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Review: Nena Amsler at Kristi Engle Gallery

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The 11 paintings by Nena Amsler in her debut exhibition at [Kristi Engle Gallery](#) come in parts — 54 in all, suggesting that no painting, like no man (or woman), is an island, entire of itself. Painting as a material object is emphasized, while its conceptual interconnection with other art is acknowledged.

“Tree,” for example, has 18 sections — two raw plywood sheets to represent the trunk and a limb, plus 16 stretched canvases of various dimensions for the canopy. The tree’s leaves are composed from linear green paint squeezed straight from the tube, its curves emanating outward from text written on the surfaces. (“In case it isn’t immediately obvious this is supposed to be a tree,” etc.) Each letter “T” and sentence-ending period takes the form of a red paint-blob — nominal apples, suggesting the work represents a tree of knowledge.

Amsler’s work is invested in pictorial word games. “Concetto Temporale” fills the curved cuts in a Lucio Fontana-style canvas with chunky white teeth, transforming the late painter’s anti-illusionistic abstractions into a representation of a laughing painting. “Be Very Afraid” puts an actual zipper in the center of a smaller, decorated version of Barnett Newman’s zip-painting, “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue”; Amsler’s zipper is partly open, revealing a human spine inside the work.

The iconoclastic strategy in these paintings derives from Marcel Duchamp — the show is titled “N. Mutt 2009,” merging Amsler’s first initial with Duchamp’s made-up signature on his 1917 urinal, “Fountain.” Duchamp was creating a new thought for an existing industrial object, but something gets lost in Amsler’s translations of existing art-objects into her own work.

Perhaps it’s because of the ubiquity of Duchampian art in the last 40-plus years, but their cheerfully informed rebelliousness feels conventional.

— Christopher Knight

Kristi Engle Gallery, 5002 York Ave., Highland Park, (323) 472-6237, through May 30. Closed Sunday through Wednesday.

Above: Nena Amsler’s “Tree.” Credit: Kristi Engle Gallery

