

DANIEL BRICE: PAINTINGS

Son of Malevich: in the Modernist tradition of non-objective painting the quadrangle—square or rectangle—was never as much the motif as it was the *mise-en-scène* of the painting. The geometric forms comprised not only the design but also the visual narrative of the composition. The status of the composition as pure abstraction—purged of any local, individual, and hence subjective visual allusion to objects (natural or man-made) experienced in the world—enabled artists to create a pictorial structure in the service of a deeper reality—spiritual, metaphysical, utopian. In a word: universal. The dynamic, romantic current of Malevich and Russian Constructivism and the classic, cerebral vein of Mondrian and Dutch De Stijl are (mixing metaphors) two sides of that geometric abstract coin. Over the course of twentieth-century Modernism these two paths to pure abstraction have converged and, at times, subtly merged. What both had in common was the concept of what Malevich referred to as “the supremacy of pure sensation,” in which the color and line of (geometric) shapes in pure abstraction had primacy over painting’s capacity to depict visible phenomena.

The oil-on-burlap paintings of Daniel Brice’s current show at Chiaroscuro are a marked departure from his earlier abstract work dating from 2009. Then, Brice pursued the parallel, organic tendency of non-objective abstraction with a series of spare paintings whose pastel-on-paper surfaces were defined by a gestural line in charcoal. What created the tension in these earlier works—apart from the contrast

in scale between the large expanse of surface and its often solitary calligraphic stroke—was the ambivalent identity of each mark, much like a brushstroke on parchment might convey an identity as calligraphic script whose meaning is unknown to us but legible to those who know its signs. Yet, as the viewer continues to look, each amorphous, usually broken line on the paper’s surface appears close to revealing itself as part of some larger, recognizable entity—the curve of a breast, the contour of a torso, the thin line of some deep cleft winding down a canyon floor far below.

Each painting in the current series evokes Color Field composition with its large area of bold, intense chroma coextensive with the canvas. The featured painting *OX 12* (oil on burlap) recalls Barnett Newman’s large canvases with their saturated, single-color shape inflected by a bold vertical stripe of contrasting color. Brice’s choice of earth-based hues and satin finish adds strong visual appeal to the work. If that were all that was going on here it would be enough for a strong show, which it is. What makes the show an engaging one as well is the tension that Brice builds into the series, as he did with the earlier “biomorphics.” This is not simply an homage to Color Field painting. Rather it’s something of a riff—a respectful one—on this by-now iconic phase of late Modernist painting. For as the viewer spends more time with a painting like *OX 12*, the color-field aspects of the work appear more self-conscious, and provide subtle visual disparity with traits in the painting that belie the color-field effects—and hence their intent.

As in most of the paintings in the series, *OX 12*’s

monochrome image spans a field comprised of panels joined together—two in this instance. The vertical line of shadow marking the division provides a virtual “stripe” countered by the strip of exposed under-paint on the other side of the larger panel whose “zip” is zapped at the bottom by a competing broad horizontal band of the under-painting. That band arrests the monochrome yellow field’s extension to the bottom of the canvas. Throughout the series, the actual narrow slit between joined panels vies with a virtual stripe produced by a slightly darker painted line (for example, in *OX 17*) or a lighter one (as in *OX 20*) that only simulates a partition. In *OX 12*, the holistic aspect of the monochrome yellow is further compromised by a thin yellow band of more reddish hue painted across the top and a thicker one at the bottom. In several paintings, Brice introduces adjacent bands of color as a hedge against holism. And in *OX 14*’s broad span of the reddish-orange color field, his grounding of its virtual stripe in a contrapuntal patch of complementary green is a credible rumination on the intent of Newman’s *Vir Sublimis Heroicus*. These painterly interventions are reinforced elsewhere in the series by complementary vertical “drips” and patinas. Thus the unified image of the saturated Color Field painting is consistently declined by Brice for the immediacy of painted canvas (here, burlap). So, in this self-conscious reprise of late Modernist non-objective painting, the canvas itself becomes the object. The result is a painting series that renders homage to the primacy of pure sensation.

—RICHARD TOBIN



Daniel Brice, *OX 12*, oil on burlap, 55" x 96", 2011