

# ARTIFACTOID



## JOHN TORREANO: DARK MATTERS WITHOUT TIME AT LESLEY HELLER GALLERY

*Above: John Torreano: Dark Matters Without Time (installation view, Lesley Heller Gallery, New York, 2018). © John Torreano courtesy Lesley Heller Gallery.*

By Jonathan Goodman

Now in his late seventies, painter and sculptor [John Torreano](#) has been well known as an artist for half a century. He is recognized particularly for his inclusion of acrylic gemstones in his art. His studios are set up in New York and Abu Dhabi, where he has been teaching in the last few years. In this show at [Lesley Heller Gallery](#), Torreano is exhibiting both paintings and wall reliefs; he remains an unrepentant abstractionist, someone whose art connects with the well-established history of the [New York School](#). His synthetic gemstones, though, add a bit of decorative play to his nonobjective language; because of their artificial character, the gems provide Torreano's efforts with a partially ersatz character that undercuts the high romance of the abstraction. This is likely a good thing, late in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as we seem to have tired of the idea of noble motives alone. But, whatever the intentions behind the paintings and wall reliefs, we see that Torreano is not only a craftsman of note, he is also an esthetician of considerable ambition. His works stand out both as examples of skill and as efforts meant to communicate a paramount belief in beauty. Perhaps his experience in the Middle East is leading him further in the direction of beauty; the long horizontal wooden panel painting, titled *Sea Sky Gold* (2018), feels like it owes its exquisite colors—dark blue and gold—to a geography we do not find here in New York.



John Torreano, "Sea Sky Gold," 2018. Acrylic paint and gold leaf on plywood 45 x 180 inches. © John Torreano courtesy Lesley Heller Gallery.

*Sea Sky Gold* is the major work of this excellent show. Its dimensions are more than considerable: 45 by 180 inches. The work consists of four panels of deep blue, with numerous oval gouges, clumped in groups and covered with gold. Its appearance begins with a surface of decorative flair, but then moves beyond that to a place of elegance and artistry (not that decoration always excludes such qualities!). Torreano appears to have learned something about the inherent attractiveness of well-appointed color—an insight evident throughout the exhibition. The danger exists that this painting, a genuine tour de force, would end up overwhelming the show, but this doesn't happen; instead, it serves as an anchor for a body of works that cumulatively appeal to the audience. For example, *DM's & Hot Stars* (2015), a large painting in a small space at the front of the gallery, works its effects seamlessly within an all-over compositional field. The squared painting, consisting of four large panels, exists in a matrix of organically shaped contours—mostly tan and blue, with a bit of black. Although the work's title skews it toward science, it very much exists within the established language of abstract expressionism. It can be easily argued that we have been revisiting this movement too often and too long, but, as still happens regularly in New York, Torreano's painting establishes itself without bowing excessively to the past.



John Torreano: *Dark Matters Without Time* (installation view, Lesley Heller Gallery, New York, 2018). © John Torreano courtesy Lesley Heller Gallery.

The column wall sculptures—thin sticks of color studded with mock jewels—look at first like objects of deliberate desire (they range in dates from 2014 to 2017). And so they are, up to a point! These four works, arranged on a side wall, descend slightly in size from left to right. The acrylic gemstones stud all of them, adding to the surfaces' sculptural intricacy and presenting an alluring, albeit entirely synthetic, exterior. They do enact a singular attractiveness, but that doesn't really matter—what counts is the artist's willingness to undercut the abstraction with an imagery that clearly is counterfeit. This is likely an attempt to remain resistant to the pull of something overly attractive. Even as the show refers to high culture, there is a healthy disregard for its imagistic excesses, driven as they are by ego here. But, at the same time, for the more seasoned among us, the use of such fakery causes some anxiety—at what point does the falsehood take over and make barren the eminent history that precedes it? This is a question for philosophers and art historians more than it is a query for the general public, composed as it is of artists and, usually, connected viewers who want the simple chance to enjoy what they see. Torreano's art does this wonderfully well, providing admirers with the chance to lose themselves within a language both established and new. And his slight disregard for the fulsomeness of New York's painterly past is a welcome reminder of its historical limitations.

*View John Torreano: Dark Matters Without Time at Lesley Heller Gallery through Sunday, April 8, 2018.*

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