

Robert Sagerman: It's Time

By Matthew Hassell

Much like most art worth talking about, being in the presence of the new paintings by Robert Sagerman is the only way to really feel their significance. Recently on view at Margaret Thatcher Projects, the show is fittingly titled "It's Time." With each work listed by the number of paint dabs accumulated on the painting surface, the artist makes sure to pay attention both to the registered passage of time invested on each work while at the same time minding the value of the individual marks accrued. The compositions can be imagined as slowly accumulating meanderings of contemplative, process-driven mark making.

Sagerman's paint is laid down in vibrantly contrasting pigments accrued in peaked daubs. The marks are precariously applied one on top of another to form an optically sizzling skeletal paint mesh. One is immediately struck by the intensity of the pigment, realizing upon closer inspection that the marks are actually raised from the painting surface. They at times extend almost as far as two or three inches into the gallery space. The paintings are at the same time vibrant and dynamic, while utilizing a structure that is extremely delicate.

As the viewer moves from left to right in front of the work there is an intriguing visual shimmering. The colors interact in a lively way with the shadows cast from the accumulated physicality of the paint application. The resulting placement of cavernous spaces created by the way the paint accrues on the canvas is as skillfully considered as the actual marks themselves.

Each daub coming to a peak, the paint exhibits a natural directionality. In observing the work, the viewer's eye is scuttled around the composition haphazardly, each mark guiding the eye in a new direction. Organic as they seem from up close, in stepping back the viewer is able to recognize contemporary painting tropes. Sagerman reduces his compositional structures to horizontal color fades, central blooms of transitional color, and overall abstraction in the spirit of a monochrome.

Both in the fuzzily demarcated spaces and their dizzyingly complex construction from up close, the reductive compositional structures allow for any number of visual references to be inferred. On extended viewing of any work, the viewer can begin to create his or her own figural elements emerging from the busy abstraction of the composition. With a little patience, the resulting visual play is reminiscent of the way impressions of light linger momentarily behind recently shut-tight eyelids.

The compositions seem in some way like the construction of an early Animal Collective track—innumerable vibrating melodies condensed onto a common plane. Forced to coexist, the resulting visual construction finds its beauty in the excitement provided by its discord rather than its cohesion. Shadow and physicality play against color and form as the stacked daubs of paint entice the viewer to come closer, then again to move back.

I found myself wanting to squint, tilt my head, and watch for changes in the work as I moved on to the next piece. This game continued for at least an hour. When you head to see Sagerman's work, bring a snack. You'll probably be there for a while.

Matthew Hassell is a contributing author for NY Arts.