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WILSHIRE CENTER

Ron Linden's painting has a dry, neutral look about it that belies a passion for grappling with the nature of representation. For years, he has isolated objects – often furniture – in empty or equivocal spaces, not to paint portraits of their specific characteristics but to present some ways of looking at and thinking about them. It's definitely a low-key venture; his predominantly gray palette rarely warms up beyond rust and ocher, his paint is intentionally thin, and his work tends to hover around the middle range of values. But his art has an unexpected warmth, arising from subtle overlays and, occasionally sensuous surfaces.

Linden's current show encompasses various styles of representation – from a greatly enlarged, realistic hand to some mysterious geometric volumes – but it's tied together by his investigation of two- and three-dimensional form. He questions perspective and contradicts our perception of space in forms that can be read as receding or advancing. "Dilemma-A.M." overlays flat rectangles on stair-stepped towers. "Under This Red Rock" sets a table into an indoor-outdoor space, while other canvases scatter seashells, bones, drafting tools and simple volumes across flat grounds.

"Con and Pro," one of the most intriguing pieces, mines the vocabulary of modern sculpture and design as it simultaneously presents three attitudes toward representation: illusionistic painting, a sculpture interpreted as a painting and flat cutouts. A roundly modeled black chair seems to float in space next to a painting of a head and shoulders constructed of planes, a la Naum Gabo. In the background are white silhouettes of the head. All of which suggests that Linden has found a more interesting way to grapple with contemporary painting than merely "appropriating" art history.

(Ovsey Gallery, 126 N. La Brea Ave., to June 14.)

Suzanne Muchnic