

Kelly Berg and Ned Evans at Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica



*KELLY BERG: Edge of the World, 2018. Acrylic, aluminum wire mesh, plaster and cloth, 50 x 42 x 11 inches*

By **PETER FRANK**, May 2018

KELLY BERG: UNKNOWN HORIZON

NED EVANS: PAINTINGS AND KEYHOLES

[Craig Krull Gallery](#), Santa Monica

April 14 - May 26, 2018

Kelly Berg's low and not-so-low relief confabulations, brimming with evocations of nature's overwhelming energy, seem a universe away from Ned Evans' cool, limpid geometric abstractions. And, indeed, the two shows of recent paintings provide the viewer a perfectly poised yin-yang experience. But such poise results from subtle structural factors the two bodies of work share. One such factor allows Evans as well as Berg to treat painting sculpturally (if not in an integrated way like Berg); another plays – and plays hard – with recessionary space, a space both artists inherit from the Renaissance but pull apart to suit their respective pictorial needs.

The exhibitions present themselves as entirely distinct even as they share a roof, their contrasts far more evident and numerous than their similarities. But they do spring, at least partially, from a common artistic source, Southern California Light and Space. Evans' planes of subdued but luminous color, shifting here, locking in there, bear various of Light-and-Space's readily recognizable earmarks, including quasi-architectural reasoning – to the point where certain of his canvases suggest cityscapes – and shifting perspective. Berg, at least a generation younger than Evans, derives less from the evident characteristics of the Light and Space movement and more from its spirit. Her often dazzling light effects do recall the application of Light and Space aesthetics of such painters as Eric Orr and Mary Corse, but the presence, indeed dominance, of representational imagery in Berg's tableaux opens up a whole new dimension. She turns the spectacle of light into a spectacle of nature, implying in this context that light is a central element of nature, not just its cosmetic.

Besides the small, almost jewel-like paintings for which she has become best known, Berg's most extensive show to date features a number of much larger pictures. Having encrusted the small works with glistening, aggressively concupiscent material reaching out well into three dimensions (giving the lie to the "bas" in "bas relief"), Berg has transferred the approach to the big paintings. On that scale, however, she recognizes that the painting itself can no longer rely, at least completely, on its own objecthood; it must answer to pictorial concerns, especially as imagery – a particular kind of imagery – drives Berg's entire aesthetic. Her renditions of lightning bolts, erupting volcanoes, caverns spiky with crystalline stalactites, and other imposing natural phenomena certainly align themselves with other contemporary painting of imaginary landscape. But they derive from pre-modern notions of the intellectual and spiritual impact of landscape on human consciousness. She is motivated in particular by the Enlightenment notion of the sublime, constructing the apprehension of natural calamity and/or immensity as a moral as well as optical spectacle. And there is something in how she finds a way of rendering fierce weather and topographic disruption, depicting it at once stylized and natural, that reawakens the viewer's own primal dreads. So does the sculptural element with which she normally braces the images: where in the small paintings that encrustation is effulgent almost to the point of absurdity, in the large works the extensions into space are modeled so as to underscore the power and gravity of nature at its most fearful. This elaborate artifice enhances the pictures' suasion rather than getting in its way. Yes, Berg's aesthetic remains attached to the decorative, but the decorative here militates against decorum rather than maintaining it.



*NED EVANS: Crewe, 2016. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 30 x 30 inches*

Evans' canvases, for their part, propose a realm that distances itself from visceral response at the same time as it invites such response. In certain of his paintings, rather than Berg's nightmarish scenarios, Evans constructs spaces that suspend us in an almost-anesthetic hypnogogia, their tinted planes seemingly in constant drift, always gently pushing the eye toward the next plane. In other works Evans seems to lock in such planes so that they describe a kind of geometric mapping, describing coolly elegant regions of color and pattern. Evans pushes beyond such cool often enough with dark, shadowy passages and more nervous rhythms occurring in certain paintings. But these more anxious paintings serve to make Evans' overall method that much more convincing, and

beguiling. A truly contrasting approach manifests in the “keyhole” paintings and wall sculptures Evans shows in a side room. In these, two- and three-dimensional works alike, he arranges a cluster of four irregular quadrilaterals so that a hole appears at the center. It’s a far more minimal formula than presented in his larger paintings, turning their restless geometric elements into restful (if, because of the keyhole pieces’ color, hardly inert) touchstones. But it does activate Evans’ style beyond the canvas. **WM**

Craig Krull Gallery, Bergamot Station