

Myers, Holly. "An artist's inspired growth." *Los Angeles Times*, 31 March 2006, p. E24.

An artist's inspired growth

By HOLLY MYERS
Special to The Times

Many artists shift toward a sort of minimalism as they mature, their compositions shedding clutter as their confidence in form and technique develops. It says something about the boisterous nature of **Roy Dowell's** sensibility that his career, outlined in a 24-year survey at Margo Leavin Gallery, has followed more or less the opposite trajectory. Far from detracting from the work, this proves to be exhilarating.

Dowell's transition from the

affable, quirky but relatively forgettable paintings he made in the early 1980s to the dense, sharp, fantastically dynamic collage works that carried him through the 1990s comes as an emphatic reminder that less is not always more. The gathering and marshaling of momentum can be a form of refinement in itself.

The early paintings have their moments, to be sure — in the tension of certain edges, for instance, or the buoyancy of some of the shapes. On the whole, however, they cover familiar territory, putting a blithe 1980s-era spin on a traditional vocabulary of form familiar from Cubism and Constructivism.

Part of the problem is that Dowell is simply not a brilliant painter. As lively as his forms may be in a pictorial sense, his technique hasn't the delicacy or nuance to set them off — to sharpen contrasts in texture, for instance, carve out a more reso-

nant illusion of depth or enliven the surface of the canvas — and thus to move them past the level of the merely enthusiastic.

For this reason the introduction of collage comes as a revelation. One senses Dowell moving toward the shift in the denser paintings of the late 1980s — most notably in a large and very appealing untitled work that's dominated by an exploding rose-like motif. In actually breaking up the surface of the canvas, the incorporation of printed elements seems to unleash an entirely new rhythm and lends all of his forms a renewed sense of purpose.

How these chaotic, cluttered compositions hold together is something of a mystery, but they do. Few involve anything more

than an echo of recognizable imagery (the magnified skin of a strawberry, the edge of a pack of cigarettes). But they exude a syntax of their own that the sympathetic viewer will pick up in an instant.

In a gratifying twist, Dowell returns to straight painting in several of the most recent works, dating from the last three years or so, but with all the concentrated energy of the collage works. Most of these are smaller pieces with more centralized compositions. They are so taut that they almost seem to hum. Along with two collage works from 2005, they speak of an artist at the top of his game.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 273-0603.
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Margo Leavin Gallery

COLLAGE: An untitled 1996 work by Roy Dowell at Margo Leavin. The artist began as a painter before moving on to collage.