

"California Earthquakes" is a so-so summer group show. Scruffy, plucky, and crowded, it resembles a student auction or an exhibition in a bar. As far as I can tell, the show has little or nothing to do with either California or earthquakes. The press release says "Earthquakes" comes from a sequence in one artist's video in which stuffed animals "shake sporadically," while California is used because some of the work "incorporates a crafty, psychedelic surrealism." So much for thoroughgoing reasoning.

A few of the 34 pieces (by 22 artists) stand out, including Björn Copeland's electric organ played by mechanical birds, Danica Phelps's me-so-horny diagrams, Amy Gartrell's window installation, an aluminum foil crown by old-schoolster Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, and a fanciful canvas by Tyson Reeder. I'd split "Best in Show" among Christian Holstad, Brian Belott, and Devendra Banhart (who really shines in a lovely three-person show at Canada). Other than that, things look generic.

The best thing "California Earthquakes" does is offer further proof, if any were necessary, that a boomlet—some say pox—is upon us. We're inundated with art that is small of scale, colorful, and made of cheap or flimsy material. It blends cartooning, comics, illustration, and something slightly street, and is labor-intensive and manic but not angsty. Its foundation is collage and drawing, so much so that my editor, Vince Aletti, says, "Drawing is the new photography." The "Earthquakes" press statement says much of this art deals with "interior worlds." Perhaps, but the best of it deals with bigger, less narcissistic things.

Whether inclination, ism, pestilence, or fad, this art is proliferating. It's also irking people. I've heard a lot of grumbling about "all this cutesy, crafty stuff." A young conceptualist I know calls it "Puberty Escapism." Writing in the nifty L.A. journal X-Tra, the cogent but clearly irritated artist-critic Michelle Grabner disparages painter Scott Reeder (brother of Tyson) as well as collectives like Forcefield for being "solipsistic," "cute," "anti-intellectual," and "faux naïve."

Many would agree, and though her terms are not entirely unwarranted (much of this work does look hormone-driven), her criticisms feel harsh and may miss something. Grabner states this art is "a-critical," by which I think she means it isn't analytical or especially aware of other art. But I'd argue that the best of this art—in Reich's show I'd limit that to the artists I named—is implicitly critical of other art, especially the art of the immediate past. A generation of emerging artists appears to find the puffed-up professionalism and market-driven hustle of the late 1990s bogus, while the over-intellectualization of some of the art of the same period strikes them as institutional or simply over. Just as Elizabeth Peyton's scale, touch, and sincerity were implicitly critical of the slick ironies of late-'80s appropriation and Neo-Geo and the bravado of neo-expressionism, the apparently in-turned, decorative obsessiveness of this work is implicitly critical of the flashy Festivalism and gonzo careerism of the decade that followed.

Previously, I've called this kind of work "Little Art" because of all the small gestures, bits, and pieces. With apologies to Manny Farber, who employed the term "termite-fungus-centipede-art," I now see what's going on as "Termite Theory." The only way to chew through what these artists perceive as rot is with a lot of activity and in great numbers. Their tactic is to ingest and destroy simultaneously. That's the passive-aggressive ambition of this work. Whereas Donald Judd or the Bauhaus wanted to change the way the world looked and the way we look at the world, termites are just trying to keep their own fires burning in an art world rife with complacency and commercialism. This is as admirable as it is understandable.

However, much of their activity may be more instinctual than conscious. Also, many of these artists are in danger of losing sight of the big picture. Much of this work has moments—a passage here, a sparkle there, something strange. But too often works aren't memorable as wholes. This is a big problem and why much of this art tends to blend together. On the upside, there are many types of termites, colonies of them in fact, some at odds with one another. The lyrical mytho-religiosity of Banhart or the caustic politicality of Belott is completely different from the Pop-y superfluity and madcap color of Assume Vivid Astro Focus or Dearraindrop. Regardless, elements present in various colonies include whiffs of Warhol's Factory and the early East Village; Jack Smith, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the edgy oddness of Karen Kilimnick; '60s Pop, '70s porn, and '80s flair; grooviness, goofiness, and graffiti; Henry Darger, illustration, teenage doodles, and fairy tales.

"California Earthquakes" is only average because most of its termites seem more interested in getting into the system than in undermining it. Most have more funk and spunk than depth or density, and they aren't exploring their form in any compelling way. These artists will likely fall by the wayside. However, a number of termites are exploring their form in ways that are already showing signs of something sweet and strong. The hive is alive.