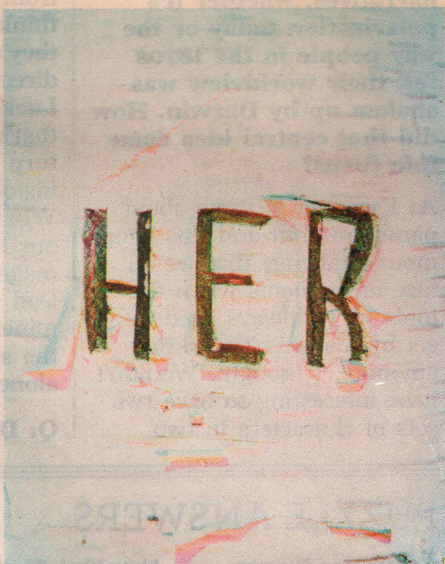




Rena Bransten Gallery

This work by Eirik Johnson condenses feelings of love in his show.

Landscapes of the heart and mind

By Charles Desmarais

Eirik Johnson is part of that second or third wave of "new topographic" photographers who no longer feign a neutral position as observers of the man-altered landscape. There's a strain of pathos that runs through the work of such younger artists as Lucas Foglia, Ed Panar, Johnson and others that their predecessors in the 1970s were loath to admit.

Johnson's exhibition through Dec. 22 at Rena Bransten Gallery (1275 Minnesota St., S.F. <https://renabranstengallery.com>) is a departure from his best-known work, a poetic side note that is made aching touching by the barest of means. It consists entirely of pictures, carefully made but seen as if from the corner of the camera eye, of words someone took the trouble to carve into the trunk of a tree. A record turntable plays an LP of songs composed by various artists to accompany the show.

There's a photograph of the requisite heart, and of an old carving X'd

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Shaun Roberts

“Operational Slope” by William Swanson is among his new paintings that give structure to nature in the “Florascape” exhibition at Eleanor Harwood Gallery.

Landscapes of the heart and mind

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through with anger or regret. One work, “THE SMITH’S,” speaks of a fan’s devotion (and poor grasp of grammar). The pictures were shot at night, their subjects apparently illuminated by campfire or, perhaps, by a Roman candle. Some are displayed as backlit transparencies, which heightens the sense that they were made in fleeting light.

If all the expressions of love were to be condensed in a single picture, it would be the one that reads, simply, “HER.” And if I told you that the trees are not all conifers, you might read the title of the exhibition, “Pine,” as a sentimental verb.

A Bay Area original: A visit to the gallery Hackett Mill (145 Natoma St., Suite 400, S.F. www.hackettmill.com) is a daunting experience. No sign at street level says that you must ring for someone to bring down the elevator, and once you’re there, you may feel that you are intruding in a scholar’s cramped library. Get over it.

The current exhibition, “Jess: A Family Collection,” (through Jan. 25) is just as it’s billed, drawn on works gathered over many years of friendship between the artist and a Bay Area couple, the parents of a man named Stephen Burton. As a result, it includes incidental objects among the good stuff. Distributed around the busy space, the collection is as much family album as major exhibition, and that is its charm. A thin catalog also serves as Burton’s memoir of the relationship.

Jess (born Burgess Collins, 1923-2004) was at heart a 19th century romantic, destined to make his way in an atomic



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Eirik Johnson’s “THE SMITH’S” is one of the photos that were shot at night in fleeting light in his exhibition.



Hackett Mill

“Petals of Paint” by Jess is the stunner of the collection of his works based on his friendship with a Bay Area couple.

world. His life and career were quintessentially San Francisco (though he was born in Long Beach) — he was creative, idiosyncratic, gay and out in the 1950s. Under-recognized still by a wider art world to which he paid little mind, he is nevertheless a key figure of the art history of California.

The 23 objects in the exhibition range from clumsy art school projects to Aubrey Beardsley derivations to transcendent paintings of great originality. “Night-scene: St. Dominic’s” (1954) might be a classic work of abstract expressionism influenced by his teacher Clyf-

ford Still, but for its small scale and the procession of figures at the bottom. That scene turns the picture into a somber landscape under a smoky sky.

The stunner of the show is “Petals of Paint” (1964), one of the artist’s famously exuberant oil paintings on panel. It is so thick with impasto it might have been squeezed from a cake frosting tool, and its colors are pieced together like tiles in a mosaic. The picture is all surface at first glance, until you see the black cat frolicking on the floor, and everything pops into perspective, as we fall into Jess’ kaleidoscopic world.

Drift and slope: William Swanson’s new paintings are deceptively easy to like. His exhibition “Florascape,” at Eleanor Harwood Gallery through Dec. 15 (1275 Minnesota St., S.F. <http://eleanorharwood.com>), feels a bit like a walk through a mirror universe to ours, a place where nature is somehow mathematically rationalized.

The 6-foot-wide “Alumina Drift” takes center stage among 11 semi-abstract landscapes that fairly glow with a light of crystalline purity. It sets us at the edge of a vast scene of mountain and lake — a vista of what lies before us and also, impos-

sibly, above us, held aloft by a network of misty ribbons. In “Operational Slope,” we glide among structures made up of no more than lines and wings, above a broad valley.

An implied grid underlies every picture, bringing rigid structure to what was wild. To propose that the world can be so controlled is not the same as to say that it is safe.

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