

Review: At Robischon, Eight Solos Add Up to a Major Look at Contemporary Abstraction

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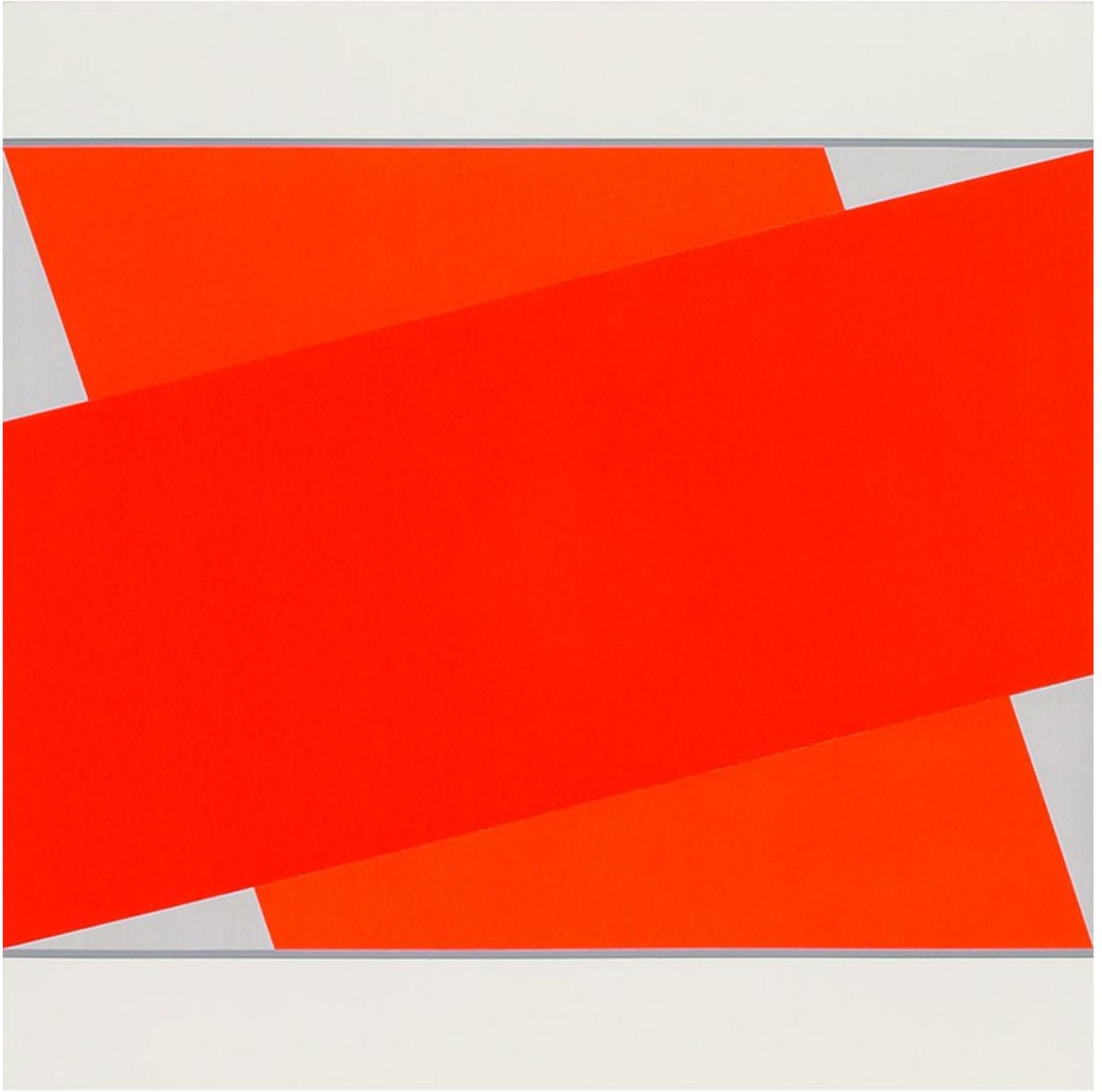


Installation view of "Canterbury," by Stephen Westfall, latex.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

The Robischon Gallery is enormous; its multiple spaces can be spliced and diced any number of ways. At first glance, what's currently filling Robischon looks like a major group show on the theme of contemporary abstraction – but as I looked at the supporting materials, I discovered that it's actually a set of eight solos, some small and most fairly large. But these solos resolve into a single coherent visual experience because all of the artists are dealing with the same issue: how to do something different with abstraction, arguably the style of our time. And they all succeed in their own distinctive ways.

