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Westword

Review: Jason Middlebrook's *Drawing Time Dazzles* at David B. Smith

by Michael Paglia



"Inspired by Lake Como," Jason Middlebrook, 2016, acrylic on curly maple.

Mid-career artist Jason Middlebrook, who lives and works in Hudson, New York, is the subject of an elegant single-artist show titled *Drawing Time* at David B. Smith Gallery. This is Middlebrook's first solo at the gallery, but his work has been exhibited nationally for over twenty years and acquired for important art collections across the country, including that of the Denver Art Museum. Despite the reference to "drawing" in the exhibit's title, the pieces at Smith are actually paintings. Middlebrook has long used trees — in the form of wooden planks, trunks, rough-hewn boards, twigs, roots and cut or sliced logs, which are linked both actually and poetically — not only as the basis for his paintings, sculptures and installations, but also at times as inspirations for them, as in those pieces that depict leaves and tree branches.

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Only one work of this type, "My Landscape," is included in the Smith show; everything else is pretty much of a piece: abstract featuring non-repeating painted patterns, in the form of geometric abstractions that depict three-dimensional constructs in two dimensions.



"My Landscape," Jason Middlebrook, 2016, acrylic and spray paint on cottonwood.

The Middlebrooks at Smith fall into two broad categories: logs sliced across the grain, revealing the concentric ring patterns of the trunk; and rough-torn planks cut along the grain. Everything has been done on the flat sides of the boards or the equally flat surfaces of the tree-trunk slices. But since Middlebrook has a taste for pieces of wood with unusual shapes, the slices often have eccentric margins — cut across at the point where a branch comes off the main trunk, for instance, so that there's a bump on one side of it. The planks are also not standard, and have sometimes been taken from trees that had grown at an angle or had a curve to their trunk.

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The painted areas are hard-edged, though defined by parallel lines that are repeated in rows. In “Inspired by Lake Como,” the resulting geometric shapes are arranged as though they fit together in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle, but with wide gaps between the parts.

In other pieces the balance between the rows of lines and the resulting shapes tips toward the latter, as in “21 Paintings Inspired by Rocks.” And sometimes, as in "Light Way Down," the lines and the shapes play equal parts in the composition.



"21 Paintings Inspired by Rocks," Jason Middlebrook, 2016, acrylic on walnut.

To paint the wood, Middlebrook tapes off the margins of the patterns. In some cases, he has almost completely covered the surfaces with paint; in many others, the painted parts are more like a net or screen, revealing the wood behind them. After he's painted the works, he removes

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the tape and reveals the underlying raw wood. The painted portions are on a plane that's slightly — though still noticeably — above that of the underlying wood's surface. Thus the patterns of the wood grains are revealed between and slightly below the lines of the painted patterns. This sets up a compelling juxtaposition between the “artificial” geometric patterns of the painting and the “natural” patterns of the grains. The man-versus-nature tension is heightened by the colors that Middlebrook uses. Emphatic tones that are bold, bright and shiny introduce a strong contrast to the dull sheen and quiet brown, gray or gold tones of the natural wood. Everything in the Smith show is wonderful and eye-dazzling — whether taken separately or as a whole.



"Light Way Down," Jason Middlebrook, 2016, acrylic on maple.

Jason Middlebrook's Drawing Time runs through September 3 at David B. Smith Gallery, 1543 A Wazee Street. The gallery is open from noon to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday. Call 303-893-4234 or go to davidbsmithgallery.com for more information.