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Don Suggs: 'Face-Off'
Insightful Musings on the Human Condition
L.A. Louver
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Don Suggs' post-humous exhibition, *Face-Off* comes as a bit of a surprise. A beloved professor and mentor, Suggs (1945-2019) was well known for his paintings of concentric circles and photographs in which he superimposed these same forms over images of the natural landscape. Suggs also made sculptures— towers or totems of plastic shapes that extended from floor to ceiling. In these works, Suggs explored disruptions that occurred when views become altered. Although his works displayed a formal elegance, they were also conceptually based.

The paintings that comprise *Face-Off* juxtapose hard edge geometry with playful figurative drawing. They are strange anomalies for those unfamiliar with this aspect of his practice. Suggs was an avid draughtsman and scribbler, often jotting down quick sketches on note cards he carried in his shirt pocket. He called these drawings “autoglyphs” — spontaneous works that served as the basis for these larger, more colorful paintings.

Here, black-outlined characters interact with colored shapes to create ambiguous narratives. Though not specifically referential, the paintings have the feel of political caricatures. For example, in *Tyrant*, (2017) over a deep yellow ground, Suggs has loosely painted light yellow and orange-red rectangular shapes that serve as the boundaries for calligraphic lines that describe two heads, both part-human and part-animal. On the right, a bearded figure overlaying rough, orange-red brush strokes, sticks its tongue out as if licking the lighter colored head next to it. Both figures have cartoony eyes that stare out toward the left side of the frame. The title *Tyrant* directs the interpretation of the work. Is this figure the devil with his pointy ear and beard, or just a misogynist?

Talk to the Hand, (2018), presents a Guston-esque triangular shaped male head face to face with a more rounded head held in a disembodied hand as if a piece of fruit. A transparent pink wash covers the canvas, bisected by light aqua and purple stripes. The black outlined figures are positioned within these stripes. What transpires between them can only be inferred.

While many works juxtapose pictogram-like drawings with solid colored backgrounds sprinkled with geometric shapes, the exhibition also includes a selection from Suggs' small-scale (10 x 8 inch) *Paintlings* series. In *Winding* and *Fledgeling* (both 2018), he immerses animal heads in an energetic swirl of colorful paint (like a rake was dragged over it while wet) that approximates the texture of a marbleized surface. In *Fledgeling*, a bird's beak pokes through the paint, while its eyes remain submerged amidst the overlapping strokes.

While these works are rooted in drawing, they also reflect Suggs' understanding of color theory and the language of abstraction. The pieces function on multiple levels— as studies of form and color as well as insightful musings about the human condition. It is a tragedy that Suggs' career was cut short, but this unusual and unexpected exhibition celebrates the complexity of his vision.

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