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CALENDAR

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ART REVIEW

A tactile journey

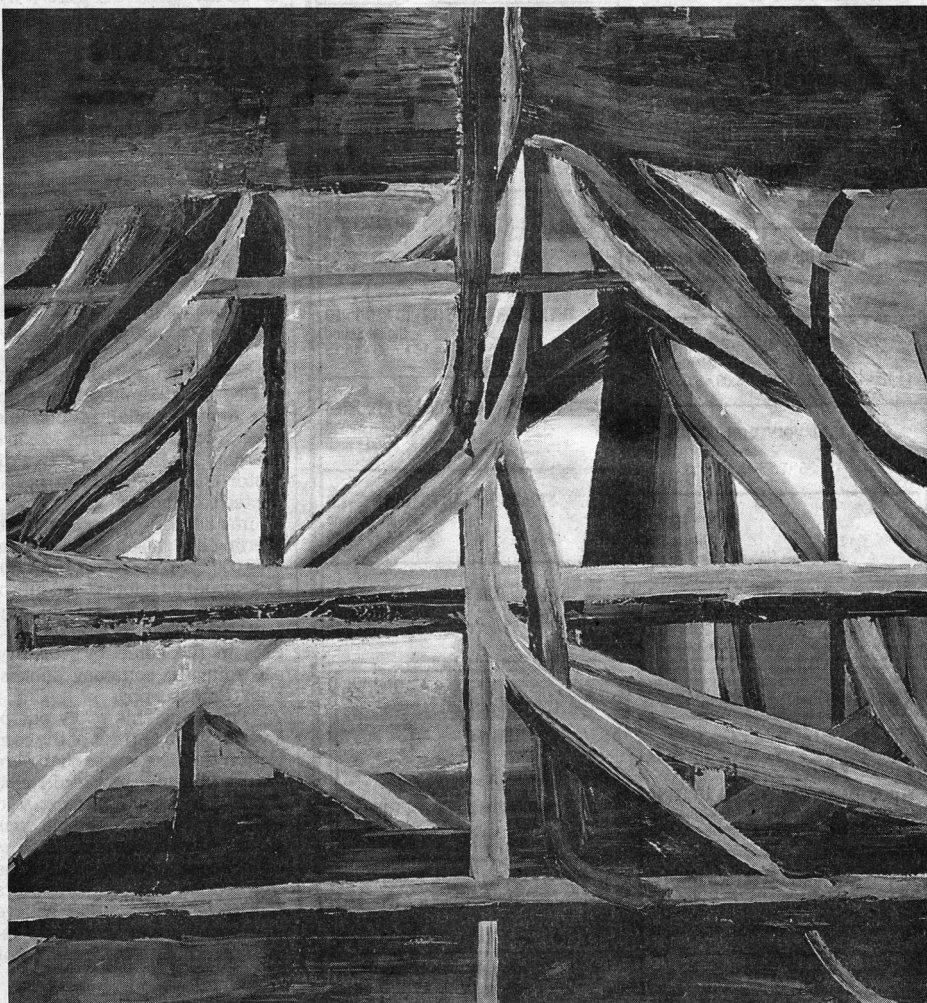
Lavi Daniel's mid-career exhibition of paintings and ink washes moves from refined to raw, from highly formalized to spatial ambiguity.

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Lavi Daniel is a meat and potatoes painter. At the Armory Center for the Arts, a mid-career overview of his works on canvas, panel and paper is true to the ethos at the heart of his art. Organized by guest curator Anne Ayres, "Parables of Space: Lavi Daniel: A Twenty-Four-Year Survey" puts substance ahead of style. The visually satisfying and emotionally rich exhibition avoids the glamour and trendiness that often accompany contemporary art and sticks, instead, to what Daniel does best: hearty paintings whose pleasures are part of their unfancy earthiness.

There's not a lot of formal innovation in Daniel's paintings. But there is also very little repetition. It's clear that the 52-year-old Los Angeles artist has staked out fruitful territory.

And the range — from figurative to abstract, with atmospheric deep space and shallow picture planes, taut geometry and loose gestures, wet-on-wet brush strokes and chalky, mortar-like accumulations of thick, gritty pigment — suggests nothing came easy. Where other painters working in this idiom regularly make such struggles into the subject of their art, Daniel is too humble to do so. Selfless



Photographs from Armory Center for the Arts

FRACTURED PLANES: The show at the Armory Center for the Arts is anchored by eight of Daniel's large recent paintings, including this untitled oil on canvas from 2004.

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generosity frees his art from autobiography, giving viewers the freedom to discover its hard-won pleasures for themselves.

