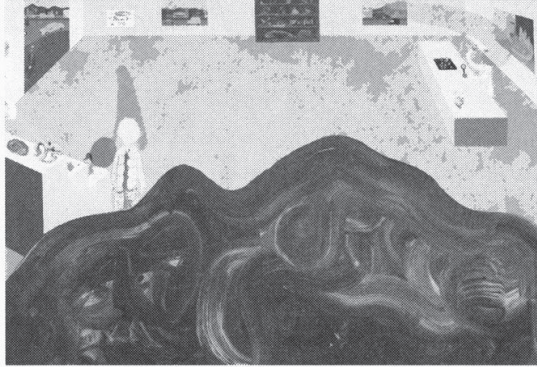


Stone's eye view:
Peter McDonald's
"Rock Gallery"
(2008), now
showing at
Gallery Side 2 in
Higashi-Azabu
GALLERY SIDE 2/
PETER MCDONALD



The rocks of abstraction

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In September last year, Anglo-Japanese painter Peter McDonald won the U.K.'s £25,000 John Moores prize for contemporary painting with a work, "Fontana," that depicted in simplistic shapes an artist thrusting a knife into a circular canvas. Or it could be someone attacking a giant eye. Or perhaps an update on Miro's floating blobs. And, quite probably, all three.

The painting's title refers to the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana, who in the late 1950s started slashing into canvases. For a century that saw painting dismantle itself — proceeding from 19th century Impressionism's hazy concentration on light to Abstract Expressionism's abandonment of recognizable subjects through to the white canvases of Robert Rauschenberg from the '60s — Fontana's action was the final frontier, a moment where the painter said, "Let's just move beyond the surface altogether." McDonald's work, while capturing such a historic moment, also visually tracks this evolution of 20th-century painting.

In that, it captures a perfectly 21st-century trend: the postmodern practice of sampling — as seen in music — and assembling together other works to create something new. McDonald's latest mash-ups of abstraction, narrative and art history can be seen at Gallery Side 2 in Higashi-Azabu till Jan. 24. The new series of paintings are inspired by rocks, which, the artist pointed out at his opening, allow you to paint whatever you like.

If as a child you ever got in the habit of collecting stones, you can attest to the fact that it's hard to stop because there are so many varieties you can come across. This makes them a perfect foil for an artist interested in exploring color and composition. The largest work in the exhibition, "Rock Gallery," shows a spacious room with specimens displayed around the interior. Looming at the bottom of the canvas are dark swirls of paint that look as if they are invading the peaceful scene, slowly taking over the canvas. The 35-year-old McDonald explained that this is a stone from behind which the viewer is looking into the space.

The bulk of the canvas is portrayed in a flat manner, much like in illustrations, but is interrupted by other smaller points

— representing rocks — where the painting becomes rougher or more chaotic. Humans who occupy the room are simplistic, with balloonlike heads that spread out into the area around them, as if their thoughts are pointing to what their minds are dwelling on.

There is a lot to look at, and the composition of the piece as a whole doesn't allow the eye to rest, propelling it around in attempt to find something on which to settle. This gives the paintings a childlike feel, and McDonald says that he is very conscious about their composition, sketching them out in advance and looking to remove elements that would anchor the painting to an expected visual language. Instead, he prefers to have the paintings reveal their inner themes slowly, with echoes and rhythms establishing themselves after the restless eye has wandered through the canvas.

Other works on show are more direct than the complexity of "Rock Gallery," and thus simpler to see as meetings between abstraction and narrative. The compositions have an immediate impact, while the presence of human characters suggests a story; often, as in "Fontana," one that speaks of the art world.

Such postmodern layering and referencing of earlier art works should, perhaps, come as no surprise. McDonald's brother is Roger McDonald of Arts Initiative Tokyo (www.a-i-t.net), which offers courses in contemporary curating and puts together exhibitions in alternative spaces. AIT's last mention on this page was for "16 Hour Museum," an exhibition of art about curating art.

The two brothers obviously share a fascination with the inner machinations of their field, and display it through their work. Peter McDonald's paintings can be challenging due to the visual instability caused by their compositions and art history references, but this depth allows the viewer to teeter continuously through different reactions. If they are postmodern puzzles, then they are ones that don't ask for a final resolution.

"Peter McDonald: New Paintings" is showing till Jan. 24 at Gallery Side 2, 2-6-5 Higashi-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo; a five-min. walk from Akabanebashi Station on the Oedo Line; open 11 a.m.-7 p.m. (closed Mon. and Sun.). For more information, call (03) 6229-3669 or visit www.galleryside2.net