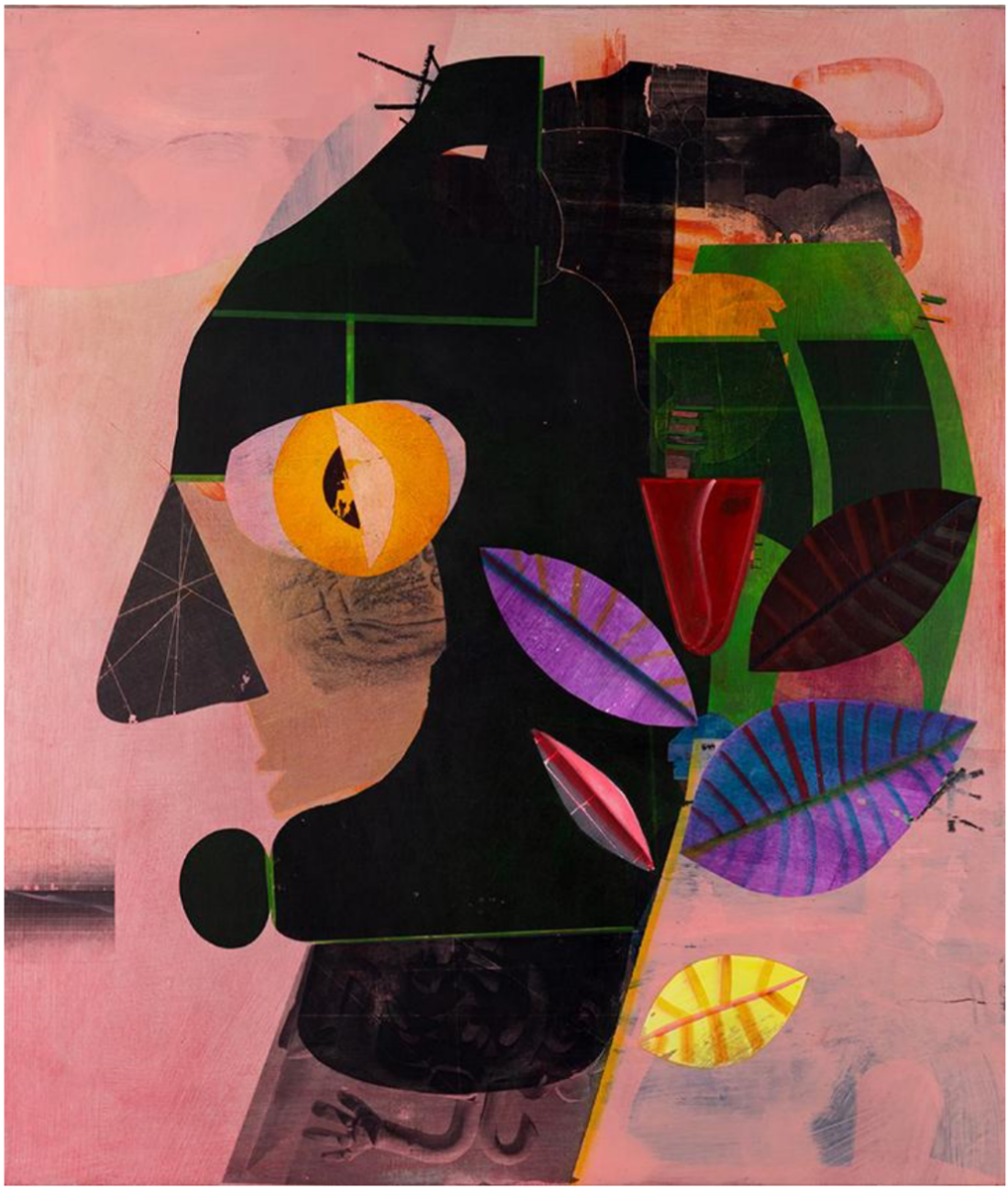
Robert Hardgrave and Tim Cross, "In Between: A Cross and a Hardgrave"

by Matthew Kangas

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The persistence of representational and figurative art explains the imagery of Tim Cross and Robert Hardgrave. What is noteworthy about their new bodies of work, however, is a turn to greater abstraction with, in both cases, mixed results. The blurring and blending of abstraction and representation has long been a thread uniting Seattle-area painters. Cross and Hardgrave have jumped on board with their own takes on the long-standing tendency.



