



ArtSeen

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JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET *Fugue*

by Alex Bacon

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Despite having recently focused on more environmental installations of his “Fugue” paintings, Brussels-based artist Jean-Baptiste Bernadet eases in his U.S. audience with a more traditional presentation for his New York debut at American Contemporary. Displayed spaced out and in two groups—four in the hallway-like first room, and four framing a corner in the back—the arrangement of the works encourages one-on-one viewing. The paintings are kept close enough together for the viewer to experience something of the immersive situation that the artist has played up more explicitly in other exhibitions of these paintings, most notably in the continuous, eight-panel frieze shown earlier this year at Rod Barton in London, a former car dealership that, fittingly, presented the work for the delectation of passersby as much as for those who walked into the gallery.

Bernadet’s process in making the paintings is deceptively simple. He builds up a field by taking a thin brush and progressively and systematically, if always intuitively, lays down a flurry of quick marks in his bright, almost pastel palette of oils mixed with wax and alkyd. There are slight variations in the application of each mark; the overall effect, however, is towards unity, with the field being built up in an all-over fashion. Bernadet’s goal is to prevent the eye from being able to definitively locate any points of focus such that, as he paints the painting, the artist constantly adjusts any passages that seem to jump out at him. For this reason, any expectations of discovering natural analogues in the “Fugue” paintings, especially of landscape or sky, are thwarted. Instead, the works always remain resolutely non-referential.



The fact that it is hard to precisely define the differences between one painting and the next at American Contemporary is significant and instructive. As happened with a work in the back corner, we may begin by thinking that a certain painting has an overall blue tone, say, only to

look at it for a while and have this reading unravel as passages of pink, or yellow, or green, emerge from what at first seemed to be an all-over field of color, subverting our initial analysis. This plays out most clearly in our memory of the works, which is often hazy at best. We are left with a vague sense of what it felt like to behold them—perhaps the sensation of their optical shimmer—our brain unable to retain more than incremental coloristic and compositional data. This is due to the nature of how fugitive the function of color and composition is in these works, which, we discover, adeptly play with our unconscious expectations of the agency of our vision as it acts, not only on a painting, but on space more broadly.

Seen from a distance, the canvases at first appear airy and atmospheric—a hazy veil of color suspended somewhere just before the picture plane. Fixing our gaze on this resplendent mist and approaching it, it appears to part only to abruptly harden as each brushstroke comes into view and suddenly snaps into place, each delineating a block of pure color. It is at this point that the field starts to vibrate and shimmer, precisely because the colors and brushstrokes stop blending into one another as much as they do from afar, refusing to create a kind of passive pictorial space where the eye can roam freely around.

Our gaze is kept on the surface due to the work's various, coexisting points of focus. Here different spatial regimes eagerly solicit our attention. It is not the painting that is laid out like a taxidermist specimen, then, but rather, our vision as it is stretched out across the painted surface. Our eyes are asked to look left and right, up and down, simultaneously, to process both the mute facticity of brushstrokes and the hazy effulgence of blended passages. In still other parts of the picture, we find Bernadet's build-up of paint has magnified the weave of the canvas into an organic grid of color that sits resolutely on the surface, while around it various other colors pulsate.

It is thus quite a challenge to keep our eyes fixed on a "Fugue" painting for too long. Instead it is as if, in the process of this unfolding visual experience, our typical expectations of vision—that it be centered and hierarchical, aloofly dissecting what is before it—are slowly undone. To the point at which the painting's subversive formalism has destabilized conventional visual cues such that, even when we turn away to see the actual world again, it takes us a moment to get our bearings.

In an age where our expectations of agency, control, and access are constantly shown to be almost, if not completely, co-opted, this is a profoundly critical stance. The destabilizing quality of Bernadet's strongly optical fields make clear that the seduction of aesthetic beauty can conceal a more sinister subversion of the very means by which that experience was delivered to us; our visual senses. This does not drain these paintings of the pleasurable aspects of looking, however, even as they also challenge and, quite literally, undermine them.

CONTRIBUTOR

Alex Bacon

ALEX BACON is a critic, curator, scholar based in New York. Most recently, with Harrison Tenzer, he curated *Correspondences: Ad Reinhardt at 100*.

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