

LA Times

Art; AROUND THE GALLERIES; Rustic rides with David Hockney; [HOME EDITION]

David Pagel. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Mar 11, 2005. pg. E.34

EEK! Are they watching us?

It's one thing to feel that you're being watched by other people. It's quite another to believe that inanimate objects are watching your every move. From here, the slippery slope descends precipitously to a shadowy world in which rationality accounts for just the tip of the iceberg.

That's the reality Chris Vasell paints in his L.A. solo debut at Blum & Poe Gallery. "Don't go outside they are waiting for you" gently blends the movie industry's interest in supernatural dramas with stain painting's willingness to let thinned pigment do its own thing as it runs, puddles and dries on large canvases. The results are haunting landscapes that seem to stare right through you.

A love of Mark Rothko's luminous rectangles and chilling voids lies behind Vasell's art. The six big paintings in the main gallery acknowledge the multilayered complexity of the present by evoking aboriginal sand paintings, the domes of planetariums, fabulous ice caves, electronically transmitted lunar imagery and schematic renditions of ape's faces.

None resembles another. In "Cephalic isolation" and "SELF (landscape)" disembodied eyes stand out clearly. In "Second day," a single eye slowly emerges from an aqueous wash of dirty blues and murky greens. In others, it's unclear if the eyes are hidden in the imagery or projected there by your overstimulated imagination. "Ariel Pink (S.O.E.)" is tie-dyed trippiness filtered through the paranoia of Thomas Pynchon's Nixon-era hippies.

Vasell is adept at confusing inner and outer worlds. In a second gallery, 14 page-size watercolors include ghostly figures whose shadows may be their doubles, their evil twins or simply their reflections in mirror-like surfaces. Masks, monkeys and men emerge from foggy washes aswirl with mixed messages. Some figures resemble Jesus. Or Jerry Garcia. Or just a guy with long hair.

In every case, Vasell's paintings contain a lot more than meets the eye. Their afterlives, in the mind's eye, are even richer.

Blum & Poe Gallery, 2754 La Cienega Blvd., (310) 836-2062, through April 9. Closed Sundays and Mondays.
www.blumandpoe.com