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Art in Review: Richard Artschwager

By Roberta Smith

In the last several years Richard Artschwager's art seems to have lost some of its usual cool, and this is a good thing. Colors have warmed and a degree of direct observation has softened the intense artifice, grounded in an idiosyncratic fusion of Pop Art and Minimalism, that is so basic to the wide-ranging Artschwager brand.

Most of the recent works here depict desert landscapes similar to those the artist knew and loved in his youth. They are pastels on paper or acrylic on his trademark Celotex fiberboard, although its ersatz brush-stroke textures seem to have lost their satiric edge. In "Landscape With Rosettes" the textures add body to a field of tumbleweed that basks in the palpable, quietly electrifying sheen of a yellow moon. In "Untitled (Roofline)" the textures are outdone by color: a wedge of red shingles and a wedge of striped pink that could be tilled field or streaky sky. These areas meet along a gray diagonal that is probably a gutter, but what matters most is their woozy, tilting glow and the irreconcilable spatial ambiguities.

Perhaps in an attempt to show that the give-and-take between observation and artifice enlivening these works is not really new, Mr. Artschwager includes a dozen small landscape drawings in combinations of watercolor, pastel and graphite from around 1950. Their improvisational shorthand — unexpectedly reminiscent of Milton Avery — is full of scrolling tangles, scratchy lines and staccato marks that telegraph the desert's sage, chalky strata and distant buttes. They suggest that Mr. Artschwager has not so much lost his cool as reclaimed an earlier part of himself.