The first solo, installed just inside the front door, is *Stephen Westfall*, and it makes a major statement with “Canterbury,” a mural that's approximately fifteen feet tall and fifty feet long; not surprisingly, it dominates the front space. The composition is like a harlequin pattern of diamond shapes in rich colors, arranged in an unusual combination of tones; missing elements in the pattern have been painted white. According to Westfall, there's a figural quality to these white areas when viewed against the colored ones. I see what he means, since the white parts advance visually in relation to the colored ones, setting up a figure-and-ground juxtaposition. But what's really interesting is that a similar setup of colored shapes and white ones in “Other Places,” an oil and alkyd on canvas, has the colors pushing toward us while the white seems to recede – precisely the opposite effect.



Don Voisine, "Crossway" oil on panel 32 x 32 inches.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

Finishing off the entry space is *Don Voisine*, which seamlessly picks up where the Westfalls leave off. When I called Voisine's work "neo-minimalist," he took issue with the description; he does not view his work as coming out of the minimalist movement, and instead terms his approach "reductive" – despite the fact that he employs color fields done in flat planes in pared-down palettes, with straight lines firmly separating the different shades. As I looked at his work at Robischon, though, I noticed the three-dimensional planar conception of pictorial space suggested by the cruciform. Now I think he's right about "neo-minimalist" being the wrong descriptor; these are more post-minimal, maybe even constructivist. Whatever you call them, the works are extremely elegant exercises in aesthetic restraint.



"Circuit," by Lloyd Martin, oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

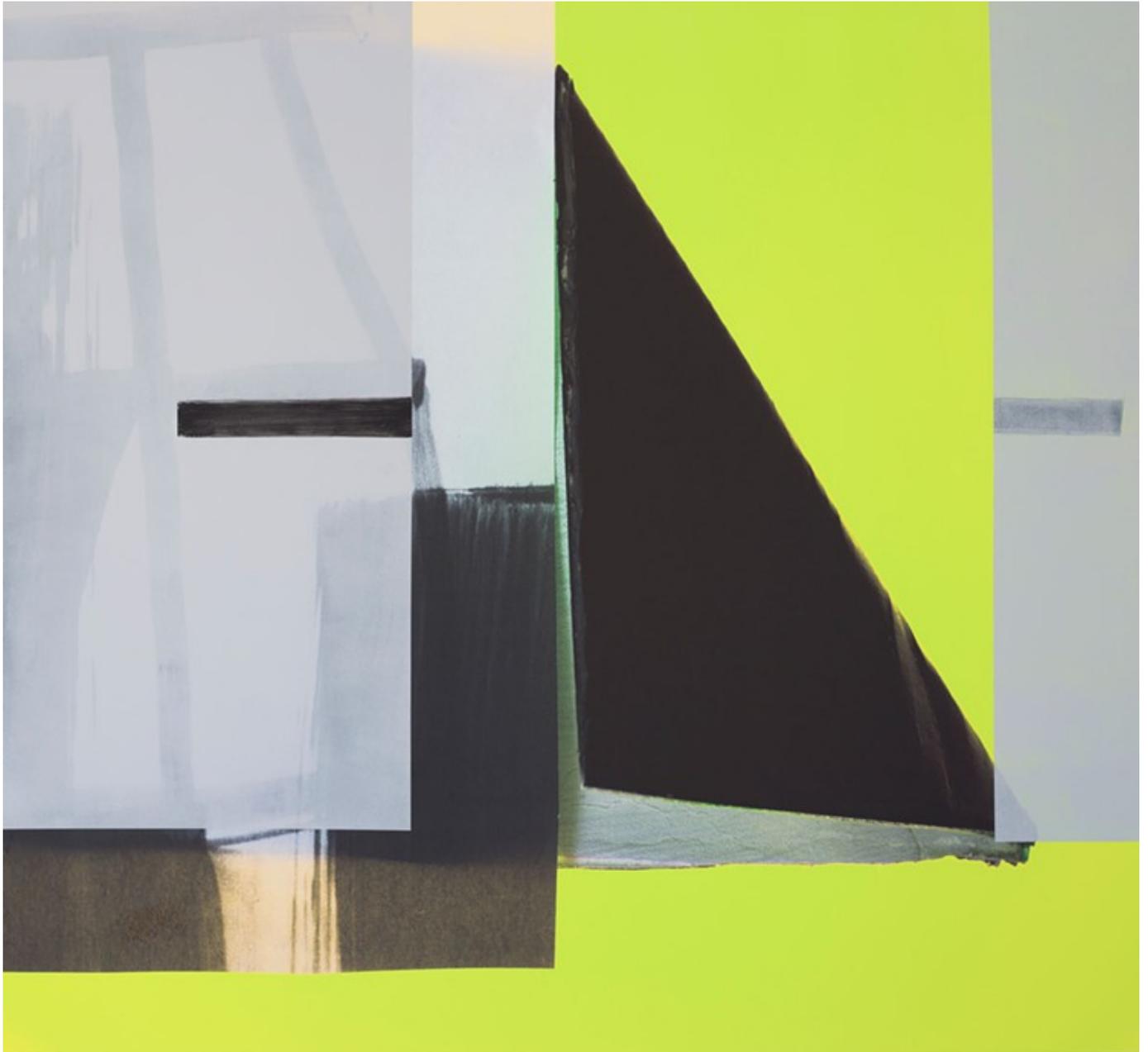
Back in the viewing room, *Lloyd Martin* highlights another artist who, like Westfall and Voisine, is interested in architectonic compositions. In Martin's paintings, horizontal bars are the chief formal device; this has been the artist's signature for the past five years. Martin adds an expressive, painterly aspect to the mix of geometric shapes and straight lines, and his stacked rectilinear shapes are painted and repainted with gauzy layers of pigments, allowing the earlier coats to show through in areas and lending the bars a scuffed-looking quality. The rhythm of the colors of the rectilinear shapes creates different compositional approaches; some have a clearly articulated formal structure in the center, while others have an all-over quality.



