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BROOKLYN RAIL

Critical perspectives on arts, politics, and culture

David Mann at McKenzie Fine Art

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In his essay for the catalogue which accompanies David Mann's show of new paintings at McKenzie Fine Art, Carter Ratcliff writes that Mann "is one of those artists whose art invites us to see ourselves seeing." Mann's canvases, which marry a rigorously mechanical sensibility with lusciously seductive color and painterly process, evoke a kind of self-conscious inquiry into what exactly we are seeing. Mann's vocabulary of nebulous spaces and lyrically organic forms give rise to multiple associations: transmutations of cellular populations, cosmic and celestial processes, viral fecundity and colonization, and the shifting logic of molecular migrations. What, then, distinguishes Mann's paintings from large scale photomechanical reproductions or painted illustrations of biological or cosmic phenomena? Mann's expressive abstractions, with titles like "Bi-Solar Cycle," "Before," and "Cusp," lean toward the mystification of his subject matter: the imagery is stylistically no more dramatic than startling satellite images of the Milky Way or the in-utero saga of the 8th grade science class staple, *The Miracle of Life*. But as I moved through the gallery space, I began to see that it is Mann's painterly commitment which creates the tension in the work, the surfaces becoming inquiries into the relationship between the parameters of aesthetic choice and levels of visibility within our increasingly mediated world.

Using oil, alkyd and acrylic, Mann builds up his paintings with a series of stains and washes followed by a layering of translucent glazes, dabbing, and repetitive circular gestures. The result yields a palpable sense of space within which often muted swirling grounds recede behind more defined disc-like

forms. In the painting entitled "Verge," the largest piece in the exhibit, Mann's linked biomorphic forms flow from the left and right edges of the painting into the luminous lime green center. The vertically oriented center of the painting becomes a kind of abyss into which we may enter visually from above, similar in feel to Pollock's "The Deep." This center teems with the activity of stains and bubbles that are less defined by their slightly red and hazy perimeters than by their seemingly infinite number. Small circular entities that resemble mold growth proliferate in variably sparse and dense groupings across the surface of "Verge" as well as in most of the other paintings in the show. In each, a thin circular boundary defines the overall shape within which exists a more concentrated nucleus-like core. Delicately thin lines of pigment flow like tiny webs between the cores and their respective boundaries. Created by Mann's controlled dabbing of pigment and the natural phenomenon of water-oil separation, it is this element in Mann's paintings which most directly asserts the fluidity between the material actions of matter and their potential as an aesthetic choice.

Mann's suggestive titles, and those compositions in which his glowing forms seem to move toward, across or into a kind of center, point to his interest in the culmination of energy just before the emergence of some unknown entity into being. Other works, such as "Coil" and "Link," have a more all over composition and an arranged appearance of entropy comprised of multiple layers of colors and shapes. In these paintings, the edges of the canvases emphasize the partiality of what is shown, suggesting the potential continuation of such occurrences beyond the canvases' own space. "Transparent Society," an all over composition of oranges, reds, yellows and pinks, posits a less mathematical and more sensorial vision of colonizing forms, bringing to mind the work of Constantinos Doxiadis, whose ekistics drew parallels between circular and hexagonal patterns of growth in nature and society. Though Mann's technical execution and vocabulary of forms persist through all of the paintings in the show, it is primarily his rich use of vivid color which distinguishes one work from the next. Often invested with an emotive quality, Mann's exploration of color is at its best when conversant with some branch of synesthetics, and at its worst when it starts to look like formulaic psychedelia. Yet it is those in the latter category which most reference the tweaked quality of color often associated with digitally generated images or the buzzing codification of color employed by CT scanners or MRIs.

Looking down from Mann's vibrant paintings at the dark and unassuming manufactured floor tiles in the McKenzie gallery, I noticed that the circular forms in the paintings are in a muted dialogue with the grid of circular forms on the tiles. Perhaps just as the organizing principles and patterns in nature inform our aesthetic choices far beyond the parameters of art, our aesthetic choices in all aspects of fabrication in turn inform our understanding of nature. Now that it is common to be on intimate visual terms with that which was once invisible, there is a sensorial conflation between the mediated or manufactured and that highly contingent, evolving experience of "nature." Mann's work invites us to see that the manner in which we see is in fact a fluid synthesis of the two.