

ART

Rolling with the changes in his tastes

Two exhibitions of Lavi Daniel's work show some of the journeys his perspective has taken.

By ALEX CHUN
Special to The Times

THE career of 52-year-old Los Angeles artist Lavi Daniel has been marked by constant change, so when his work appeared in not just one but two solo shows last month, it came as no surprise that he was once again refocusing and refining his vision of modern abstraction.

A 32-piece exhibition at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts carves Daniel's career and features his largest and most recent works, gestural abstract oil painting with fluid lines of color, while over at Santa Monica's Bobbie Greenfield Gallery, another exhibition homes in on his small-scale, architecturally

mindful monochromatic ink-wash drawings.

"For the last 20 years, I've continually visited Lavi's studio and continued seeing his work taking off in different directions and exploring the abstract language," says Anne Agres, curator of Daniel's Armory exhibition. "Finally in 2004, I saw work that gave me so much pleasure that I thought it was time to collaborate with him and the Armory Center on a mid-career retrospective."

For Daniel, the two exhibitions represent recognition for a career that received early notice almost 20 years ago when he was selected for inclusion in the Orange County Museum of Art's now-defunct "New California Artist" series. They are also the culmination of a long and often difficult journey that began when Daniel, at 3 years old, definitively declared he would be a painter, after combing through his grandfather's expansive art library.

After an aborted stint at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he struggled to make his way as an artist until he met his future wife, Diane, in 1975. To-



Armory Center for the Arts

OIL ON CANVAS: Fluid lines of color have characterized Daniel's recent work.

gether, they took what little money they had and traveled to the rain forests of Borneo, where they collected 19th century textiles — a trade that supported them for the next 25 years.

Returning to Los Angeles, Daniel found success as a figurative painter, but by the time his work was showcased at Santa Monica's James Corcoran Gallery in 1988, he had already begun to shift gears.

"It was painful — the audience was onto my work, but I was off it," he recalls. "I spent three

years groping because I moved away from what I had been in command of.

"What happened is that I had been moved by the work of Terry Winters [best known for his sensual abstract paintings], and I was being moved by line drawing by Pygmy women in the Iuri Forest in the Congo." (Along with Borneo textiles, Daniel and his wife also collected Pygmy drawings, 50 of which were published in the 1996 book "Mount Design: Paintings by the Pygmy Women of the Iuri Forest.")

A series of high-contrast abstract, "finger-made" paintings ensued, but drew little notice from either the press or the galleries.

Then in 1995, his wife was diagnosed with cancer, which took her life five years later. Daniel reacted to his wife's death by exploring pastels and creating what Agres calls "light-drenched fields of brilliant atmospheric color."

"These paintings were all about daring to dance at the edge of the void," Daniel says.

"Diane's death was mind-blowing, and I needed to know that I could paint without her in my life."

AFTER the pastels, Daniel's work took yet another turn as he was re-inspired by the Pygmy drawings. "I had this enormous appetite to expose my line again," he explains. "I started from a place of wanting to expose how well I draw and bring character to a line and make it probing and honest and effective, and dramatically confident or tenderly wandering."

The result was an explosion of otherworldly biomorphic and architectural ink washes that evoke images of tree branches, piers and unfinished buildings, and more recently, their counterpart, huge paintings with big thick tactile lines of color that sweep across the canvas like a roller coaster.

As it turns out, the ink washes were born of necessity. After moving from his longtime Mar Vista home and while waiting for construction on his new Cheviot Hills studio to be completed, he was left with his kitchen as a workspace. There, he produced five or six ink-wash drawings a day and more than 300 in total.

"All my life, before these ink-wash drawings, I always spent months on a piece," he says. "I have had to suck the floor for every inch of advancement that I

Exhibitions

Lavi Daniel: Recent Ink Wash Drawings

Where: Bobbie Greenfield Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B6, Santa Monica

When: 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays (closed today)

Ends: Jan. 20

Price: Free

Info: (310) 264-0640, www.bobbiegreenfieldgallery.com

Parables of Space: Lavi Daniel: A Twenty-Four-Year Survey

Where: Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays

Ends: Feb. 25

Price: Free

Info: (626) 792-5101, www.armoryarts.org

have made, and these represent an unbelievable explosion of energy for me, having overcome the tragedy of six years ago, and now feeling young again and revitalized."

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GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

IN HIS STUDIO: Lavi Daniel with some of his ink-wash drawings, reflecting an alteration in his creative drive but also born of necessity when he temporarily had only his kitchen as a workspace.