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Review: Morgan Fisher gets contemplative over color

By Christopher Knight, Times art critic

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Morgan Fisher's "Exterior Color Beauty" (2013); acrylic house paint on panels. Installation view. (International Art Objects Galleries)

Found art, or paintings and sculptures not originally made by an artist or even with art in mind, is a modern phenomenon heading toward its formal centennial anniversary next year. In 1915 Marcel Duchamp coined the term “readymade,” annoying countless observers in the process, but today the strategy barely turns heads.

That doesn’t mean it’s moribund. At China Art Objects Galleries, Morgan Fisher has made two suites of paintings based on paint chips commercially produced in 1935 to help American consumers decorate their homes. He invented neither the colors nor the compositions. Yet, marvelously conceived and exquisitely crafted, Fisher’s “Exterior and Interior Color Beauty” is an exceptionally compelling show.

Five small paintings are crafted from two or three wood panels, each painted a single flat color and all fitted together to form a horizontal rectangle. The pigments and their combinations were recommended by a professional color consultant as a fool-proof way to create harmonious rooms.

Most often the color is a neutral or soft pastel -- oyster, heather, iris -- and the

use of organic names for industrially produced hues is sly. Each separate color panel is a different size, indicating its intended use on a wall or as a subsidiary trim.

Likewise, five large paintings do something similar for exterior color combinations. One large panel features an ideal hue for the outside of a house, while anywhere from three to six smaller panels are affixed along the side or, in one instance, along the bottom edge. The small panels feature possible trim colors.

The exterior paintings' compositions suggest semaphores or sign language, as if their geometric configurations and smoothly uninflected colors are gesturing to you from across the room. Initially, the communication is as mysterious as any composed in a symbolic language that a viewer might not understand.

All that falls away, though. The paintings slowly open up to embrace surprising questions about taste, personality, economics, aesthetics and history.

Up close, the precision of their hand-craftsmanship is as meticulous as fine cabinetry. It speaks of values like care, thoughtfulness and the importance of time. The paintings' unknown color consultant likewise did his or her job well, as balance and harmony (if not excitement or verve) are prominently displayed.

When one learns that Fisher based the paintings on a brochure published by his father, an adventurous Chicago architect who tried to make a go of manufacturing prefabricated houses, these abstractions enfold unexpected autobiography. Found art is likewise prefab, connecting the son's paintings to the father's houses; given the ubiquity of found art, it is also where we now live.

The original brochure intended to create comfort for what was, in 1935, a radical home-building (and buying) proposition. Here it gets turned on its head.

The work's ancestry during the Great Depression pointedly resonates with our social situation today, when more than one in six Americans languish in poverty. Industrial mass-production plays against handcraft, the optimism of Constructivist art and the Bauhaus gone sober in the lingering wake of housing shenanigans that shoved the economy over a cliff.

In the 1930s, the Social Realism of artists as diverse as Thomas Hart Benton and Dorothea Lange was the leading artistic response to grinding conditions of human despair.

Given long-standing precedents to Fisher's new paintings -- from the revolutionary premises of Constructivism to the more recent Minimalist color charts of Ellsworth Kelly, Gerhard Richter, Tim Ebner and Stephen Prina -- these abstract geometries suggest a loopy new form of American Scene painting, melancholic and contemplative.