

# Paint 101

The medium, not the message, is given the limelight at Glen Allen.

by **Paulette Roberts-Pullen**

**F**ew believed Picasso (or the throngs of abstractionists who followed him) when he said that there is no such thing as "figurative" and "nonfigurative" art. Art is art, he claimed — merely colors and shapes — and trying to understand art is as fruitless as trying to understand the song of a bird. Why, then, more than 70 years after Picasso tried to assure viewers that they could trust their own eyes and instincts, are we still so hesitant to do so?

Why do we think that if we knew some secret code, we'd be better equipped to appreciate art?

"Thick and Thin," the current exhibition at Gumenick Family Gallery in the Cultural Arts Center at Glen Allen, insists on being seen first as the result of artists' manipulation of paint in varying densities. It asks us to strip away preconceptions of what paintings should tell us and to look at the gestures made by the artist's brush, palette knife or spray gun.

Showcasing six abstractionists who manipulate their material in extreme ways, "Thick and Thin" takes viewers off the intellectual

**Diane Szczepaniak's "Work No. 1, 2002" juxtaposes contrasting hues in simple geometric forms.**

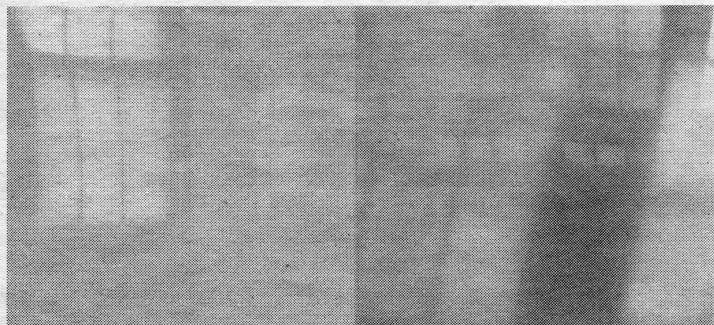
hook immediately. As the exhibition's title suggests, the visual contrasts between thick and thin paint are stark, from the patterns made by Mary Shand's runny oils to the tactile qualities of Joanne Kent's shaggy, built-up paint. The show's simple, liberating premise means viewers can seek optical pleasures without worrying about meaning or agenda. (Picasso would remind us that an experience of visual discovery is rarely meaningless.)

"Thick and Thin" isn't a primer on how to use paint but how to use paint effectively. Its artists aren't paint slingers, but apparently are smart and thoughtful about their products. Two of the sharpest are Diane Szczepaniak and Bernhard Hildebrandt whose works, which hang on adjacent gallery walls, seem to speak to one another about translucency. Szczepaniak's minimal watercolors pulse with opposing hues painted in simple geometries. But while her pristine shapes butt against one another, sometimes creating an afterimage in the eye, edges of the paintings are often irregular and unfinished looking, as if to remind viewers that what they are looking at, after all, is just pigment suspended in water and a little binder.

Bernhard Hildebrandt's diptychs of paintings paired with large, gauzy photographs result from a less-direct approach with the medium. Hildebrandt's play with real and perceived space via pigment and surface sets up engrossing illusions that involve light captured with film and reflected off his high-gloss finishes. In one diptych the artist adds another layer to the illusion by using a tangled trail of brushwork on top of one panel while embedding the same image into a photograph in the adjacent panel. Within his paper-thin surfaces, Hildebrandt suggests depths ranging from a millimeter to yards.

In plain terms, "Thick and Thin" dispels the myth that abstract art is for "informed" viewers. It rewards the viewer willing to look, and better yet, it preserves the glory — even the mystery — of seeing. **S**

*"Thick and Thin" runs at the Gumenick Family Gallery in the Cultural Arts Center at Glen Allen through May 14.*



**Bernhard Hildebrandt's diptych "Untitled 2005" pairs painting with photography to explore the illusions of light and space.**