

Leaving (most of) it up to chance

Jeff Perrott
points his art in
new directions

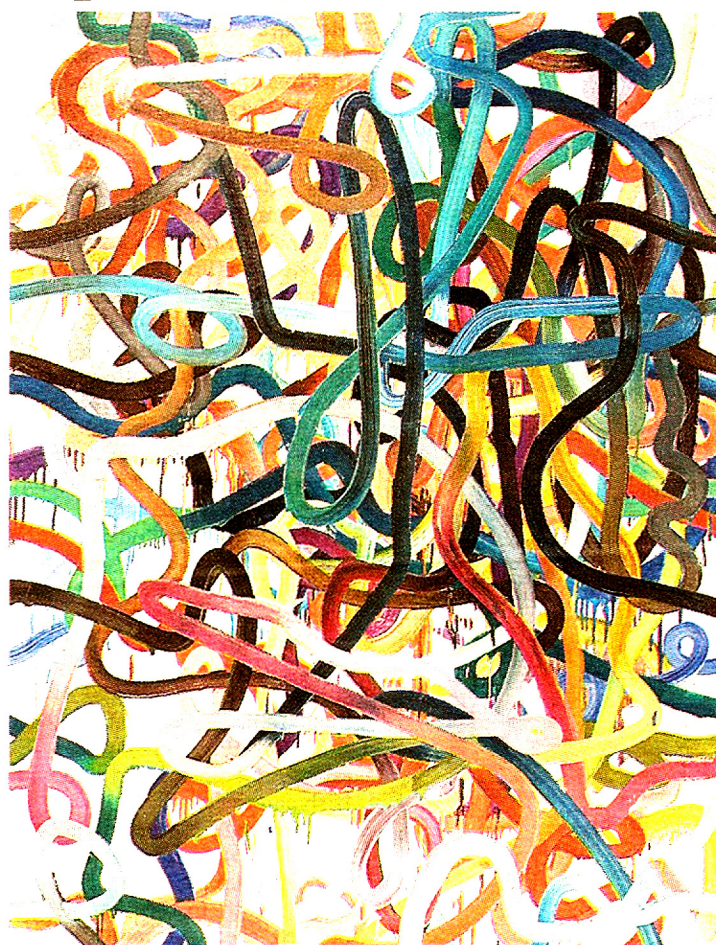
By Cate McQuaid
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For Jeff Perrott, art is an investigation into the nature of existence. He's a conceptual artist who has dallied in a variety of media to explore topics such as emptiness and chaos. For his painting show at LaMontagne Gallery, "Random Walks in Endless Fields," Perrott deploys an arbitrary system to direct a line across the canvas — he uses a spinner to point the way. After a fixed length, he spins again and the line moves in a new direction. At each shift, the color changes. The result: Colorful spaghetti tangles squirming over and sometimes off the canvas.

Artists have deployed chance in their aesthetic decisions at least as far back as Marcel Duchamp. It's a nod, in Buddhist terms, to the potency of what arises in the moment. Perrott is no longer the sole author of the painting; he is collaborating with chance. Some would say he's embracing chaos theory. Others might suggest he's dancing with God.

But does it make for good paintings? These loopy, drippy works evoke Abstract Expressionism. There's a tart irony in that; Abstract Expressionists are legendary for being heroically self-directed. They weren't rolling dice to determine their next move. The sheer painterliness of Perrott's lines can't help but imply gestural intention, and there's a meaty contradiction in that.

Some of the paintings drew me in; others I whiffed by. I expect that's because luck directed their composition (at least in part; Perrott must have decided where to begin, when to finish, and what colors to use). "RW 11 (Elemenopia)" is a wormy snarl of shifting tones; as the loops build up in the middle, they get so entangled that any sense of space is compromised. I preferred "RW 1 (Crux)," in which the lines are brawnier and more fluid, and drips rush from them down the canvas, a reminder of paint's vagaries — and how chancy painting anything can be,



COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND (ABOVE LEFT) LAMONTAGNE GALLERY

Clockwise from above: Jeff Perrott's "RW 1 (Crux)"; Cig Harvey's "Emie in the Truck, Rockport, Maine"; and Alex Carlson's "The Hunter."

whether directed by a spinner or born entirely from the artist's head.

Perrott has a concurrent show of the same body of work at Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York. Catalog images suggest that the New York exhibit features one large canvas, "Nothing Doing," in which the loops are so dense they generate their own jazzy energy. They overtake the field, and that's when the sheer randomness of the enterprise explodes into something visceral and commanding. Of course, it's impossible to judge merely from a catalog reproduction. I wish that painting had been on view here.

Tone poems

Cig Harvey's mournful color photos at Robert Klein Gallery are ripe with loneliness and rich with tone. The images date from 2003 to 2010, and it's easy to see the work deepen. Harvey's earlier photographs (and some recent ones) are self-portraits, in which

we rarely see her face; they're more about absence than presence. She's deeply engaged in composition, in the shapes that fill a frame.

The early pieces, such as "The Cut Apple and Gingham Dress, Self-Portrait, Clark's Island, Maine," are bright, but a little too clever. This one shows us just the artist's torso in her gingham dress, with a green apple half at her waist. In more recent works, Harvey expands her scope to include friends, family, and the landscape around her Maine farmhouse.

The emphasis evident in the self-portraits on what it is to be a girl or woman is more tender when Harvey aims her camera at others. In "Devlin and the Fireflies," a girl who might be anywhere between 11 and 16 stands in the gloaming, attended by bright fireflies. "Emie in the Truck, Rockport, Maine" has a round-faced child peering out the back window of an old red Chevy, bright in a snowstorm. She's in