Deborah Zlotsky, "Pittsburgh left (sic)," oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

In the adjacent wing, the paintings in *Deborah Zlotzky* resonate beautifully with the Martins. The works share certain broad stylistic attributes, like those scuffed-looking surfaces and the soft-yet-still-hard edges. Some of Zlotzky's new paintings are partly based on vintage '70s sheets that she found at an estate sale and others that she subsequently purchased. Zlotzky responds to the geometry of the found patterns, turning them into horizontal stacks climbing the paintings. She likens this to geological layers and to a mirage called a Fata Morgana, in which horizontal stripes are visible on the horizon. Zlotzky has also contributed an unrelated wall painting, "Body Politic," that lampoons Donald Trump's lurid interests. It's done in chalk on blackboard paint, and a lot of it has been erased, visible only as ghost images or words.

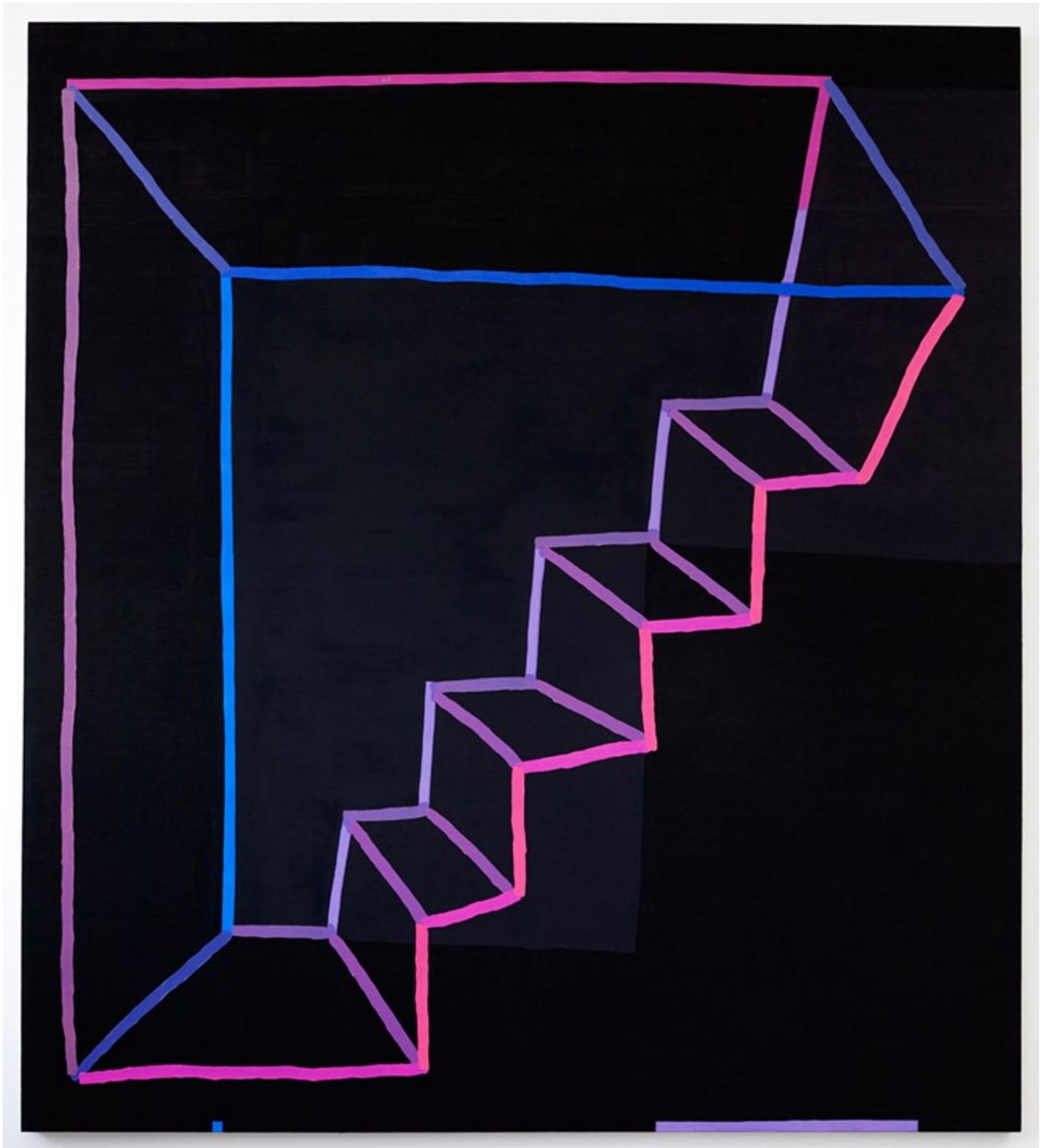


"Underneath It All," by Kate Petley, acrylic and archival ink on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

In the southernmost space by the windows, *Kate Petley* displays the artist's updated brand of color-field abstraction with small works from her "Fold" series, so named because a folded shape anchors each.

These are done with colored gels covering drawings that have been stapled together, making Petley's layering technique more explicit here than in her larger and more carefully executed paintings. For the magisterial "One Day," for example, Petley created a unique digital print that she subsequently painted over; running down the left center is a bifurcated shape that reveals a printed, striated pattern in gray, surrounded by flat areas of gold tones accented by black. The colored fields in the paintings are much more compactly layered than they are in the more informal "Fold" works.



"Untitled (P-1518)," by Jason Karolak, oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

In the large back gallery, *Jason Karolak* is the initial draw, because Karolak's large, distinctively colored and graphically robust "Untitled (P-1518)" can be seen all the way from the front area, where the Petleys are. Here the ground is covered in various shades of creamy charcoal grays done in blocks. Both on top of and in places peeking out from beneath these unifying grays are lines that convey the outline of a preposterous staircase. Karolak has messed with the perspective so it would be impossible to