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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Modern experience, dissected 11 ways

■ Doug Aitken grapples with tough questions at Regen Projects. And more.

By Christopher Knight , Times Staff Writer, Times Staff Writer

Possibilities at play in fields of color

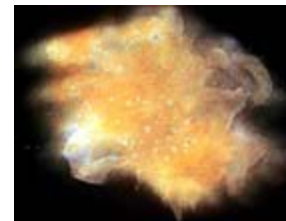
Joe Novak is an unabashed Color Field painter. His paintings and aquatints at Bert Green Fine Arts — the Santa Fe artist's third show there — feature works that will call to mind abstractions as diverse as those by Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko and Morris Louis and the landscape abstractions of Joe Goode.

The show surveys a dozen canvases from the last 18 years. The most dynamic is "Libica" (1997), which can be described in two ways. It's either a burst of shimmering golden atmosphere from within a dark amorphous plane or a dark cloud encroaching from the edges to swallow up a field of shifting light. Novak's best works revel in this sort of ambiguity, in which allusions to creation and destruction balance on a knife edge.

The paintings are made by diluting acrylic paint and applying it to a wet surface, then manipulating the canvas or the paint using a relatively dry brush. "Libica" — the title suggests an Arabic reference to Lybia — is not an illustration of some celestial phenomenon but instead asserts itself as a vivid chromatic form that has found its shape through a combination of natural accident and human intercession.

This is a difficult feat to pull off, and a few of the paintings feel inert. (The smoke drawings, in which candle-soot creates the tornado- and thundercloud-like images on the paper, seem like old-fashioned Surrealist tropes.) The more uniformly uncanny works are several beautiful aquatints, made with multiple printing plates that somehow merge atmospheric halations of color in a way that makes each hue distinct, transparent and inseparable from the others — all at once.

Bert Green Fine Art, 102 W. 5th St., (213) 624-6212, through Nov. 19. Closed Sundays and Mondays.
www.bgfa.us



'Libica'
(Bert Green Fine Art)

