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Love hurts. That's the message of two smart and saucy exhibitions up now. Steve Locke's show at Samson, "you don't deserve me," and Monique Johannet's "Is It Something I Said?" at Carroll and Sons neatly braid art theory with ambivalence about romance — turning fusty old theory more immediate and juicy.

Locke, a painter, has for a long time investigated a standby of art theory: How does the viewer's (and the artist's) gaze objectify the subject of a painting? Using loaded, expressionistic strokes and tart colors, Locke paints men who actively respond to that gaze. They close their eyes. They stick their tongues out.

In this show, he turns up the heat on the interchange between the viewer and the painting by mounting several of his panels on poles that jut up from platforms on the floor. This move also hits a contemporary art hot button, as artists explode the boundaries between painting and sculpture.

With titles such as "you don't deserve me," "nothing's changed," and "i don't remember it that way," these works broadcast conflict in relationships, and their installation — as some paintings turn coyly toward the wall — implicates the viewer in those relationships.

And why not? Whether spotting an attractive stranger across a crowded room, seeing a delectable sculpture for the first time, or viewing a beautiful face or figure in a painting, desire rouses. And desire is all about what we want, much less about what the object of our desire wants. That's easy to contend with in a painting: You like it, you buy it, it doesn't talk back. But in a way, Locke's do.

Sometimes Locke takes the emotional pressure off the viewer, drawing that freighted connection

Love and its comical wounds



Monique Johannet's "Battleground" at Carroll and Sons; Steve Locke's "presence" and "nothing's changed" at Samson.

between paintings. "Nothing's changed" stands high on a pole right beside the larger, wall-mounted "presence." The fellow in "nothing's changed" is in profile, facing "presence" and sticking his tongue out. "Presence," meanwhile, shows a man head-on, also with his tongue out. It's comic — a schoolyard exchange of retorts — but it also betrays the deep hurt of a connection gone wrong, in painterly strokes that speak volumes about art and the human heart.

Johannet takes inspiration (and borrows freely) from Roy Lichtenstein's paintings of comic book girls made in the 1960s. With their tears and their peril, they struck a chord with Johannet, who writes in her artist's statement, "Lichtenstein's works

provide me with a rich opportunity to get thoroughly confused about who's pining, who's painting, who's the seducer, who's the love object, who started it, which side I'm on."

She evidently wants to empower these girls, and does so with feminist snark in works such as "Battleground," in which a woman in a beret shoots a rifle, exclaiming, "Is my body still a battleground?"

But Johannet also movingly dissects the delirium and anguish of young love. A poor boy named Brad plays the object of love and hate throughout the show — even though you might call the crisply beautiful young women in the paintings its objects of desire. In "Drip," a blonde makes a painting joke: "Oh foocy, here comes Brad

... where do I hide? He's such a drip!"

Brad has broken the heart of whatever young woman animates the spirit of this show. A two-part painting installation, "Bad Break-up/Boston Whaler," features small, bubbly circles of blue and black water with larger canvases that suggest disaster — such as a pink thought bubble that reads "I don't care! I'd rather sink — than call Brad for help!" Nearby hangs the disc of a life preserver, stamped "Brad is a Cad."

This all may seem like foolishness if you haven't weathered the fevers of adolescent romance. Frankly, it's a delight to see an artist take it so seriously. Like Locke, Johannet also charges the ram-parts of sculpture. "A Hole That