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ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

CRITICS' PICKS

Tom McGrath

KANTOR / FEUER GALLERY

7025 Melrose Avenue

May 20–June 24

*Sprinkler City, 2006.*

The four paintings in Tom McGrath's new show are all virtuoso performances by a painter's painter brimming with the desire to push oil paint to the limit of its descriptive potential; they radiate a knowing confidence. McGrath is manifestly aware of the artistic climate in which his work will be seen for the first time and also versed in the history of painting for painting's sake, beginning, perhaps, with Courbet's landscapes.

As shrewd as these sumptuous paintings may be, however, they are also decorative, sometimes to a fault. McGrath's subject matter, unlike his formal devices, is not ambitious or provocative; in fact, he seems to select prosaic subjects that will play a secondary role to the main attraction. This tactic is least successful in . . . *tons of barrelin'* . . ., 2006, which describes a speeding fuel truck in a blur of varying brushstrokes. Though this work is less representational than others in the show, McGrath's formal decisions, down to the dimensions of the canvas, seem subservient to the incident they describe, and in this sense the painting is comparatively banal. *Sprinkler City, 2006*, by contrast, is such an explosion of masterfully handled formal motifs—wild splatterings, thick impasto, and agitated brushwork—that it is a challenge to find descriptive language consonant with its details. Though the subject matter does little to ignite the imagination (the painting depicts the back garden of a suburban house), both the surface details and the gestalt generate ample interest. One wonders what McGrath might achieve if he were to turn his hand to matters as ambitious as his technique.

—Christopher Bedford

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Bedford, Christopher. "Critic's Picks: Tom McGrath" Artforum.com, June 14, 2006