Robert Hardgrave, “Sensai,” 2026, acrylic, acrylic and toner transfer on canvas over panel, 28 x 24”. Courtesy of AMcE Creative Arts/the artist.

Besides painting, Hardgrave also dabbles in sculpture and object-making, represented in the gallery by small-scale mixed-media assemblages. Among the most interesting of these are the larger ones, strange horizontal-scroll viewing boxes that alternate photographs of various scenes. “Whale Hunters” and “Smoke Season” (2020/2026) invite our participation but are hard to credit for realizing their purpose. Leaving the viewer to guess any intention, they provide a mid-way pause before the new paintings.

Hardgrave has returned to painting after an extended absence. With all the signs of talent that are evident, one wonders why he turned away from the medium for so long. And more so that he now returns to the practice. Unusual palettes (primaries with garish, jarringly bold black outlines) inform the watercolor/gouaches and the larger acrylics on panel. The outlines may define shapes but they push each painting toward illustration.



Robert Hardgrave, “Paper Boy,” 2026, acrylic on canvas over panel, 60 x 60”. Courtesy of AMcE Creative Arts/the artist.

There’s an enigmatic intimacy to the watercolors, such as in “Municipal Mayor” and “Pasture Plant” to “No Protection (Black and Blue)” and “In Between” (all works are 2026). All vacillate between urban caricature (in “Municipal Mayor,” which calls up an allusion to Seattle’s new Democratic Socialist mayor) and gangly growth (in “Pasture Plant”), in which black outlines are exchanged for white. “No Protection” and “In Between” complicate the compositions more satisfyingly with the black background of the former and a pink-and-blue palette in the latter.



Tim Cross, “Yardscape,” 2026, gouache, acrylic transfer, polyester, and wood, 55 x 40 1/2”. Courtesy of Koplin Del Rio/the artist.

Hardgrave mixes in something he calls “concrete supplement” which deadens the surfaces, adding gritty, grainy passages. He drops this gimmick in the larger (28-by-24 to 44-by-42 inches) canvases, which carry their convoluted compositions to the limits of recognizability: human limbs, body parts or silhouettes seep out of scenes that carry a greater atmosphere than do the smaller studies. “Sensai” may be a big black head, a sister to “Jellybean Jam,” both of which have more breathing room for the pseudo-alien heads, all of it finally freed of black outlining. The largest and most ambitious composition, one which hopefully points toward the future is “Paper Boy.” Here Hardgrave introduces a cubistic male figure with crossed legs and upturned left arm supporting a severed head on a platter. It’s got the right balance of creepiness and appealing color. “Paper Boy” rests on a diamond-tile floor, daring us to confront it, inviting with its by now characteristic blend of anguish and ambiguity.

Hardgrave’s “Pasture Plant” connects to the large Tim Cross abstracted landscapes facing it. Where Hardgrave condenses leaves and blossoms, Cross expands and dilutes their backyard presence. Building on previous smaller-scale works, Cross has advanced to a bigger (five to six feet) rectangular format that looks as if the viewer were glancing out the kitchen window. Where Hardgrave’s colors are unremittingly opaque, Cross adds so much white paint to each panel that the flowers and trees seem transparent, sliding off the picture plane like a waterfall, as in “Yardscape” or “Reservoir” (all works are 2026). Despite its naturalistic sources, this new body of work pushes further toward complete abstraction, a welcome shift that preserves the breathability of the outdoors while drawing greater attention to paint-handling and bravura brushwork.

“Searchers” and “Fortress” are the most abstract works of all. The former adopts a black-to-white palette of stripes and sprouts or flashlight beams, while the latter nestles residual green shrubs in a rainy cloak of pink and gray clouds. Where Hardgrave is forthright and confounding, Cross is tentative but still poetic. Ross’ garden paintings, including “Rockery,” “Flower Boy” and “Red Garden,” have a giant pink bush at their upper center. The central globs of color steer them away from the more complicated composition of the other works. Nevertheless, taken together with Hardgrave’s, Cross’s images affirm the wide spectrum of approaches to abstract painting and its endless potential for mystery and submerged meanings.