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# THE DENVER POST

## 2 exhibits celebrate art of enigma

By Kyle MacMillan, March 3, 2010



Nathan Abels

There would be little reason to consider Nathan Abels and Andrew Speer together if the two Denver painters didn't happen to be featured in concurrent solo exhibitions.

Their styles contrast significantly, and they come from disparate generations — Speer's career stretches back more than three decades, while Abels is just starting to make a name for himself.

But after seeing their paintings back to back, some intriguing, unexpected similarities emerge. Though their working methods could hardly differ more, they are both consummate technicians.

More important, they both have a penchant for enigma. The works of both artists provoke plenty of questions and provide only limited clues to the answers. Nothing is obvious or direct.

After a break-out debut exhibition last year at the Rule Gallery that made clear his abundant promise, Abels is back for a well-deserved encore.

This second show, which remains on view through March 20, is smaller and shows the artist taking his work in some new directions, adding figures in certain cases to scenes where at most only the traces of people had been visible previously.

But, as in “Passage” (2009), where an apparent spelunker — his eyes shut — is sandwiched into a crevice with just a small circle of light from above protruding into the inky blackness, Abels offers a frozen glimpse, a moment in some larger narrative.

The artist leaves it to the viewers to decide what that story might be. Is the cave explorer stuck? Is he resting? Or is he pausing to savor this potentially transcendent experience?

All but one of the paintings take place at night, the central action fading into a sea of uninterrupted blackness — a dramatic approach that links him to a long line of nocturnal painters going back to Georges de la Tour and beyond.

It is impossible to separate the real and imagined in Abels’ works, which can be at once romantic and stark. Nowhere is this strange alchemy more evident than in “Wildfire” (2009), which is based on images of terrifying fires early that year outside of Boulder.

A full moon wrapped in a misty aureole (Was there such a moon that night or is this the artist’s invention?) casts a romantic light on this surreal scene, creating an unsettling if alluring dichotomy of beauty and danger.

If there were any lingering doubts about Abels’ technique, they are quickly erased by a set of three stunning charcoal, graphite and pastel drawings, especially “Murmur” (2009), a hypnotic image in which lights glint off the surface of the rippling water.

Speer, former chairman of the painting department at the Metropolitan State College of Denver, serves up mystery of a different kind. Rather than snatches of narratives, he constructs compositional accumulations that become intriguing, if elusive visual puzzles.

A striking example is “Permanent Memory” (2004), in which a dominant section of highly textured snowflakes is offset with an inset black square and irregularly shaped sections of pink and lavender. Other elements include mathematical symbols, clasping hands and the bare outlines of a heart.

This unlikely compositional mix shouldn’t really work, but somehow Speer pulls it off, creating a loosely integrated whole. Much the same can be said of his unlikely, even potentially disjunctive color combinations, which manage to fit together and work.

The large-scale painting is one of 14 from the last decade that are on view through April 17 at the Pattern Shop Studio, a live-work space located in a lovingly renovated historic industrial building in Denver’s River North Art District.

As handsome as it is, the two-story structure has a couple of drawbacks, including the lack of an open, dedicated exhibition space and highly restricted viewing hours.

Both can be equally powerful, but instead of the obvious and overt, Abels and Speer masterfully celebrate the cryptic and obscure.

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## “NATURAL CAUSES.”

**Art.** Rule Gallery, 227 Broadway. An exhibition of 10 new paintings and drawings by Nathan Abels, who was named the Denver Post’s 2009 emerging artist of the year. Through March 20. Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Free. 303-777-9473 or [rulegallery.com](http://rulegallery.com).

## “INDUCED DREAMS AND OTHER PAINTING BY ANDREW SPEER.”

**Art.** Pattern Shop Studio, 3349 Blake St. On view are 14 paintings from the last decade by Andrew Speer, former chairman of the painting department at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. Through April 17. Limited viewing hours: 6 to 9 p.m. today, April 2 and April 16, and 10 to 4 p.m. April 17 or by appointment. Free. 303-297-9831 or [patternshopstudio.com](http://patternshopstudio.com)