



## Skin Deep

**WHAT:** *Pentimenti*, paintings by Deborah Pellas  
**WHEN:** Through October  
**WHERE:** Heriard-Cimino Gallery, 440 Julia St., 525-7300

**WHAT:** Oils by Jere Allen  
**WHEN:** Through October  
**WHERE:** Carol Robinson Gallery, 840 Napoleon Ave., 895-6130

**E**ver notice how so many of those old master paintings seem to have an eerie aura of depth, a kind of extra dimension about them? It's no accident; all that luster and luminosity came about as the result of carefully applied under-painting below the surface of the finished image. Those sub-surface layers, known as *pentimento*, are not always obvious, but their presence is often dramatic. So much so, that related techniques sometimes still appear in contemporary abstract paintings, as well.

Deborah Pellas' new work at Heriard-Cimino is a case in point. Mostly large, and defined by basic geometric forms such as circles or rectangles amid amorphous splotches and splatters, her paintings have shimmering, pale surfaces that suggest lunar landscapes, sun-bleached walls, cryptograms or clouds of cosmic debris. Or perhaps even the crumbling textures of whitewashed New Orleans

tombs. It's an eerie ambiguity, an almost ghostly effect that somehow seems ancient and mythic, yet modern.

In *The Bottom Line*, some not always discernable circles emerge from a chaotic, smoke-toned background. Some of the circles seem fairly well defined, but others appear lost in a misty sea of gray, like a nimbus of threatening clouds in a turbulent sky. Inky black drips suggest Rorschach blots lost in space, yet there is nothing here that recalls Jackson Pollock or any of the other paragons of drip painting. Instead, it's this eerie patina that we notice, a floating, luminous veil of white on white and gray on gray that triggers associations ranging from tarnished silver and mother-of-pearl to the dank inner chambers of ancient limestone caverns.

Unlike Pollock's drip paintings, in which splatters of opaque industrial pigment over-

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### D. ERIC BOOKHARDT inside art

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lapped, these canvasses feature layers of translucent paint applied with an mixture of control and spontaneity. It's the alternation of order and chaos in the under-painting that suggests all that depth and perspective. The result is an artful ambiguity — between the surface and the depths, between the seen and the unseen — which provides the imagination with the space to wander, and to wonder.

More artful ambiguity appears in the work of Jere Allen at Carol Robinson. Allen is one



**ERE ALLEN'S WORKS, INCLUDING *SIXTH SIGN*, USE LUSH, ELEGANT BLOBS TO FORM AN EXPRESSIONIST FEEL THAT PROVIDE INTENSE COLORS AND FORMS.**

of those abstract figurative painters who specializes in the female form, and since his imagery is rather abstract, suggestion is a big part of it. In painting, suggestion is largely a matter of how paint is applied to canvas and Allen's paint appears in layers of lush, elegant globs that seem to ooze intense colors and forms from dark recesses and inky depths.

*Sixth Sign*, a 3-by-4-foot tall oil painting, is an archetypal Allen. Here a tall, statuesque female appears as a modern-day Demeter holding an ear of corn. She's a classical (or, more likely, pre-Classical) grain goddess, with a touch of the 20th century fox about her. Comprised almost entirely of highlights, of pale or vividly colored brush strokes

emerging out of the darkly painted depths, she shimmers like chimera.

Allen obviously knows how to draw with paint, but it's a whole different ballgame from drawing with charcoal or graphite. For one thing, there are few defining lines holding this figure together. Look closely at any detail and all you see is an abstract brush stroke, a swatch of color that is, in itself, no more defined than the shimmering reflections of neon and automobile lights on wet pavement at night. Put it all together and you have an imposing form of a woman with long, tapered fingers and a long neck rising from statuesque shoulders, but when you get right up close, there's nothing there but flat, almost amorphous, swatches of paint. In true mythic fashion, she exists only in the mind of the viewer.

In this, Allen owes a debt to Francis Bacon, the demented Brit expressionist whose histrionic canvasses used similarly suggestive brush strokes to evoke howling clerics and expressionistic carnage. Allen lays off the blood and cassocks, but the expressionist tone turns up in works like *Psychopomp*, in which a wraithlike female nude appears to be leaning forward as if hovering in space, as her ragged pet coyotes charge on ahead of her. Here the background is an infernal fire-engine red, and the floating femme is a complex maze of black, white and flesh-toned brush strokes, and once again the image is really a complicated illusion of suggestive painted marks, of painterly lines and swatches that attain recognizable form in the digital processors of the imagination. 🐾

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