

Art Review

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Jason Middlebrook: A Break From Content

Through 23 December
DODGEgallery, New York

by Christian Viveros-Fauné

Jason Middlebrook has, in plain New-York-ese, been around the block one or two times. A hands-on veteran whose exhibitions normally involve multiple media like drawing, painting, sculpture and installation, he has currently opted for an exhibition—his first at Rivington Street’s Dodge Gallery—that exclusively favours his eco-friendly brand of abstract ‘landscape’ painting: acrylic on wood planks that the artist sources from mills in New York State and Massachusetts.

Middlebrook’s timber stand-ins for stretched canvas provide, among other stimuli, fresh starting points for his mandala-like compositions. Featuring lines of saturated colour—straight, jagged, arcing and zigzagging—that cover the wood’s flat surfaces, his unconventional painterly applications establish recurring patterns that, quite literally, run either with or against the grain.

The results, beyond their immediate eye-candy seductions, decidedly invoke key historical experiments in abstraction—from Frank Stella to Bridget Riley to James Siena. What’s more, Middlebrook’s decision to lean a large portion of his vertical works against the wall invoke the monolith-like ‘thingness’ of America’s greatest twentieth-century transcendental sculptor: the late, great, UFO freak, John McCracken.

But Middlebrook’s show is no run-of-the-mill in-depth investigation of abstraction. An exploration of the canyon-like divide between nature and culture run through with a not-so-quiet appeal to get off the grid, his marshalling of humongous slices of maple, elm, beech and walnut bring together painterly mark making with a processed version of the great outdoors. Middlebrook’s show is, on its face, a search for balance and artistic contentment rather than the ‘break from content’ the show’s title promises. Dedicated to a narrow gauge study of a single medium, Middlebrook still manages to smuggle a forest of ideas into an exhibition of painted lines.



Jason Middlebrook, *Vertical Landscape Painting*, 2011
Acrylic on black walnut plank; 165.5 x 41.5 x 1.75 inches
Photo: Karen Pearson
Courtesy of the artist and DODGEgallery