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## BENJAMIN BRITTON

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Benjamin Britton: *Throw me the idol, I'll give you the whip*, 2014, oil on canvas over panel, 50 by 47 inches; at Marcia Wood.

Benjamin Britton's paintings have a commanding presence, and not just because of their size, which in the intimately scaled galleries at Marcia Wood seemed to be larger than life. His canvases appear at once of-the-moment (their high-key color palette and mash-up of artistic styles and techniques suggesting the bombardment of digital images) and classical (in their deft execution and attention to detail).

Like many other artists whose works “hover between abstraction and representation”—pick your cliché—Britton employs elements from both ends of that spectrum. At first, the paintings, all oil on canvas over panel, appear overwhelmingly abstract. Yet landscapes, maps, decorative objects, figures and other representative components emerge after extended viewing. Britton—a UCLA MFA who teaches at the University of Georgia—often thrusts the opposing styles together in dynamic compositions.

But while the styles remain largely distinct, there is fluidity in terms of how they function: a color or a gesture might be as much a protagonist as a realistic object is a formal tool. The 90-by-82-inch *Fancy dancer* (2014) combines areas of calligraphic, looping lines with swatches of colorful floral and plaid patterning, delicately rendered black lace, gestural brushwork and even a snippet of text. Amid the turbulence, two ocean buoys crisscross at the center, in extreme perspective, as if being tossed around by waves. Their metal framework, though not immediately recognizable, visually connects the work's disparate parts.

Such ocean beacons recur throughout Britton's canvases. Just as they serve to guide maritime vessels, they help to orient the viewer amid the chaos. In *White-Out* (2014), a beacon's light rays emerge from a field of snowflakes. Painted along the work's right edge are three icy butterflies with wings made of sequins that resemble the snowflakes; the combination demonstrates Britton's love of depicting texture and pattern more than it offers pictorial coherence.

There's an electric quality to the paintings, especially a few that look like laser-light shows or glowing carnival rides. In *Burns to breathe (gotta have a better attitude)*, 2014, green and orange lines cross a dark expanse that eventually reveals itself to be a stormy night sky looming over a desolate landscape. The work's sense of foreboding is borne out by an ominous scene in the murk: a crashed car with an open door.

Muscles and mussels are on display in the midsize *Throw me the idol, I'll give you the whip* (2014), the pile of mollusks more obvious than the fragmented view of a shoulder, bicep and bent elbow behind it. Purple and yellow Richter-esque smears of paint that appear throughout the composition



could be both abstraction and a representation of abstraction. And it is through such complex layerings of paint and of possibility that Britton keeps us looking.

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