

Color scheming in *Mark Making in Black and White*

Brett Smith, Alex Brewer and Dixie Purvis' simple palette turns out complex results

by Felicia Feaster

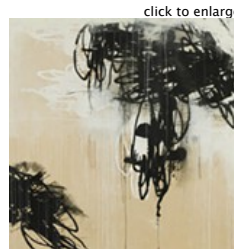
Something about the advent of color photography can make black and white feel as antiquated to our modern, techie sensibilities as cave paintings. Thus, the occasionally old-school, painterly feel of *Mark Making in Black and White* at Sandler Hudson Gallery.

The show's three painters may share a color scheme, but for the most part they occupy worlds all their own. Brett Smith is the hothead thrill seeker of the bunch: His paintings buzz and vibrate with life. His chosen medium is pastel on paper, which gives his drawings a lovely chalky, blurred quality like lighting bugs caught in a jar. A succession of "Space Structure Drawings" features forms with the look of a DNA helix or Tinker Toys — fat globs of connective-tissue black joined by long, spindly lines. The forms move away, they come together, they do-si-do and roundelay like chorus girls in a Broadway show. Conveying movement from stasis is Smith's drug. "Spring Fireworks" grabs you by the scruff from across the room and draws you near with its frantic explosion of fuzzy black forms, which look like dandelion heads projecting out onto the virgin white paper. Smith positions that little orb of activity in just one section of the vast paper expanse, an off-kilter, nicely wacky framing that arrests your attention.

Alex Brewer, who moonlights as an Atlanta graffiti artist, channels some of the energy and bricolage of the street to his paintings and drawings in *Mark Making in Black and White*. Paintings such as "Continued Days," with its layers of black, white, and grey on panel, have the complexity and sense of time's passage found in city wall palimpsests layered with decades of paint, advertisements and graffiti. Beneath the patterned surface of the painting — a repeated circuit of crescents — are splatters and drips that revel in the material of their creation. Showing a thrilling range, Brewer's large paintings display an authoritative command of space. "Untitled" is a representative piece, as sprawling and complex as any cityscape seen from above; a landscape of dense, busy energy surrounded by vast open spaces and satellites of smaller bundles of activity.

But Brewer is far from a one-trick pony. His series of 6-inch-by-4-inch piquant, witty ink-and-graphite drawings conveys a sense of humor and play that isn't so discernible in his paintings. These arch, concise works on paper look like some addled visionary's napkin sketch of a harebrained idea. There is a souvlaki-like swirl of meaty activity suspended on a long, thin tether in one. A cloud of pollution floats to the top of another drawing. The cryptic little musings might be a message or just mania made concrete.

If Smith and Brewer are men of scrawling, sprawling action, Dixie Purvis is the wallflower of the trio, a painter defined by discretion and serenity whose enveloping swaths of milky white and oily black mask her under layers of color. A scratched, distressed, worked-over surface attests to the painter's hand. The



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DARK AND STORMY:
"Untitled" by Alex Brewer

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works feel somber and shrouded, like a self-conscious woman in a figure-masking dress.

Painting, especially this kind of abstract, mark-making obsessed kind, can sometimes seem like the most exotic thing going in an art scene where novelty can be overprivileged. *Mark Making in Black and White* is a reminder that sometimes it's nice to get back to the classics.

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