enter this imaginary space. The colors he uses for the lines are toned way up; he says he prefers pure pigments, maybe mixed with a little white to brighten them. They look like they might glow in the dark, but he assures me that they don't. The Karolak show includes another major painting, "Untitled (P-1620)," plus a number of small paintings that generally relate to the large ones but tend to be more densely linear.



"Slow Turn," by Marcelyn McNeil, oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

Opposite the Karolaks is a group of paintings, all but one on paper, that make up *Marcelyn McNeil*. These pieces are the most expressionistic of all the work on display at Robischon. While the artists all employ predominating formal elements – which link their pieces to those in the other shows – McNeil’s approach is freer and less constrained, particularly in her brushstrokes. Her palette of airy shades, often with the even airier ground showing through, can be transparent in places; that, along with the colors she’s chosen, gives her work an unsullied freshness and sense of spontaneity.



"It's The Little Things," by Wendi Harford, latex acrylic on canvas.

Courtesy of Robischon Gallery

In an alcove between the Karolak and McNeil shows is the last and by far the smallest of the eight interlinked solos, *Wendi Harford*. There are only two paintings here: “Blue Streak II” and “It’s the Little Things.” But since they are so tall – seven feet and thirteen feet, respectively – they make a strong enough statement to stand up to the other seven shows. Harford displays different kinds of abstraction in these particular paintings, which are from a body of work in which she uses drips of paint to form controlled stripes. The repeated pattern of the stripes, executed not with tapes or rulers but with freely flowing drips of pigment, makes these paintings an intersection of gesture and geometry – a decidedly unusual combo.

It must have been hard for Robischon to come up with a worthy followup to the amazing, steampunk-funky John Buck show that came down last month. This set of abstract solos, representing a perspective that’s the polar opposite of Buck’s, was an inspired solution, one that you could say almost takes the gallery from the ridiculous to the sublime.

Westfall, Voisine, Zlotsky, Petley, Harford, Karolak, McNeil, Martin through March 4, Robischon Gallery, 1740 Wazee Street, 303-298-7788, robischongallery.com.

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