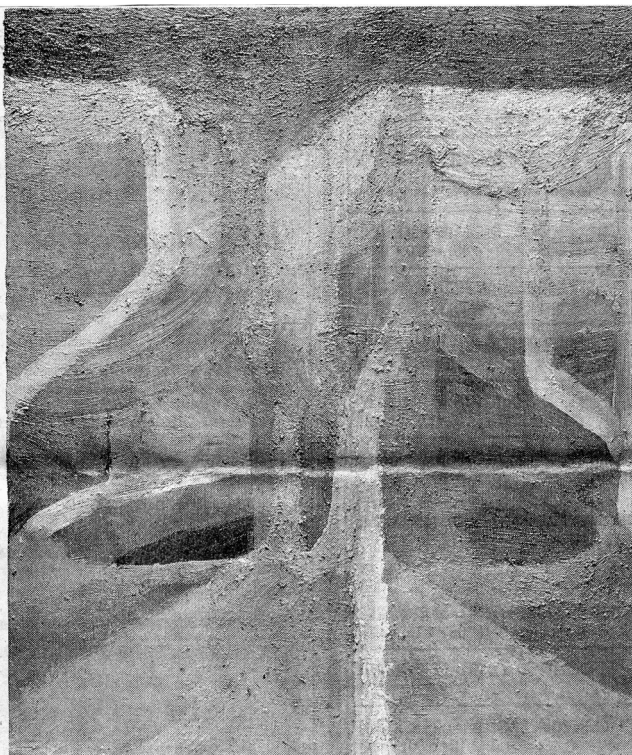
The four-gallery exhibition has not been installed chronologically. But it isn't difficult to determine the rough order in which the works were painted. Its 22 paintings and suite of 10 ink washes fall into three loose groups: staged tableaux (1982-88), evocative depictions of atmospheric space (1994-2002) and expansive views often glimpsed through abstract architectural structures (2004-06).

Daniel's earliest paintings are the most fastidious. The newest are the loosest, most confident and, happily, the simplest. The exhibition takes visitors on a step-by-step journey, moving from refinement to rawness, from a highly formalized affection for theatrical mystery to a basic love of spatial ambiguity and paint's tactile sensuality.

The six paintings from the 1980s appear to have been made from photographs. Most feature the limbs or torsos of androgynous models posed as if they were mannequins, still-lives or movie stills. All are radically cropped, as if a camera had zoomed in for a close-up. Little space is left between viewers and paintings, enhancing the intimacy — or the claustrophobia.

The smallest, a page-size gouache mounted on canvas, shows a prone figure's bare feet protruding from behind a blue curtain. In a mid-size image, a figure's arm sticks out from behind a sheet of plywood that serves as a backdrop for a blindfolded goat. And the largest, at nearly 5 by 9 feet, depicts a performer ducking and covering as the tail feathers of his or her costume rise overhead.

The charged moments Daniel paints do not seem to belong to full-blown narratives as much as single instants that welcome epiphanies. But the drama feels forced, the artifice too arch to get beyond mannerist manipulation. The best thing about these gouaches is their surfaces: They are luscious, velvety and luxuriant, bathed in sensuous light and suffused with resplendent



DOWN-TO-EARTH DIRECTNESS: *An otherworldly beauty shines through in an untitled oil on canvas from this year.*



DUCK AND COVER: *In a large, untitled gouache from 1988, the tail feathers on a performer's costume rise overhead.*

textures that beg to be touched.

Daniel abandons figures to focus on the surfaces of the works in the next group, a series of atmospheric abstractions.

In four mid-size oils on panel from 1994-2000, angular geomet-

ric forms appear to emerge from thick fog. To give these paintings their buttery tactility, Daniel applied the paint with his fingers and palms, massaging and caressing it into desired form. Three slightly smaller pastels on

'Parables of Space: Lavi Daniel'

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

Contact: (626) 792-5101;
www.armoryarts.org/gallery/gallery.html

paper from 2002 replace the quasi-mechanical forms with pure blackness surrounded by warm light, suggesting the presence of various voids and their spectrum-spanning auras.

The last group includes the show's largest paintings (measuring up to 12 by 8 feet) and smallest ink washes (the size of notebook pages). In these, Daniel leaves behind the smooth, carefully worked surfaces of the second group for brushwork that is either rough and vigorous or casual and offhand — so swiftly applied that its unselfconsciousness is unmistakable.

The little ink washes, done in 2005 when Daniel did not have a studio, resemble the silhouettes of buildings under construction. Their backgrounds often dissolve in blinding light, which seems to recede to infinity. They have the presence of dreamy studies.

Daniel's eight big paintings, four each from 2004 and 2006, are more grounded and gritty, muscular and meaty. They anchor the exhibition.

The dark ones recall subterranean structures — ad hoc systems of pillars, planks and buttresses. In others, fractured planes of unblended colors and knotty lines evoke freeway interchanges. And the brightest, painted in a Mediterranean palette of cool aquas, sandy golds and smoldering oranges, are also the most expansive. Their otherworldly beauty is all the more potent for being painted with Daniel's down-to-earth directness, with no fancy flourishes getting in the way of the basics.