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ARTS & THEATER

Patrick Graham



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By Kenneth Baker

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Last year's unsystematic survey of Patrick Graham's art at Meridian Gallery introduced a painter of ruthless creative independence and uncommon flair. Those who missed it, and visitors wishing they could have seen more of Graham's work, get a second chance thanks to the Paul Mahder Gallery.

Graham, a Dubliner who turns 70 this year, has seldom left Ireland, which may account in part for lagging recognition of his work by the big art world. He has long practiced a mode of personal expressionism out of vogue right now, though he benefited little when it was in style in the 1980s.

His work punctuated by enigmatic symbols referring to Catholic ritual, to Irish history and literature or to his own emotional inner and family life, Graham does not package easily from an art market perspective. The unfinished, or

uncertainly finished, quality of Graham's art challenges even those accustomed to plugging apparent gaps in artworks with divots of theory.

No theory propels his work. It evokes unfashionable notions such as instinct, good reflexes and irresistible compulsion. Consider the wonderful drawing titled "Somewhere Jerusalem IV," a study relating to a big 1996 painting also at Mahder.

This large sheet bears the marks of episodic attack - including swathes of over-painting - in a variety of media. It incorporates bursts of drawing which hint at a native facility that Graham inhibits.

The drawing, which characteristically uses collage, includes a fragment of a barge-like, coffin-like form that recurs in his art, engulfed in a sea of washy brushstrokes.

A scalloped margin at the top triggers a thought of Islamic architecture, "Jerusalem" being both a literary allusion - to the Bible, William Blake and William Butler Yeats, among other sources - and an ancient and modern axis of sectarian conflict.

Words occur frequently in Graham's art, here only as the broken inscription "-RT history."

Graham's art may come as close as anyone's to making mental life visible in its tatters of subjectivity, flailing idioms and self-interruption. But that alone would not make his art fascinating were he not alive to the suggestive energy of fragmentary form and the promising, but potentially meaningless, disorder of an awkward page or painted construction.

Despite his preference for standing still in the jet-propelled global art spectacle, Graham clearly knows the artistic force field that his work enters. Thoughts of contemporaries such as Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Jasper Johns and Anselm Kiefer may crop up in any view of Graham's art.

But after acquaintance with it, there will be no mistaking Graham's work for anyone else's.

Patrick Graham: Redemption: Waiting in the Silence: Paintings and drawings. Through July 7. Paul Mahder Gallery, 3378 Sacramento St., S.F. (415) 474-7707, www.paulmahdergallery.com.

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