

Review: Paul Shank builds grace into variety

By Ivy Cooper, Beacon Art Critic

Posted 3:47 p.m. Mon. March 30 - With "Paul Shank: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1964-2008" at the Phil Slein Gallery, the St. Louis artist finally gets his due -- and we finally get a chance to review the considerable career of an artist who has alternately mirrored artistic trends and bucked them throughout his long career.

The survey opens with two expressionist landscapes from the 1960s bathed in Mediterranean light and color. From there, it progresses to Shank's main occupations: modes of abstraction, the figure and the still life (and often they all appear in one canvas).

PAUL SHANK

When: Through April 25

Where: Phil Slein Gallery, 1319 Washington Ave.

Information: 314-621-4634, HYPERLINK "<http://www.philipsleingallery.com/>"www.philipsleingallery.com

Shank's still lifes are so expertly and lovingly rendered, one could see him building a career on them alone. In works like "Mapson's Perfection" and "Still Life with Block" (both gouache on paper, 1995), Shank's rendering of objects achieves solidity of form and intriguing surface textures, all played out against studies in abstraction. Indeed, one of the most gratifying aspects of Shank's work is the way he weaves techniques of 20th century abstract movements into his works. In "The Rout of San Romano" (2003, gouache and pastel on paper), he nods to the elemental forms of Kasimir Malevich as well as the gestural, sketchy landscapes of both Wassily Kandinsky and Arthur Dove.

It's in the figural works, however, that Shank really shines: In the midst of condensed, complex Cubist passages, Shank places solidly built, relatively realistic figures that become anchors for his frenetic exercises in abstraction. There are multiple variations on this approach, ranging from studio scenes such as "Figure in a Blue Dress" (1981), to the dazzling pieces in which portraits of writers are set against abstracted European landscapes ("Paul Nizan in Aden," 2006; "Ingeborg Bachmann in Rome," 2007; and "Robert Musil at Maerish Weisskirchen," 2008).

Particularly in the portrait of Musil, the writer maintains a stoicism that belies the nigh-apocalyptic scene of Cubist-expressionist collapse all around him. Only an artist of Shank's accomplishments could integrate such disparate aesthetic strains and do it with this level of grace.