



## Nathan Abels' own stamp

By Kyle MacMillan, January 14, 2009

The shadowy silhouette of a building and the glow of a dozen or so windows are all that can be seen through the fog in Alex Katz's hushed nighttime view of New York City, "New Year's Eve" (1990).

Borrowing some of the innovative approaches he employs in his more widely known portraits, Katz merges representation and abstraction in the oil on canvas, a highlight of Denver Art Museum's collection of modern and contemporary art.

Nathan Abels, a highly promising 28-year-old artist who moved to Denver in 2007, takes up where Katz left off in "Stills," a striking new group of paintings on view through Jan. 31 at the Rule Gallery.

Indeed, "Not Lightness, But Darkness Visible," a 16-by-20-inch acrylic on canvas with three glowing windows in an invisible building piercing an otherwise unbroken blackness, can be seen as a direct echo of Katz's painting.

These dozen peopleless works, which can be categorized loosely as land- and cityscapes, all exude a sense of emotional detachment and mystery while never seeming distant or cold.

A few of these pieces, such as "A Lot of Little Rain," even possess a gently romantic quality. In the gray, monochromatic 16-by-20-inch oil and acrylic on canvas, the faint, dreamlike outlines of pine trees and glow of rain drops can barely be seen.

Abels, an Indiana native with a master's degree from the Savannah (Ga.) College of Art and Design, is clearly aware of the many styles and movements that have rocked the art world in recent decades. Like Katz, he fuses abstraction and representation, but the younger artist injects his works with a subtle conceptual edge at the same time.

All this gives his paintings a decidedly contemporary feel. He can be counted as part of a recent surge of painters who are reincorporating narrative into their works, though his story lines are more remote and his style considerably more nuanced than many of his peers.

While speaking to the present, he also conjures the past. It's nearly impossible not to look at many of these pieces, especially the nocturnes, and not think of precedents in American art history, such as the shrouded landscapes of Ralph Blakelock at the turn of the last century.

"There, There" (2008), a spare, straight-on view of a lonely house with a barren tree in front, is reminiscent of similar forlorn compositions by Edward Hopper, such as "House By the Railroad" (1925) or "Ryder's House" (1933).

Rather than full-on depictions, many of Abel's compositions offer little more than a glimmer, a glimpse, an enigmatic hint at something larger — an isolated fire in "Nothing Is Fair or Good Alone," a section of chain-link fence in "Somnambulism."

In others, though, the subject matter is evident. The exhibition's largest selection by far — "Overpass," a 3-by-8-foot acrylic on panel, depicts a prototypical expressway interchange.

But in Abels' hands, even this recognizable scene remains elusive and distant. Other painters have taken on similar imagery, but he puts his distinctive stamp on it, giving this expansive work a haunting presence.

Here and elsewhere in the show, the young artist successfully marries concept with craft, matching his distinctive creative vision with deft, well-honed paint-handling skills.

"Stills" demonstrates again that gallery owner Robin Rule's eye for talent remains keen. Abels possesses all the ingredients necessary for a significant artistic career.

*Kyle MacMillan: 303-954-1675 or [macmillan@denverpost.com](mailto:macmillan@denverpost.com)*

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## **"Stills"**

Art. Rule Gallery, 227 Broadway. Recent paintings by emerging Denver artist Nathan Abels. Through Jan. 31. Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Free. 303-777-9473 or [rulegallery.com](http://rulegallery.com).