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Review: Michaela Eichwald at Overduin & Co.



Michaela Eichwald, "Duns Scotus," 2015, acrylic, oil, wax, lacquer on pleather (Overduin & Co.)

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By **Christopher Knight**

There is nothing precious about the gritty, grimy, sometimes even coarse abstract paintings of Berlin-based artist Michaela Eichwald. They work their considerable magic in spite of it.

Or, perhaps it's more accurate to say in concert with it. These are paintings that operate on carefully balanced tensions generated between attraction and repulsion. As a characterization for the social and cultural conditions in which art exists today, that's pretty spot-on.

The nine compelling paintings in Eichwald's show at Overduin & Co., her fine solo debut in Los Angeles, share an unusual support. Using a variety of paints -- acrylic, oil, tempera, lacquer – plus graphite and wax, she paints on stretched surfaces of pleather, the imitation leather fabric made from polycarbonate.

The diverse painting materials don't always gel with one another, creating surfaces as discordant as the agitated lines and settled shapes they describe. The pleather support generates a dull sheen.

For the works' painterly, organic shapes and loosely totemic forms, Eichwald draws on several brush precedents since World War II. Among them are Abstract Expressionism, Japanese Gutai and 1980s Neo-Expressionism, both German and American.

The brutish and influential work of Georg Baselitz and Sigmar Polke thrums in works like "Duns Scotus," named for a medieval philosopher who insisted that existence is pure abstraction. And has anyone, anywhere ever built on Julian Schnabel's work? A big, oozing blob of burnt-umber, the color of dried blood, dominating and obscuring one tall painting seems to.

Her shapes and palette often echo the viscera in something like Arshile Gorky's 1944 "The Liver is the Cock's Comb" – albeit notably without the radiant inner glow of that celebrated masterpiece – or a jam-packed André Butzer mural with all the vivid color drained out. Perhaps due to the pleather support, the light in Eichwald's paintings seems on the verge of flickering out. Entrails mix with the scatological earthiness of ordure on surfaces textured like brittle skin.

The show is titled with Delphic aphorisms in Greek and Latin – "*quo vadis, gnothi sauton* and *cui bono*." Where are you going? Know thyself. To whose benefit?

The last, cited by Cicero, is used today to identify the basis for a crime. In Eichwald's tough yet somehow also tender paintings, things are not always what they first seem to be.

Overduin & Co., 6693 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 464-3600, through Aug. 1. Closed Sun. and Mon. www.overduinandco.com