

ARTS+MOVIES + FEATURES

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Digging into Leslie Wayne's multi-layered works

Wayne's World By Nick Smith



Courtesy of Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art

If you could reveal the different stages of your life, the awkward phases, the highlights and dark times, would they be as neat and even as a gourmet layer cake? Or would they be haphazard, one tier tumbling over another as you developed into who you are today?

Art — the thought-fueled, time consuming kind — can be like a developing personality. But artists rarely show that development, that process. To Leslie Wayne, the process must be revealed to make the art complete.

The German-born, New York-based abstract painter is finally presenting a show at the Halsey after five years of discussion, development, and delays. "The initial idea was to include some pieces that I developed awhile back, installed directly into the walls," Wayne says. "We would have cut a hole in the sheetrock with no seams showing, so it would look as if I came up and dug paint out of the wall itself." This would have been the last show in the Halsey's old Simons Center space, "as if I were deconstructing the gallery and all the paint came flowing out of the wall."

All of Wayne's paintings have an organic, three-dimensional quality. She spreads, folds, dissects, and combines thick layers of oil paint so they resemble geological strata. "They're very dimensional," says the artist. "Many people think of them in sculptural terms, but they are nevertheless paintings."

In the Halsey show, they fall into two main categories: large (some are 14 feet long), deeply textural examples of "morphogenesis," and smaller (10" x 13") striated artworks. The paintings don't all look carefully prepared; they're more organic, like chunks of coral, fossils, magma, and rural landscapes all crushed together into aesthetically appealing pieces.

Mark Sloan, exhibition curator and director/senior curator of the Halsey, is "attracted to the conceptual idea" of the multilayered pieces. "They're visually stunning to see in person," he says. "They're colorful, but it's also really powerful to stand near them. Some of them look like candy or ooze from the center of the earth."

Sloan fell in love with Wayne's work when he saw Under my Skin at Solomon Projects in Atlanta in 2000. "It looked as if she had taken an axe to the gallery wall, pounded it in, created gashes, and the paintings had emerged from them," he recalls. His response to the immediacy of the gesture? "Man, that's for me, I'm all over it!" This led to a studio visit in 2006 and the idea for the final Simons Center installation. That morphed into a more traditional, wall-displayed show at the new Halsey, planned as its inaugural exhibition.

"The College of Charleston was dragging its feet about getting the gallery up," says Sloan. Wayne's show was slated for September 2009, but the space wasn't going to be open until October. So collage/sculpture artist Aldwyth got the prime slot and Wayne got more time to build her body of work. "She's been very patient with us," Sloan adds gratefully.

"It was exciting to be scheduled as the first show in a new gallery space," says Wayne, "but all the kinks weren't necessarily worked out. With time it's much better. The Halsey staff is settled in, they know the space's parameters, and it gave me the opportunity to make new work." She's continued to develop her "One Big Love" series. The title is inspired by a Patty Griffin song she listened to a lot while creating the works.

These relatively small pieces are the average size of a human head, drawing viewers in close for maximum appreciation. But if they're looking for a specific meaning in any of this recent work, Wayne has no clues for them.

"The layers are the content, and the content of her work is the making of the painting itself," Sloan says. "This is a different category of painting with no representational image."

Like the rings of a tree, the layers in the paintings show a fascinating process of discovery and growth. They combine to make a show that Wayne hopes will enlighten her as well as her viewers. "I don't know if the paintings will read as a linear progression," she says, "but as a wider, more progressive trajectory." She sees the exhibition as "an exciting opportunity to see my range of work, assess the development of my ideas all in one room. We'll see where my ideas started, where they're going, and where to take them next."

Tags: Leslie Wayne, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Modern Art

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