

Art

LaMantia and Hall, in top form at 620

By Dennis Adrian

The gallery complex at 620 N. Michigan has two new shows of special interest: Paul LaMantia's paintings and drawings at Zaks (through Dec. 13), and Michael Hall's sculpture at Walter Kelly.

LaMantia long has been a Chicago maverick. He has had shows in places such as the Hyde Park Art Center, but the explosive ferocity of his style and his highly toxic subject matter have perhaps made it hard for a wide public to relate comfortably to his work. Until recently, his painting and drawing styles seemed almost separate. One would find partisans of one or the other, but infrequently both.

LaMantia's art comes out of an extraordinary inner awareness, centered on a powerfully visceral experience of the world and his feelings about it. The themes his personages and figures express or represent are the raw force of nerve and mind interacting in the harsh texture of existence.

The scenes are bizarre confrontations, sometimes erotic. Separate, individual sensations of feeling, color and form are whirled together in hot, vivid, jumbled compositions that seem to change and develop before one's eyes. LaMantia's form and color roar around with a startling energy. The variety of his invention, in a purely formal sense, overwhelms one in work after work.

Grit your teeth

The pictures are so scalding in their intensity, so agitated in the emotional fields they generate, that the viewer must grit his teeth and force himself to take it all in. Letting oneself become absorbed in these works is like being pulled into a frightening melee of hysterical activity: The surprise is that once one enters LaMantia offers an exhilaration of feeling that is addictively satisfying.

There is so much going on in his paintings or drawings that one feels intimidated, or perhaps not up to the effort they seem to require just to see them. This is probably why he may remain one of those artists whom one accepts wholeheartedly or must

leave alone. Equivocation in the presence of LaMantia's art is unthinkable.

Having seen them now for more than 10 years, I have become partially acclimated and have a very high regard for LaMantia's wonderful drawing ability and sense of color. He has developed his figural ideas to the point where the earlier distance between the paintings and drawings has almost disappeared. The consistency of his vision now is thorough and convincing.

Technically, the works are intricate and accomplished. The manner of handling is completely individual and luxurious. Despite their very high emotional voltage, they have a wonderful sense of the beautiful and the grand.

In the paintings, the compositional ideas often begin with an unexpected classical formulation—lush female figures, partly nude, lolting about an interior. This formulation is a kind of armature for LaMantia's wild inventiveness.

The pictures are really about art as much as anything else, but this is not the closed self-reflection of minimal art or other kinds of formalism; rather, it is a concern with art as a mode of emotional and perceptual existence. For LaMantia, art is a way of being. He has access to areas of thought and feeling that most of us cannot bear to address comfortably.

I feel there is a real and unconventional greatness in his work, connected to a pitch of intense feeling that exists in some of the fiercest Picasso paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s—Picasso's "Dora Maar" period.

In those paintings, as in LaMantia's work, the artist has confronted and involved himself in a disturbing area of inner feeling. Yet somehow he has retained control or organizing ability that allows the sensation to be transmitted coherently, in a composed fashion but with undiminished force.

This is a rare accomplishment. One would have to look for other modern equivalents in the "Women" paintings of De Kooning, in Peter Saul's early work or in the harshest of the late triptych paintings of Max Beckmann.



A portion of Paul LaMantia's "Conversation Pit"—addictively satisfying.