in which he drops sharp, geometric figures smack in the middle of traditionally composed landscape paintings, he explains: "Essentially it's about questioning our assumptions about the natural and how we've tailored our notion of the natural into some kind of pretty thing. So, what happens when you're given all the cues for that experience and then someone disrupts it by blocking a part of it out? My father, who was an engineer and not in any way interested in art, said when he saw these paintings from the mid-'80s, I really like your pictures, I just wish you hadn't put those things in front of them. You know? That was the exact thing I might have expected from him. And my response is, Well, Dad, those *are* the pictures. There's nothing in front of the picture, that *is* the picture, it's a two-part experience!"

"Either you bypass the disruption," he adds a little later, "or you philosophize about it. Why am I being deprived of this? And then hopefully this leads to a kind of re-examination of your assumptions about the thing depicted."

Take the concentric-circle paintings: gorgeous disks of candy-store color that, while resembling modernist distillations of pure form, are actually depictions — or translations, to use his word — of famous classical paintings. Working back from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1907 to the



Pacifier II-4 (1998-2004)

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Mona Lisa in 1506, Suggs chose one monumentally iconic painting for every 80-year interval (roughly a lifespan), then charted a spiraling path through its composition, beginning with what he considered its formal or psychological center, tallying up all the colors he passed along the way. He then reproduced these colors, in the same order, as outwardly emanating concentric rings in his own painting. (In response to the indignation of his friend Linda Stark — "I was trying to make this argument over *huevos rancheros* one day," he explains, "and she was so angry: This is just patriarchal, canonistic, blah blah blah, and I said I know, I know, but it's history! And she would just not be deterred" — he expanded the series to include 20th-century paintings by women artists, chosen at 20-year intervals; hence the series title "Patrimony/Matrimony.")

"All of my paintings are representational," he says. "And yet everything is a translation. Why do we need *The Raft of the Medusa* in front of us? Everyone's got it in their little memory bank, and so when you see something that's called *The Raft of the Medusa* — and that's the name of my picture, *The Raft of the Medusa* — then what does that do to you? It brings up the question you just asked, which is, okay, where's the imagery and, uh, why isn't the imagery in there? And the answer to that is, because I don't want you to see the imagery. In fact, I want to thwart your access to the imagery. Why would I thwart your access to the imagery? Well, because it's going to piss you off and it's going to make you go look at the imagery and say yes, there it is!"

"Unless they're going to the Louvre to experience the actual painting, I would bet that when most people pass a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* they don't look at it. Or at *The Raft of the Medusa*. What you see is the category: *Raft of the Medusa*. It's hard to make people look at paintings. Because they've already got the category, they've already got the thing in their head, they are therefore not required to look at it ever again."

Between the vertiginous bull's-eye pattern, the delectable color, and the seductive sensuality of the oil paint (most modern concentric-circle paintings, Suggs is clear to point out, are acrylic), not looking is almost not an option with these paintings — or with most of the work in these two indefatigable "group shows." Looking, however, is only the beginning. ■

DON SUGGS: *One Man Group Show* | Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 9045 Lincoln Blvd., L.A. | Through June 23

DON SUGGS: *Concentric* | L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice | May 17 through June 16

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