

Wells' Pop Paintings Leave Room for the Viewer's Imagination

Art Reviews

By DAVID PAGEL
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Like flies to flypaper, words stick to some paintings. If you're a critic (and who isn't?), it's a pleasure to talk about such works. Their conceptual underpinnings invite lengthy discourse, making viewers feel loquacious and sophisticated.

Other paintings do the opposite. As if made of Teflon, their surfaces give words no purchase. No matter how many sentences are thrown at them, they slide off without leav-

ing a trace. Such works make critics feel uncomfortable, primarily because they compel us to shut up.

Lynton Wells is a Pop virtuoso whose canvases fall into the latter category. At Post Gallery, his second solo show in Los Angeles (his first was 25 years ago) makes a virtue of silence. Demonstrating that some paintings are infinitely more satisfying than anything that can be said about them, the 60-year-old New Yorker transforms muteness into a celebration of unself-conscious engagement.

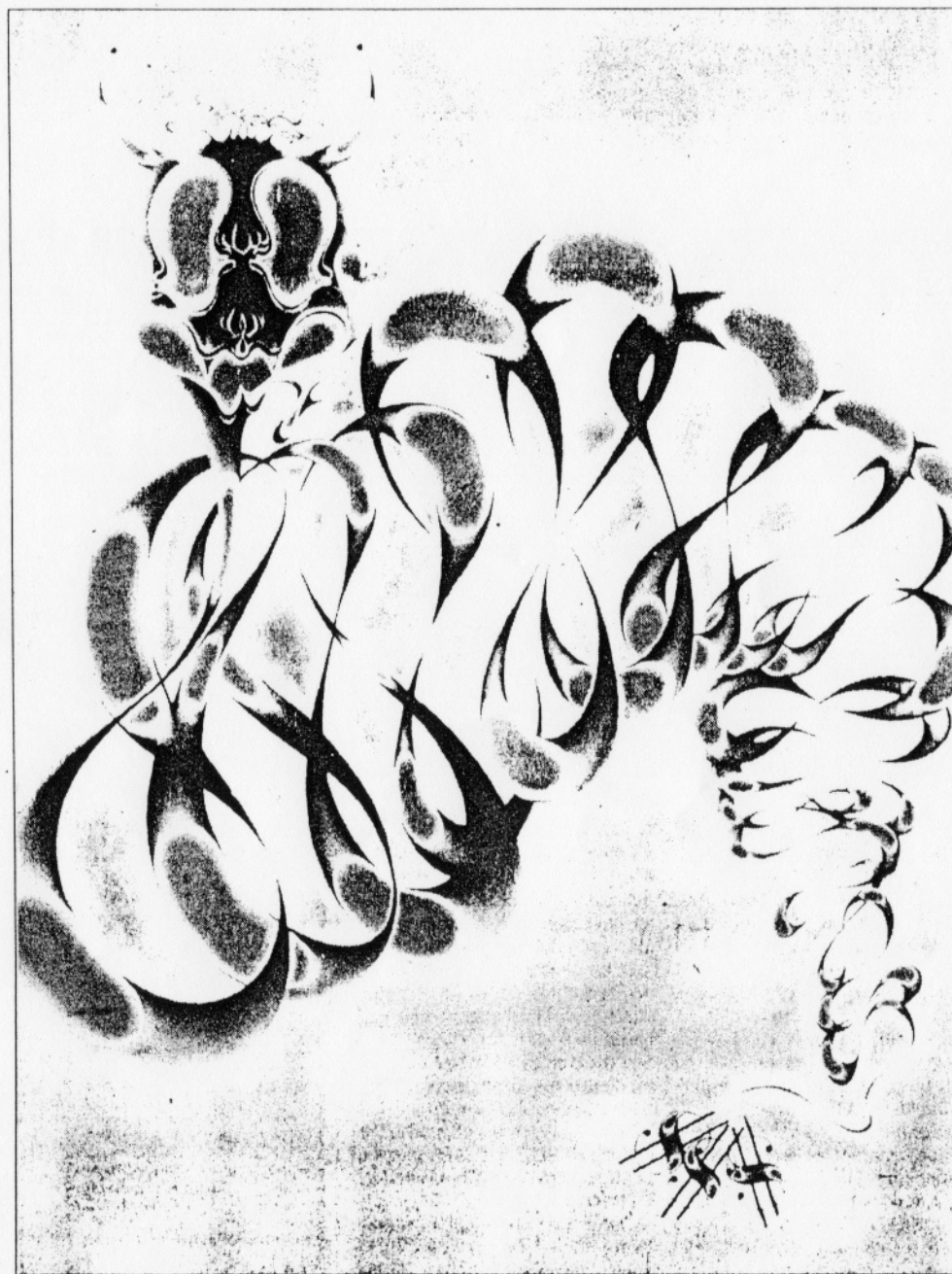
Described in words, Wells' images sound as if they're too silly to be taken seriously. One depicts a cartoon frog that arches its back and uses its long tongue to nab a gravity-defying crown. A second shows a horned serpent whose polka-dotted body forms a series of figure-eights that spiral back to a cluster of dollar signs. A third portrays a luminous carp trying its hand at fly fishing, its tangled line ablaze with otherworldly light.

In others, a trio of bonsai, plugged into a wall socket, hover like helicopters on leashes; the word "sex" is spelled out like a fiery explosion; and three mischievous demons tiptoe across the top of a gigantic question mark. Like storybook illustrations that appeal

to kids long before words make sense to them, Wells' fanciful images do not need narratives to get your eyes racing around the myriad curlicues and your head spinning with the richness of the experience.

All of his durably elegant paintings are made of layers of raw pigment and resin that have been vigorously rubbed into the weave of the canvas and repeatedly sanded smooth with an abrasive. Like oversize tattoos, their graphic patterns and ornamental flourishes are more fun to marvel at than to analyze dispassionately. Uninterested in rational explanation or long-winded explication, Wells' mute yet eloquent paintings make room for the imagination, a resource that often gets lost amid today's cacophony of instantaneous communication.

• *Post Gallery, 1904 E. 7th Place, Downtown L.A., (213) 622-8580, through May 19. Closed Sunday-Tuesday.*



Lynton Wells' "Snake 1999-2000": The fanciful images aren't interested in rational explanation.