

Art in America

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Brenna Youngblood

LOS ANGELES, at Honor Fraser

By Jennifer S. Li

Brenna Youngblood: *Heavy Metal*, 2013, mixed mediums on panel, 84 inches square; at Honor Fraser.

Rising young artist Brenna Youngblood's latest exhibition at Honor Fraser consisted of 10 mixed-medium paintings and a found-object installation (all 2013). The show, titled "Activision"—an aggregate of "active" and "vision," as well as a nod to the video-game publisher of the same name—sent the viewer down a rabbit hole filled with visual puzzles and allusions. The complicated yet seemingly effortless works (most of which are at least six feet to a side) mimic everyday textures and objects and call to mind Jasper Johns's adage: "A picture ought to be looked at the same way you look at a radiator."

In 2006, Youngblood received her MFA in photography from UCLA, where she studied under Catherine Opie and James Welling. She initially made her mark with bold political and personal collages in the vein of Mark Bradford and Betye Saar, eventually incorporating humor and pithiness in her sculpture, painting and photography. The works shown at Honor Fraser are subtler and more abstract than their predecessors. Several of the paintings approach pure abstraction, including one in which a field of bluish gray

over red is applied on glued-together pieces of panel. As the title, *Heavy Metal*, suggests, the 7-foot-square work recalls a giant slab of patinated copper. Close inspection, however, reveals a tiny metal interloper—perhaps an earring or furniture boss-embedded between two of the wood sections, nimbly contradicting the title.

Much of Youngblood's work reflects the darker or dingier side of urban domestic space and life—though she presents it beautifully. *Turn off the light* features a small photographic image of a light switch on a piece of wood laminate, all atop a canvas with a rich faux-rust paint job. The three panels of the triptych *Trifecta* are framed with household baseboard moldings; while the outer two are covered in washy rainbow colors, the middle one bears a drippy, drab gray and a cigarette butt (affixed to an upper corner).

Revolver, a functioning revolving door, led to the final round of this game of visual and linguistic play. Consisting of four found wooden doors, each dirtier and more dilapidated than the next, the portal spun viewers into the second gallery, where they were met with three large paintings. An angled wedge of glossy black bisects the plane of matte black in *Black Thunda*, alluding to fracture or disquietude. Similarly, *Fiction City* interrupts a muted sienna with a square of India red. Painted an institutional white, *10:56* includes a photograph of a metal clock fragment (bearing the title time) at the top and two black plastic electrical sockets protruding from the bottom. Together, the three paintings produced an eerie feeling and made the viewer feel like Alice in Wonderland, faced with unsolvable riddles. And yet this irresolvable quality is exactly what made the pieces so effective.

"Activision" continued the personal poignancy of Youngblood's earlier work but in a much more understated, ambiguous manner, while also managing to encompass themes meaningful to any modern city dweller. In her mixed-medium compositions, Youngblood featured ordinary items that might recall Johns's proverbial radiator, but the viewing experience—with its many dimensions and possible interpretations—was far from a simple encounter with utilitarian objects. She reeled the viewer out of complacency and into active vision.