

Abstract dominates Sheehan show

"Recent Paintings," by Richard Sheehan, at the Alpha Gallery, Boston, through Wednesday.

ART

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THIS show represents a major step forward for Boston painter Richard Sheehan.

Sheehan, 35, has been showing at the Alpha Gallery for the last

decade. His subject has remained consistent — views of Boston's streets, bridges and expressway overpasses.

Although the locale may be Quincy or Dorchester, the results are anything but pedestrian. Sheehan mines the stark, angular topography of decaying industrial sites to structure works that are lyrical and dynamic.

In the current series, Sheehan expands from small to large. He also keys up his pastel palette by a good 90 degrees. The small geometric patches of paint that made

up his earlier works have been blown up to vast rectangles and triangles.

This transition proves surprisingly graceful. Now, those small patches are broad, energetic swatches of color that consistently hold their own, and the hot hues demand attention yet remain harmoniously integrated.

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On this scale, the abstract predominates. Still, it is the underlying realistic inspiration that sparks these paintings. Without those hints at roads, weeds and signs, we would be faced with simple reworkings of Abstract Expressionism color and brushwork.

“Expressway Bridge Super Bowl Sunday” pits a broad band of aquamarine sky, which takes up almost the full upper half of the painting, against (on the lower half) an ant’s-eye view of an expressway overpass. Cutting across the center, the bridge and its shadow are reduced to blackish horizontal bands, the road to a rectangle of lemon yellow.

Sheehan breaks the horizontal monotony of this composition with three devices. First, the horizontal sweeps of paint indicating bridge and sky are countered by the diagonal sweeps of yellow paint that make up the road.

The yellow paint’s angled direction suggests a receding perspective, creating a subtle play between flat, frontal shapes and illusionistic space.

Second, glimpsed under the highway is a highly detailed, albeit abstracted view of the cityscape — a fence, hints of signs and scaffolding. This painting-within-a-painting focuses our eye on the painting’s midsection, where a secondary drama between flatness and illusionism integrates with the same tensions evident on a larger scale.

Third — and here Sheehan again breaks the dominant sweeping abstraction with hints of realistic detail — a brushy cluster of reddish strokes suggesting vegetation erupts along the underpass wall, piercing both the wall’s stolid blackness and the sky’s true-blueness. This suggestion of the natural world (which is also alluded to in the thick, sensuous strokes of paint) impinges on the geometric industrial worlds.

Placed at the center of the painting, it literally and metaphorically “builds a bridge” between seemingly oppositional forces — flatness and illusionism, horizontality and verticality, sky and earth, abstraction and realism — in a thoroughly satisfying visual synthesis.

In the six large and three small works on view, Sheehan employs similar strategies. Yet the paintings remain fresh. The disciplined combination and recombination of given factors plus the painter’s sheer exuberance lends these works an admirable bravura.