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To Leo, A Tribute – Sideshow Galley

September 17, 2014

by Paul Corio



Matthew Deleget, *Shuffle (for Felix Pupi Legarreta)*, acrylic on MDF 18×18 inches 2010

The big story in the New York art world for well over a year now is the broad reemergence of abstract painting. After nearly fifty years of adamant declarations of its death, its self-indulgence, its inaccessibility, its inadequacy in the face of political injustice, plus a laundry list of other indictments articulating its lack of utility to the culture that created it, it quietly but forcefully came back.

One could endlessly debate the reasons for this surprisingly robust return – I myself have a boatload of ideas as to why it happened at this particular moment, but that’s not my purpose in this essay. One of the many things that I like about abstraction’s current airing is that there are many, many serious people who have been quietly toiling in their studios with only modest recognition for years as the partisans of critical theory stood outside the window and threw rocks. Many of these artists are getting a fresh look, and it’s well deserved.

Quite a few belong to American Abstract Artists, an association established in 1936 and dedicated to the advancement of abstract art – a mission which has not always been an easy one. Their recent group exhibition at Sideshow Gallery in Brooklyn, NY, was titled “To Leo, A Tribute,” and was organized as a kind of thank you note to AAA artist and past president Leo Rabkin. The nonagenarian Rabkin led the AAA for fourteen years starting in 1964, into the post-modern era and through the supposed collapse of painting, abstract and otherwise. He never lost faith in the endeavor during the darkest moments, and this tribute seems particularly fitting as abstraction takes its current star turn. Rabkin’s contribution to the show consists of five of the box constructions for which he’s best known. The show also featured a series of short films about Rabkin’s work by director Augusta Palmer.



Don Voisine, *Knot*, oil on wood, 28×24 inches, 2013

The show contains more than eighty works, mainly painting with some sculpture and work on paper, and maintains a surprisingly strong level of quality throughout – group exhibitions of this size are notorious for their ups and downs. That said, a tick-box review of a show this large isn't practical, so I want to highlight a handful of works with which I was particularly struck.

I'm a longtime fan of Gilbert Hsaio, and his circular *Rocket #9* (2014) was spiraling and hypnotic. Hsaio's painting is inextricable from his passion for music – the title here is taken from a Sun Ra tune about a spaceship destined for Venus. Like the majority of Sun Ra's output, the picture borrows much of its impact from low budget sci-fi of the '50's and '60's, but it shares something else with the work of Sun Ra (and Monk, and Ornette Coleman, and Eric Dolphy): it's playful, but it's no joke. Hsaio take three achromatic colors applied to stripes roughly equal in width and creates a space that is alternatively knotted, creased, radiating, and wrinkled, and which changes in each adjoining pie slice until it turns back on itself and starts again. It's a kind of halo dedicated to the crazier side of jazz.

Don Voisine has been negotiating a Spartan set of colors and motifs for three decades and in doing so has mastered the most subtle shifts in surface, proportion and scale – he's really hit a stride in recent years. All his strengths are on display in *Knot* (2013); the shift from gloss to matte black in the central motif articulates a space as subtle as Reninhardt's, while the white wedges in the upper left and lower right could be construed as holes in black motifs, or opaque shapes laid on top of them, or, because of their deceptively simple interconnections, as extensions of either the matte or gloss black shapes (or both). The red and blue bands on the top and bottom serve the seemingly contradictory function of making the picture feel complete within its boundaries while also suggesting that it expands beyond them.

Not surprisingly in a show of this nature, there are many iterations of the venerable grid. For me, the principal appeal of tessellated squares is that their relative blandness allows the color to come to the fore as a picture's true content – even moderately active figuration tends to relegate color to a secondary role.

Vincent Longo's *Untitled* from 2014 featured close value squares in a variety of muted oranges and greens, which subtly organized themselves into four rectangular sub-sections. The picture was happy without being saccharine – it evoked summer and memory with a slight tinge of sadness at the periphery. The grey and dusty green squares in Daniel G. Hill's *#9704* (1997) firmly anchored nine pinks that glowed as though lit from behind. The collision of the greys and greens, colors derived from nature, with the hot pinks, a product of neon lights and computer screens, gave the painting its punch. Ward Jackson's *Interchange V* from 1964 skipped chroma entirely, with concentric black and white squares inside of a lozenge shape. The title refers to the

picture's unstable figure ground reading, underscored by the aggressive flickering effect of the high contrast colors. Matthew Deleget's system-based *Shuffle* (2010) presented something tantamount to four monochromes trying to exist within the same space, each jostling out the other. Focusing on any one of the painting's four sets of four colors called them up to the foreground, only to be superseded by another with a shift in gaze.



