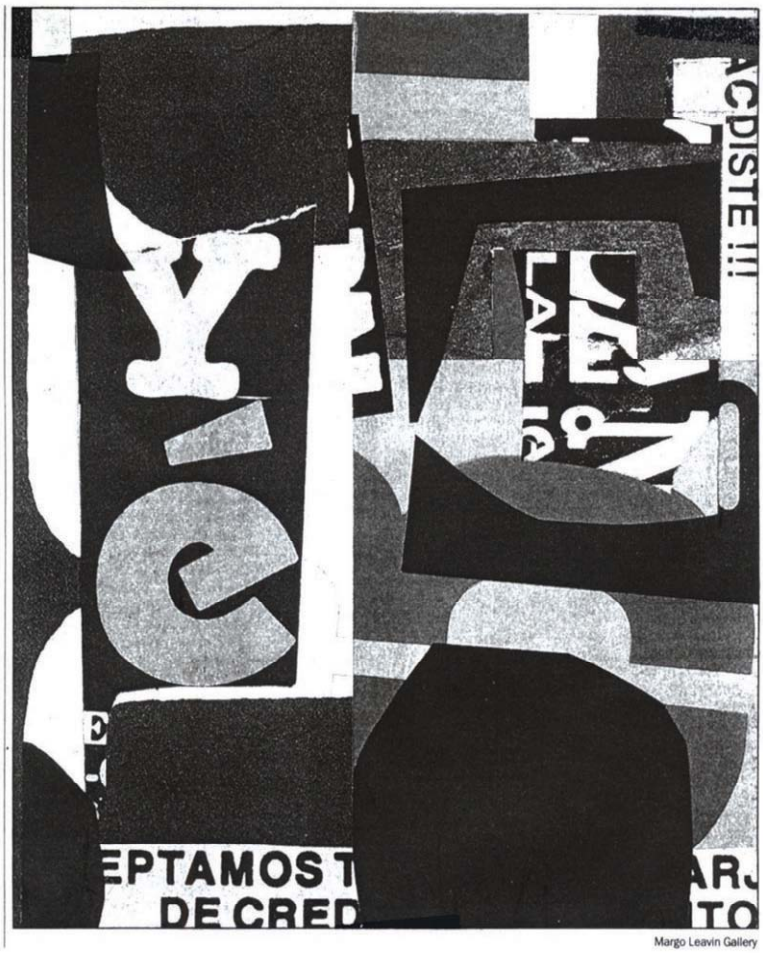
Pagel, David. "Some Theatrical Reflections on Alienation and Illusion." *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 2000, p. F2, 32.

Mortar Master: At Margo Leavin Gallery, a series of 40 painted collages by Roy Dowell embodies ethics in the only way art can: indirectly, by showing rather than telling.

It is impossible to read specific statements in any of the artist's intimate, page-size abstractions. Even though it's clear that all of his works on paper are made from carefully cut sections of posters that have been peeled from the walls of boarded-up buildings, the meanings of the original messages are completely subsumed in the vibrant visual stews Dowell cooks up by mixing and matching unrelated elements.



Margo Leavin Gallery

The insistent illegibility of his punchy works overrules the idea that art is a form of self-expression. In Dowell's case, art is a way of life. His show's title, "Like Love, Built on Precedent," drives this point home with the same generous equanimity of all his open-ended abstractions.

An architectural quality suffuses these remarkably stable works, whose additive, part-by-part structures recall the gridded consistency of brickwork or the interlocked solidity a mason is able to wrest from an otherwise chaotic pile of irregularly shaped stones. In Dowell's carefully balanced images, handmade marks, both drawn and painted, function like mortar, holding the cut-and-pasted fragments together in wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts.

The cumulative aspect that gives each piece its internal rhythms also takes shape among the 40 uniformly sized works in the show. To see what Dowell has done (over and over again) in an extremely limited format is to get a good feel for the sustained daily labor that goes into his brand of art-making.

Steering his way between the plodding repetitiousness of merely punching the clock and the freewheeling exuberance of unfettered creativity, his artistry is even-keeled, steady and measured. It involves adjustments and compromises, weighing one element against several others and determining what is the best all-around arrangement. Details are fiddled with, and contrasts are fine-tuned, but neither goes on endlessly. After all, Dowell is less an obsessive out for perfection than a pragmatist in search of an ad hoc solution.

His work as an artist has a lot in common with that of a repairman. Both begin with things they didn't invent but about which they have intimate knowledge. Both operate on used objects that have seen better days but are too valuable to discard. And both use finesse or muscular force, depending on the job's requirements.

In a sense, the art of collage is about as glamorous as that of repair work. Lacking the drama of painting and the touch of drawing, it plays second fiddle to both. But, as Dowell's humble works boldly demonstrate, playing second fiddle has nothing to do with being second-best, especially when you play your heart out.

• *Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through July 15. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*