

Searching for meaning within a forest of asterisks

The work of Southern California painter Anoka Faruqee at Hosfelt connects in my mind with that of the late Sol LeWitt. She makes conceptual art in his sense of production almost slavishly obedient to an idea.

Unpredictable results follow, as LeWitt promised. Though Faruqee does not delegate fabrication of her work, as he usually did, her ideas make it look, in LeWitt's words, "a perfunctory affair."

Yet, like LeWitt's wall drawings, Faruqee's paintings benefit by the hand's — any hand's — limited consistency.

In "Freehand Asterisk Painting (getting smaller) #2" (2006), Faruqee plays upon this fact by making a field painting of multicolored, more or less interlocking asterisks that gradually, yet only slightly, diminish in size from top left to bottom right of her canvas. Her self-set task dictated the course she took in making the work, but did not free her from the need to constantly watch and adjust its progress.

In "Freehand Fade to Yellow Painting" (2007), she kept the size of the asterisks as consistent as possible from left to right, while gradually changing their hues from deep and shrill green, maroon and taupe toward an acid yellow.

Faruqee appears to have chosen her asterisk form as an arbitrary granule of pictorial information. But it does optically connect early modernist pointillism with the pixelation of the video screen. And as a typographical symbol, the asterisk serves as the generic marker of reference beyond the main text, thus perhaps as Faruqee's little joke about abstract painting as non-referential art.

Compounding her very low intensity irony, Faruqee sometimes makes paintings in pairs, meticulously copying at large scale a casually swiped tiny canvas or translating a poured paint abstraction into a field of asterisks. In every case, she sets herself a conceptual problem that she must address through eyeballing and physical control.

Have we entered a new period of academicism?

Faruqee's work, like much other new art I have seen recently, makes me think so. Her art exudes an air of calculation — conceptualism plus color-field painting equals . . . — yet it also involves an almost fanatical commitment of effort. That commitment finally outshines the optical glimmer of Faruqee's art and may leave even an unpersuaded viewer feeling optimistic for her.

Kenneth Baker Galleries

► **Anoka Faruqee: As Far As the Eye Can See:** paintings and drawings. **Roland Flexner: New Sumi Ink Drawings.** Through June 9. Hosfelt Gallery, 430 Clementina St., San Francisco. (415) 495-5454, www.hosfeltgallery.com.

The untitled sumi ink drawings of New York artist Roland Flexner at Hosfelt make a strange pairing with Faruqee's work. They counter her work's methodical quality, leaving us baffled as to his technique and the degree of manipulation a given piece may have involved.

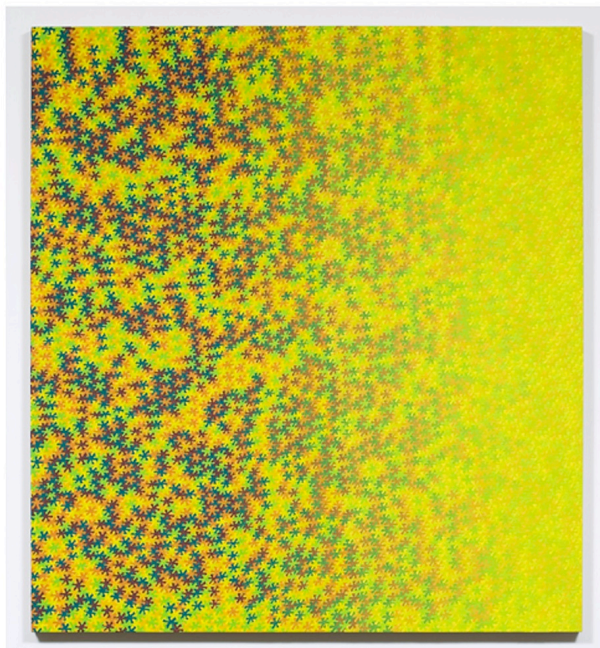
The appearance of a piece such as "Untitled SN29" (2007) plainly owes much to the physical interaction of ink and surface — pooling, sedimentation, passages drying at different rates, gravity, if Flexner propped the page at an angle.

Where, if anywhere, Flexner's hand or tools have intervened probably only someone who uses the same materials could guess.

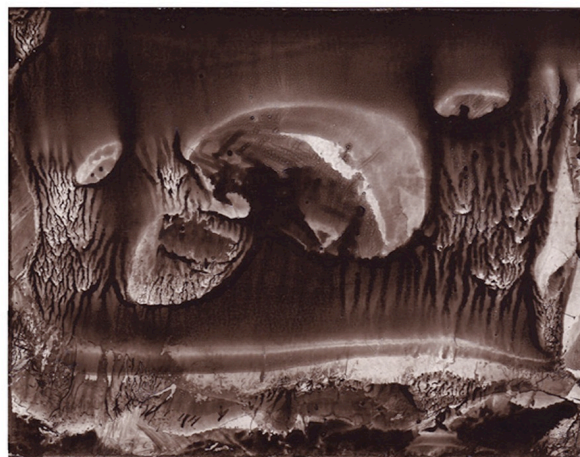
Anyway, the thinning and settling of the ink has produced something that tempts the imagination to see it as an aerial photograph of a distressed shoreline or as a very eerie sunset.

Flexner's technique recalls the Surrealists' liking for ink-blots, frottage and other chance effects capable of baiting the unconscious into declaring its fixations by seeing images where none exists.

Faruqee's work challenges us to see anything in it but systems and deviations from them. Flexner's poses the obverse challenge of trying to see merely the richness of the process that generated it, refraining from projections of fantasy.



Anoka Faruqee, *Freehand Fade to Yellow Painting*, 2007



Roland Flexner, *Untitled (SN29)*, 2007