

Jennings Kerr

James Lieutenant
A Hole In The Earth

The title of this show suggests a reveal, an exposure of new material to light. The exhibition concentrates on shifts in light and our perception of it. Here the silk screen has been lifted, removed from the arsenal of brushes and a new optic developed. The paintings feel less worked but again they illuminate in very nuanced ways. The photographers dark room with its emulsion baths, chemicals and control, 'developing' an image seems to feed into everything Lieutenant conjures with his brushes, rags and squeegee. It's an exacting of pigments built up so carefully as a stand in for the photographic register. Where we previously had tulle like laces of bitmapped tone from the silk screen we now have slips, glazes of tone, colours stacked with patience. The pigment applied, dried, overlaid and repeated in patterns that almost replicate the previously interlocked bitmaps. Here it is softer, more fluid and gestural but most importantly it continues to push the connection to the photograph, to the constructed image and to the control of and interpretation of light.

The silk screens created separation in the layering, they also shielded many layers. Here the paintings are more open and exposed but not simplifying the viewing experience, we still get extremely dynamic and reactive surfaces. The controls in this show come in the form of a very sophisticated approach to palette, a kind of tonal key. The show builds through each work, a growing tonal range that is gradually increasing to the full photographic tonal spectrum. The pieces are made with a limited number of brushes per piece, in some cases only one or two for each painting. Only one pigment is worked wet on the surface at once and they are applied in varying layers of opacity and translucence. I feel this approach to the layering of tone and its affect directly relates to the viewing experience of an Ad Reinhardt. Lieutenant sent me a process image from the studio that showed hundreds of small plastic sample cups, perhaps usually more likely found in a chemist, or even a science lab. These jars of pigment used to keep a register of the tonal key, an echo of previous alchemical interest in the darkroom or the painters studio as pigment lab. I was struck by the process, how these ideas and parameters made the painting interesting to me before seeing it and how it is all in the small decisions, the many streams feeding the river.

The grounds are exposed, a sort of peeling back of the skins, revealing the linen, showing the prime and the inner workings. This approach shows a love and passion for painting but a willingness to share and to show the processes. The light is beamed out but also allowed to touch the materials so often covered over by paint. We see this most obviously in 'Lemon Waves', 2023 where the top section consists of linen left bare and then a passage through the citrus to the primed surface in the bottom portion. Somehow this honesty makes the painting all about the complexity of light and how it pulsates around the surface. It is a fine line with not making the viewing too easy, 'here is my idea for you and here is how it works'. For me without the explanatory banding at top and bottom, the painting would be all in its patterning, but with, it radiates a zesty glow. Another idea of similar generosity occurs in 'Form Underneath', 2023 where we are given a colour chart, a key to the tonal range of the painting. It's a sort of conceptual reverse engineering of Jeff Koons 'colour by numbers'. Here are my colours and here is how I layered them. For me, I loved this painting from the get go, it is a clever painting and brave but not too proud. It's beautifully simple, like the key of a map or the visual language often incorporated in printer cartridges, but most importantly it is simply beautiful.

All this technique and control has its counterpoint in the gesture. The mark making is fluid, often in great dilution, it is sponged, smeared, moved around by brush and squeegee in expressive motion. There are no hard edges, or masked areas, the paint is allowed to move and mingle within the field of painting. These works are a balance of control created through certain parameters and chaos through fluidity and mark. I see a great touch here, an ability to let the work breath and allow for an incompleteness in the painting. They are spaces for personal resolution, for control and expression but for a practice that is greatly personal they give the viewer so much. It is painting made with restraint but with purpose. I know that painting steers Lieutenant through life, the obsessive interest extends out to a passionate following of international work and we have discussed many artist's works and how they inform and inspire. I think the ability to allow imperfection, to invite error and chance are the driving force in a practice that has lifted Lieutenant from dark periods in his own life, the painting has given hope, love and also humour. I see a wet city scape in the work 'Between Shadows' 2023 and am reminded of the film *The Warriors*, 1979. The production team went to extreme lengths to wet down the streets and for filming at night, to capture and reflect the city lights and create a grit but to channel light to create another dimension or character in the film. The 'Open Sky' paintings have a different charge and bring to mind the soft light play in the sky, an afternoon sunset, colours stretched out or remixed more drastically than a time lapse might display. Lieutenant has mentioned that he notices the effect of light, the softness of colours in the morning as he makes his way through the city to work or the studio. It is life and experience finding its way into the paint, time filtered into the fluidity.

I think about an accidental exposure from someone storming the dark room, a piercing light with eyes adjusting at the end of a long period with the haze of the red light. Perhaps something coming from this chance error, a new image outside of the strict control of the developing process. Perhaps similar to how the gesture balances the constraint and parameters set in these paintings. The retina feeling the harsh change in light, reminding us how our environments are so affected by light, shaped by it and the ability of light to play on how we interpret the world around. When I mention this to Lieutenant he is reminded of visiting the same setting but seeing the darkroom being cleaned, rendered off duty. I think his painting like all good painting gives us light, pushes it out at us but it also stands in as a mirror for the world around and how we interpret it. The light in this show brings painting and photography together, it binds the histories of these mediums through a challenging and thought provoking approach to materials but it does so with a very elegant and sophisticated touch.