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Dana Frankfort: *HI* and Aaron Spangler: *A Simple Heart* – *Der Kleiner Mann* | LaMontagne Gallery, Boston Sam McKinniss



Dana Frankfort, *HI (Purple/Yellow)*, 2011; oil on canvas on panel; 18 x 24 inches; courtesy the artist and Lamontagne Gallery, Boston

Houston native Dana Frankfort's solo show at LaMontagne Gallery in South Boston consists of fourteen paintings that warmly greet visitors with casual salutations (a cheery note given the region's demoralizing winter weather). Most of the works here are word paintings, many of which spell the word "HI" with brushstrokes of an almost architectural confidence. The paintings' *raison d'être* is not to proffer clever truisms or untangle tricky semiotics, as text works from other artists like Ed Ruscha, Christopher Wool or Deborah Kass often do. Rather, Frankfort's words are excuses to drag a broad brush across canvas. Beyond possessing literal meaning, her words delineate areas where color, texture, line and form coalesce to achieve significant painterly pleasure. Her success is in conflating the visual "language" of abstract painting with written language, blithely disregarding the weighty historical associations of both. In the modestly sized oil-on-canvas-on-panel *HI (purple/yellow)* (2011), translucent canary yellow letters stretch across the surface and buttress the painting's edges. Background layers of deep purple applied over bright reds and oranges recede into atmospheric depths competing with the foreground for prominence. Bits of blue underpainting emerge in spots near the bottom corners, relieving the orange hue's heat and suggesting an even further interiority. The word "HI" seems a mere convenience of compositional organization that affords Frankfort the opportunity to enjoy paint's many plastic capabilities. Nearby is another *HI* from 2010, erecting the same capital letters—the "I" reminds one that "capital" can refer to both uppercase lettering and the upper part of a column or pier that supports an entablature. Here Frankfort's letters look like degraded steel rebar made the color of green sea glass, and the background resembles a half-done Rothko turned on its side in electric pinks and oranges. Knocking over this heavy reference defeats the somber and meditative monumentality of Rothko's late works, but who needs it? Frankfort invests in a livelier tension of material lift and sag, breath and constriction, through contrasting textures and harmonizing colors, composing horizontal and vertical gestures with effortless heft.

A lovely oval canvas titled *FLOWERS (red)* (2009) presents a big black orifice edged with poppy red, recalling the work of Georgia O’Keeffe and Howard Hodgkin, two similarly idiosyncratic abstractionists. Elsewhere, three acrylic landscapes likewise eschew words but nod to colorists such as J.M.W. Turner, Edvard Munch and Marsden Hartley. These and other masters loom large as predecessors, but Frankfort just as soon undercuts these comparisons with derisively uninspired word choices like “HUH,” appearing in nearby paintings. With their own sense of energetic fun, verbal and stylistic clichés are rendered *au courant*.

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Aaron Spangler, *A Simple Heart* (detail), 2010; carved basswood; 26.5 x 10 x 5 inches (carving); courtesy the artist and Lamontagne Gallery, Boston

In the rear gallery, Aaron Spangler shows three large graphite rubbings on paper and two sculptures that together unfortunately play second fiddle to Frankfort’s first chair. The imbalance is just poor exhibition design since the sculptures are rather interesting (the drawings, however, belong in another show). Spangler’s sculptures, shallow reliefs carved from basswood and painted black, fantasize a sort of heavy metal Grant Wood regionalism fashioned on a petite scale. *A Simple Heart* (2010), for example, depicts a small cabin surrounded by a stylized wooded enclave, looking detailed, chintzy and highly finished. Making reference to Flaubert’s fable of the same title, it sits atop a semi-busted wooden cabinet with its door hanging off at the hinge. One imagines the chilly blackness of Spangler’s sculptures might play well off of Frankfort’s paintings, if permitted to mingle.

[Sam McKinniss](#) is an artist living in Boston who occasionally writes about art on various blogs. These exhibitions will remain on view through March 5, 2011.