

Westword

Marks-A-Lot

Dale Chisman's impressive career is on display at Rule.

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By Michael Paglia

Many people -- if not most -- think of art and art writing as subjective enterprises. It's all a matter of taste; one person's trash is another's treasure. This thinking is partially right -- but mostly wrong. Like it or not, art is part of the objective reality that exists in the world outside our imagination.

Dale Chisman, the first-rate exhibit of paintings at Rule Gallery, is what brought these thoughts to mind. Objectively speaking, Chisman is one of the greatest artists in the history of Colorado and a key player in the contemporary scene here. That's really saying something, especially when you consider that I'm not giving my opinion, but rather basing it on the facts, such as Chisman's identifiable stylistic vision, his stick-to-itiveness, his commitment and his longstanding participation in the local exhibition world.

Chisman, who was born in Denver in 1943, attended public schools and studied with the late Martha Epp -- an influential mid-twentieth-century modernist -- while at North High School. In 1961, right out of high school, Chisman attended a summer program at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center,



Dale Chisman, *Primal*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 inches.

where he worked with the late Mary Chenueth. Her influence left a lasting impression on him that is easy to see in their shared approach to composition, since both set abstract shapes against modulating color fields.

Chisman moved to Boulder in 1963 to attend the University of Colorado, and during his undergraduate years he briefly studied at Yale. He graduated from CU in 1965 with a BFA; the following year he moved to London to attend the Royal College of Art, which he's told me he hated. His initial connection to London was David Hockney, whom he had met when the British legend was a visiting artist in Boulder.

Chisman returned to Boulder in 1967 and entered graduate school, earning an MFA in 1969. During this, his second sojourn there, Chisman became part of what could be called the post-mid-century-modernist group. A bunch of young artists had gathered in Boulder in the late '60s, making the town an art center for the first time in its history. These artists, many of whom still live in the area, are now themselves in their sixties. They include geometric abstractionist Clark Richert, hyperrealist sculptor John DeAndrea and neo-expressionist ceramics artist Martha Daniels. Most of them were students at the University of Colorado and studied with painter, photographer and art theorist George Woodman, the great unsung art hero of that period.

I've never seen Chisman's paintings from his student days, but he's described them to me as examples of figural abstraction, using the recognizable human form as his taking-off point.

Chisman left Colorado again, this time moving to New York, the capital of the art market. You know, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. After just a few years in New York -- Chisman sets the date at 1974 -- he abandoned all references to recognizable subjects in his paintings and began doing work that was steeped in the traditions of abstract expressionism. Interestingly, this move was tantamount to swimming up the cultural stream. At the time, figural and representational work was making a comeback, while abstraction, except for minimalism, was on the wane.

It is at this point in Chisman's career that the show at Rule picks up. The group of



Dale Chisman, Passage 5 - Western Theory, 2005, oil on linen, 60 x 66 inches.

five paintings that were done in the 1970s were created after his residency at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, an experience he sees as very important in his development as an artist. The paintings, hung in the front section of the gallery, exude an icy elegance that perfectly approximates the weather right now.

These paintings are closely interconnected and feature a cruciform of lines dividing each composition into a grid of four squares. "The quadrants were a compositional device that I used to flatten out the surface," Chisman says. "Previously, I had been dealing with deeper space, and I wanted these to be shallow." The two lines intersecting at the center bring viewers' eyes right up to the surface of the paintings.

There's something going on in each of the four squares of each painting, but more so in some than in others. Several -- such as "Primal," from 1978 -- incorporate triangles or squares or both. "I was trying to devise icons, a visual vocabulary. It seems so simple to me now," Chisman says with a laugh.

Another element in some works is Chisman's own handprint. "It's about identity, 'I was here,' and it was a way of retaining

the figure without painting it," he explains. These five paintings are also interlinked by their shared gray palette. "At the time, I was not so concerned with strong colors, and when I saw it hung for the first time, it seemed very soft to me, gray-ed. I think it was the influence of the light in New York," Chisman says.

With paintings of this sort, Chisman found ready success in New York and was represented for years by the prestigious Martha Jackson Gallery. His work was widely exhibited, and his paintings were even included in an important exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum.

Despite these successes, and for a variety of personal reasons, Chisman returned to Denver in 1984. Owing to his many artist friends from Boulder, the cachet of having just returned from New York and his obvious talent, Chisman was accorded instant credibility as a major artist in Denver's contemporary-art scene. He exhibited frequently, and over the years his pieces have been shown at Pirate, Progresso Gallery, Cydney Payton Art Folio, Payton-Rule, Grant Gallery, 1/1 and, for the past decade, Rule Gallery. His work has also seen the spotlight at the Denver Art Museum, the Arvada Center and Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art, among many other venues.

Like his New York paintings, the works of the past twenty years include simple forms and straight lines placed over color fields. But after he moved back to Colorado, Chisman's palette changed radically. He's often incorporated bold colors, particularly that uncompromising shade: red. If the grays of the New York paintings were inspired by the gloominess of the East Coast, perhaps the bolder shades he embraced here spring from the clear cloudless light of a typical Colorado day. Throughout this period, Chisman's pictorial interest constantly changed, but his paintings were always recognizable as his.

That's still true of his latest paintings -- all done since this summer -- which make up the second part of the Rule show. These pieces look like Chismans, but they also appear fresh and new. In certain ways, these new paintings are responses to the '70s-era ones, in particular with their repeated use of the quadrant. In other ways, however, they're different, with the color stronger in the new pieces and the shapes more complex, such as the cup-like form that he calls a crucible.

In these paintings, Chisman wanted to leave areas of raw linen to be used as fields or borders, but he'd get carried away and almost entirely cover the surfaces with paint. In "Passage 1--Two Forms," for example, Chisman covered most of the linen with a thin, white-ish glaze, leaving only the edges bare.

Other paintings have no linen showing, and from my point of view, they're the best in the group. In "Passage 6--Open," Chisman places the crucible shape off to one side and combines it with other soft forms, all of which stand out against the light-colored field. In "Passage 5--Western Theory," which is a real standout, Chisman uses a purply gray with pink and lots of ochre and brown. There's a black outline of the crucible, and bars of black above and off to the side. It's unforgettable.

Chisman has a dead-on instinct for putting colors together and for assembling forms. He does both of these things instinctually, not knowing how his paintings will come out until the end. The results are almost always brilliant and beautifully crafted.

During the time I've paid attention to art, I've noticed that artists tend to come and go. Very few of them manage to have a career that's ten years long. Chisman, on the other hand, has been going strong for more than forty years, producing at an unbelievably high standard. For him, painting must be something like an inexhaustible well of creativity. No matter how many times he goes back to it, he always manages to pull up a new bucketful overflowing with inspiration. If you check out Dale Chisman at Rule Gallery, you'll see what I mean.

If you do go over to Rule, you'll notice something odd: The rest of the large historic building where the gallery's located is almost completely vacant. Rule's neighbors have moved out in advance of a building rehab slated to start this spring. That means gallery owner Robin Rule needs to find a new space to do business in, and she's got to do it soon.

Rule says she's sorry to be leaving her current spot, but the choice isn't hers to make. She's been looking elsewhere on Broadway, where she'd like to stay. "Everyone knows where Broadway is," she says. She's also scouting spaces on Santa Fe Drive -- and everyone knows where that is, too.

If nothing turns up on Broadway, Santa Fe sounds like a good bet to me because so many other galleries are located there -- notably Sandy Carson -- and there are thousands of people going from spot to spot along the street on First Fridays.