

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

October 23, 2013

The New Old Logic of Abstraction

by Howard Hurst on October 23, 2013

The great thing about the outgrowth of exhibitions showcasing and examining emerging contemporary abstract painting is that the novelty is starting to wear off. The fact is, painting is such a broad pursuit any general attempt at defining its contemporary practice is bound to be, at worst, flawed and misrepresentative and at best subjective or highly focused. In getting used to the ubiquity of the medium (again) we are allowed to look passed the medium and again into content. *A Pinch of Saffron, Dash of Vermouth*, currently on view at the Lower East Side's Dodge Gallery, is a highly personal take on abstract painting, curated by painter Ted Gahl.

At first glance it might be easy to dismiss what Gahl explains in his press release, that "since it was first uttered, artists have constantly been in the midst of the claim that 'painting is dead', and that various analog approaches are old news." He isn't saying something new. The idea of reasserting the value of painting, the value of "inner content" within an artwork, or of transience, is hardly novel. Nonetheless, the paintings on view at *A Pinch of Saffron, Dash of Vermouth* seem to walk the walk.

Two paintings by Rob Davis present the subtle painterly forms of color field and abstract painters of another generation, wrought with dry wit and the materials of everyday vice. His canvas, "Hard to Earn" is a seductive web of tightly woven burgundy sinews. The subtle, allover approach and densely packed flat surface recalls early 1950s Norman Bluhm or Sam Francis. I am reminded of what it might feel like to look down at a fiery maze of bridges and canyons were a flying a fighter jet over an imaginary landscape. That the artist eschewed wine in favor of more traditional materials does add another layer to the conversation, but it does not make the work any less valid as simply what it is — a very good abstract painting.

Similarly, the work of Meghan Petras draws on a quirky strength found from mundane materials and approaches to artmaking. Her allover color fields and rhythmic biomorphic forms are exuberant and melodic but have a sort of self-aware containment that is perhaps lent by the materials she uses. Her small scale "Untitled" painting from 2012 reminds one of the deep color and mesmerizing subtle variation one finds in staring at the sky or the surface of the ocean. Despite its small size, if one allows oneself to focus on the surface of the work there is the same dislocating sense of enormity brought on, I think, by the dense rhythm of color. Its surface is disrupted by two horizontal bands where the artist has sewn the work together. This disruptive element could be nothing but intentional and serves to remind the viewer where they are, that this isn't the ocean and that it's not that serious.

Angel Otero's rippling surfaces seem like a demonic bed that refuses to be made. His paint plays like light dancing upon a rolling tectonic mess. The resulting picture is hard to define; it is light, airy, and playful yet totally gritty at the same time. More than anything it makes me want to touch it, which makes me pay attention to the surface probably more than I would have normally — a neat trick.



Gallery view of *A Pinch of Saffron, A Dash of Vermouth* (2013), with works by (left to right) Robert Davis, "Hard to Earn" (2013), Jonathan Allmaier, "Untitled(Six Green Points)" (2012), Josh Smith, "Untitled" (2007), Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2012) (image courtesy DODGEgallery)



Meghan Petras, *Untitled*, 2012, fabric paint and wax, cut and sewn, 24 x 22 inches

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Joanne Greenbaum's "Untitled" (2012) is full of similar contradictions. Her loud, brightly colored surface is perhaps unified by its commonly head chromatic mania, however, its various applied mediums feel like a of schizophrenic shouting match that somehow ends up melodious. A hulk-like biomorph of oozy green and black — that probably shouldn't feel sexy but does in an "I'm embarrassed to admit it" kind of way — dominates the center of the canvass. The childlike doodles, painterly hatches of color, and other markings form a structure so purposefully lacking in coherent composition that it seems to work. This is what painting looks like when it power-clashes.

Jonathan Allmaier's "Six Green Points" is minimal, but oddly eventful. The artist paints most of his pictures in a way that reveals the stretcher bar behind his canvases. On top of this pre-ordained composition, Allmaier works playfully, lightly floating white onto white. The only interruption is six casual brief streaks of green. The resulting painting sighs at the viewer in a practiced non-committal manner that only works for the self-assured and ultra-confident.

Josh Smith, probably the best known of the artists in the show, is now making monochrome paintings that were recently on view at Luhring Augustine in Chelsea. The works in this show are from 2011 and far from minimal. Their Xerox-collage surfaces are loud and unbalanced. Yet there is a kind of painterly logic to this work. It is probably fitting that the work that looks least like painting is the most eager to prove Gahl's thesis. It is a combined yearning to transcend the everyday and banal that unites these artists. While other generations have done this with fetid brows and heroic gesture the artists in this exhibition seem to temper their efforts with humility and humor. The result is a sum greater than its parts. With *A Pinch of Saffron, Dash of Vermouth*, Gahl has created an effervescent mixture that seems to escape direct definition but leaves a pleasant if not undefinable impression.



Josh Smith, "Untitled" (2011), Mixed media on panel, 60 x 48 inches
and "Untitled" (2008), Mixed media on panel, 60 x 48 inches

A Pinch of Saffron, Dash of Vermouth is on view at DODGEgallery
(15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 27.