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Review: 'About Face' a disparate collection, with each work enhanced by those around it



Brian Calvin, "The Up and Up," 2015, oil on linen, from Kayne Griffin Corcoran's group exhibition, "About Face."

Some of the best group exhibitions don't make sense — at least the kind of sense that can be encapsulated in a snappy title. That's the case with "About Face," a deeply satisfying show at Kayne Griffin Corcoran.

Organized by guest curators Kristina Kite and Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, the six-artist show includes enough works by each artist to give you a sense of their larger projects, all of which are ambitious.

The show's smart selection of paintings, sculptures, drawings and a single knockout film invites endless points of comparison and contrast, most more eye-opening than the last.

Each piece is enriched by those around it. The mix-and-match installation makes you want to look at everything more than once — to see how it pairs up with what you just viewed and to discover which pieces it pushes you toward.

It's a great pleasure to see paintings from the 1970s and '80s by San Francisco-based Joan Brown (1938-1990) alongside recent canvases by Los Angeles-based Brian Calvin (b. 1969). Their cockeyed visions resonate.

The same goes for the two Chicago-based artists, Diane Simpson (b. 1935) and Christina Ramberg (1946-95). Simpson's sculptures have the presence of garments for activities best left to the imagination. Ramberg's works on paper and Masonite are matter-of-fact and menacing, their point-blank simplicity delivering ample intensity.

The three pieces by L.A. artist Dianna Molzan (b. 1972) almost come off as half-baked. But they benefit from their proximity to Simpson and Ramberg's works, which anchor the younger artist's efforts.

Projected on a wall in a darkened back gallery, an eight-minute film by Austrian artist Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) all but steals the show. Made in 1992, "The Ballad of Maria Lassnig" serves as a beacon for the whirlwind of ideas in "About Face." (Incidentally, the title of Kite and Lehrer-Graiwer's exhibition echoes that of a memorable 2012 exhibition about portraiture at Daniel Weinberg Gallery).

More important, Lassnig's film contrasts dramatically with the narcissism of so much of contemporary life. Never expecting special treatment, or any other kind of entitlement, Lassnig turns egotism inside out. That leaves viewers front and center, right where ambitious art does its work.