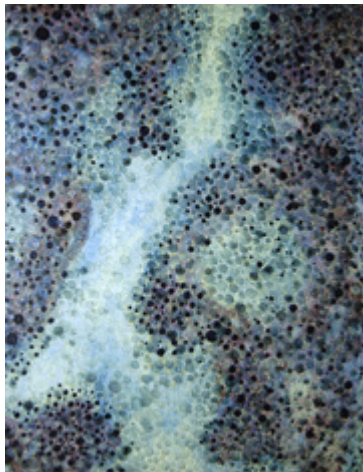


Live virus

By Dickson Beall

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When I saw them two years ago, the paintings of Chris Kahler struck me as being too “pretty,” a bit overworked and without much substance.



“Viral A-17” by Chris Kahler is on display at the Bruno David Gallery.

But something wonderful has happened to Kahler. He seems to have had a breakthrough and now appears well on his way to becoming a major figure in art.

Kahler’s work brings to mind several 20th-century artists — Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis — and he seems to have learned much from each of

them. Rather than becoming just another derivative artist, Kahler is creating decidedly original paintings that are both frightening and beautiful.

Terror and beauty seem to go together in great art. It is the implicit interconnection of the terrible and the beautiful that carries images into the territory of art, which is truly awesome.

The terror in Kahler’s paintings stems from those unknown perilous potentials — dreaded things of which one may or may not be conscious — and which are too awful to dwell on for long. Meanwhile, the beauty in Kahler’s paintings comes from the simplicity of the organization and the dynamic movement of shapes, lavish textures and extraordinary color.

Currently showing at the Bruno David Gallery are 10 Kahler paintings in a series called Viral. The paintings evoke a wide range of questions, from the microscopic — Are these representations of a

malignancy, a dangerous heart rhythm, a deadly virus? — to the cosmic — Are we witnessing an apocalyptic explosion of planets?

They also evoke lush visions of a beautiful feast, with black and red caviars delightfully displayed on a pearly and gorgeous porcelain dish, a variety of lettuces drizzled with raspberry dressing, and a beautifully patterned bowl of blueberries and yogurt.

Whatever association the viewer may bring to these images is less important than the plain and simple truth that these are stunningly beautiful paintings. The artist provides substance in the material itself and in the ambiguity he creates by the various contexts.

There are numerous paint-throwers, puddle-makers and Jack-the-Drippers filling trendy lofts with countless painted records of fits and gestures. Ever since Jackson Pollock made it look easy, painters have been lured down that splashy road in search of fame and fortune.

However, after making a mess of marks, many copycat painters must learn the difference between imitating other artists and letting those artists influence them.

Kahler may have learned spontaneity from Pollock — how to go with the flow and how to live with the happy accident as paint makes its own mark according to laws of chemistry, viscosity and gravity. However much he may have received from Pollock, Kahler has discovered his own identity in these acrylic panels, using an original process that moves from freedom and random looseness toward a tightly controlled structure.

Kahler depends greatly upon color to bring a visceral wallop to his paintings. In “Viral A-2,” Kahler connects and arranges globules of paint into hue clusters, ranging from scarlet,

magenta and oranges to yellow ochre, cadmium and lemon yellows. Other clusters move through teals, buff colors, cerulean blues and ultramarine, with the added surprise of cadmium reds. Although the base painting may have begun with a random pouring of paint, the finished work is an object completely under the artist’s control.

In “Viral A-17,” Kahler has organized various blues into a dynamic shape that calls to mind a Bill Viola video, in which a figure falls into a pool of water. The circular shapes here suggest bubbles in water. The cerulean blue wash in the background, a dynamic shape, creates a mysterious movement into a subtle color field of violets, pinks and teal green.

The masterpiece of this show is a six-by-nine-foot post-modern canvas titled “Viral A-9,” a painting that would be a

valued acquisition at any museum. This is a work of great complexity and interconnectedness. In the color and spatial development of this piece, Kahler brings to culmination the techniques and artistry displayed in all the smaller works from this show.

The physicality of Kahler’s painting, the clots of acrylic and the colors and textures of these surfaces are a magnificent treat for the eye and are far more than the documentation of an artist’s existential struggle. Kahler is clearly an artist for the 21st century, taking action painting and color-field painting into a fresh and exciting direction.

- *Chris Kahler: Viral* continues through Dec. 1 at Bruno David Gallery, 3721 Washington Blvd. For more information call 531-3030.