Jim Osman, *Allowance*, wood, paint, paper, 18x13x5 inches, 2014

I'm always hesitant to write about sculpture – not out of prejudice, but because my vocabulary is so specific to painting. But Jim Osman makes sculpture with a decidedly painterly slant on color and space. Like much of his work, *Allowance* (2014) is free-standing but decidedly flattened; it has a front and a back. The wooden parts that comprise the piece are a deft mixture of wood as found in nature, wood cut by a carpenter's power tools, and wood cut more delicately so as to approximate drawing. The latter parts give the piece a biomorphic quality not unlike what one might see in Miró, and provides a sly contrast to the sawmill and lumberyard portions. What impressed me most with the piece (and with Osman's work in general) is the color – so often a bugbear in sculpture. It's applied, but at the same time intrinsic: the paint weaves through and around the knots, the bits of bark, and the striped edges of the plywood.

Stephen Maine's *HP13-1113* from 2013 looks like an extreme close-up of one half of a glowing, radioactive Rorschach test – the dominant yellow and smaller areas of pale blue scream at one another (and the viewer). The paint could be blotted or stenciled, but also hints at a photographic record of rusty metal or a gum covered sidewalk. Maine got a lot of mileage out of the indeterminate space between the abstract and the photographic in his recent exhibition at 490 Atlantic, and this picture suggests a different take on that same exploration, here dropping his signature moiré pattern in favor of a more direct approach to the application of paint and a decidedly more aggressive palette.



Gabriele Evertz, *Green Red Passage*, acrylic on canvas over birch, 18×18 inches, 2013

There were stripes, too. Gabriele Evertz' *Green Red Passage* (2013) was a great mix of rigor and playfulness, with vertical grey stripes interrupted by subtle diagonals which suggested a complex interplay of light and shadow. This softened chiaroscuro was periodically interrupted by emphatic primaries and secondaries of the kind you might find in a playground. Emily Berger and Kim Uchiyama both use horizontal stripes, but with a strong element of the gestural. In *Geo* (2009) Uchiyama's bands are hard-edged, but some are smeared within their boundaries with multiple hues – the resulting space talks to Hans Hoffman's famous "push-pull" concept, with the flat colors rushing up to the picture plane and the more modeled receding into semi-illusionism. Berger's *Untitled* from 2014 shows earth-toned stripes with softened edges, allowing a swelling light through the negative spaces. The abrupt interruption of the motifs on the picture's right side creates a smart, subtle framing device.

There's a lot more work in this show that I enjoyed, but must skip for the sake of brevity. A few more quick mentions before closing: David Row contributed a small-ish work on paper (*Untitled*, 2014) that was reminiscent of the larger shaped canvases he showed at his impressive Loretta Howard solo earlier this year. He's revisiting some of his older motifs, especially the ellipse, and the recent work is looking very strong. Mary Schiliro's delicate *Cat's Cradle 12* (2012) was a lyrical and contemplative paean to gravity. Annie Russinof made big gestures on a small canvas in *LookSee* (2014) and the yellow space she left in the center looked like a window on the door of a furnace. Pinkney Herbert's *Battle* (2014) was authentically and successfully eccentric.

Many people try for eccentricity and only end up with artsy – the kiss of death. Based on a small number of other works I've seen, Herbert can navigate these somewhat dangerous waters with relative ease. Julian Jackson showed that his compositional language can bridge very different media in the surprising *Collage in Red and Black* (2014). If you're familiar with his work you can find the similarity between his soft focus oils and the hard-edged cut paper in the work presented here – a real feat in my estimation, and a testament to the individuality of his point of view. And the irrepressible Mark Dagley threw in a curveball with *Trapezoid Ipsissimus* from 1995 – a combination of a geometric linocut and a rough hewn trapezoid bearing a cartoon face which growls back at the viewer. Whether you like him or not, no one can deny that generally geometric Dagley is a guy who's full of surprises.