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David Mann: Sympathetic Strings at Margaret Thatcher Gallery

By David Hornung
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David Mann, Lux, 2015 Oil and alkyd on canvas, 41.25 x 39 inches
Courtesy of Margaret Thatcher Projects

The most important tool the artist fashions through constant practice is the faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed. Pictures must be miraculous; the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.

- Mark Rothko

David Mann explores the evocative properties of color and light as he works in the gap between abstraction and representation. His best paintings provide a visual experience that is richly visual and psychologically engaging. With their luminous depths and mystery of means they sometimes provoke the kind of surprising disorientation one feels when stumbling upon a dramatic scene of natural beauty. The summary effect is paradoxical: paintings that are both lucid and enigmatic. This compelling duality has long been and continues to be a defining characteristic of Mann's work.

The working process of most painters is governed by a refined instinct for balancing conceptual, formal and material variables in the service of an elusive yet very real sense of truth. David Mann's guiding impulses lead him to contrasts between the physical and metaphysical. In this, he shares a thread of painting history with late Modernists like Newman and Rothko and earlier abstractionists such as Frantisek Kupka and Hilma af Klint all of whom created enveloping visual experiences that emphasized the materiality of painting while suggesting the ineffable. Looking back to the nineteenth century, one recognizes similar aspirations (albeit in a pictorial mode) in the grand landscapes of the Hudson River School, the German Romantic C. D. Friedrich and those of W. M. Turner. Along with Friedrich and Turner, Mann's aesthetic ambitions seem philosophically aligned with the concept of the Sublime as articulated in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant and Edmond Burke.

Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) describes three states of the natural world: the Pastoral, the Picturesque and the Sublime. The first two present nature as comforting and beautiful, evidence of an ordered universe and a benign spiritual unity. The Sublime, in contrast, offers the viewer something unsettling: an arresting duality of attraction and terror in the face of an overwhelming and incomprehensible universe.

In the twentieth century Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko were attracted to Kant's aesthetic theories and his description of the Sublime. Kant wrote: "The Sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provides a representation of limitlessness yet with a super added thought of its totality." In Kant's ideas painters like Newman and Rothko found support for the higher meaning and purpose in non-objective painting.

But, despite his programmatic connections with Rothko and Newman, David Mann's paintings are not, like theirs, truly non-objective. Although he never depicts recognizable subject matter, there is a latent pictorial quality in most of Mann's work. We feel as if we are seeing indeterminate objects suspended in a deep and mysterious space and bathed in an encompassing light. The reference to either micro or macrocosmic phenomena is clearly implied, but without literal depictions of specific things. Instead of being rendered in a traditional manner, the shapes and suggested forms that appear in Mann's paintings seem to be created either indirectly, as a



David Mann, *Extended Traversal*, 2015 Acrylic and oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of Margaret Thatcher Projects

byproduct of his painting process or idiosyncratically through the use of a specialized tool. Nevertheless, the idea that we are seeing a “picture” is always in the air.

Three paintings from his current exhibition exemplify Mann’s work: *Trans*, *Extended Traversal* and *Lux*. All three manifest a characteristic profusion of color and light.

Of the three, *Lux* is perhaps the most strongly pictorial in effect, with an explosion of amber light emanating from a single point off center that sends illuminated tracers to all corners of the painting. It strongly evokes a powerful cosmic event.



David Mann, *Trans*, 2015 Oil and alkyd on canvas, 27.25 x 76.25 inches (69 x 194 cm)
Courtesy of Margaret Thatcher Projects

Extended Traversal is, in its form and effect, *Lux*’s opposite. Where *Lux* presents a rather spectacular vision by means of an emphatically hierarchical composition, *Extended Traversal* is much quieter and non-hierarchical in its arrangement. Both paintings evoke time, but where *Lux* suggests an instantaneous burst of movement, the shapes in *Extended Traversal* appear to float at a slow, meditative pace. The color in *Extended Traversal* is likewise subtle, mostly analogous tones of muted red and red-violet that enhance the painting’s sense of interiority.

Trans is painted on what, in the nineteenth century, was called a “marine format” that is, a long and narrow horizontal rectangle. The painting’s somewhat extreme shape

lends the streaks of light that cut across the picture plane room for lateral momentum. This bright, flickering movement is seen against a more softly illuminated cloud that drifts slowly in the distance.

Mann tends to bury the processes he employs to make his paintings. The old phrase “half of art is the concealment of art” can be aptly applied to his technique. Because they are seamless in their production, Mann’s images often have an air of mystery and provoke the kind of surprise one experiences in finding an unusually interesting natural object like a spider web, frost patterning or an unusual stone.

The ambivalence that exists between representation and abstraction in Mann’s work is paralleled by an overall evocation of flux and disequilibrium, as if the entire image were the frozen frame of a moving picture. Thus, time and space are made subject matter in his paintings.

The ambition to “put the logic of the visible to the service of the invisible” (paraphrasing Odilon Redon) has a long, venerable history in the art of all cultures. It’s one of the things that painting- with its capacity for nuance and duality- does well and it is central to David Mann’s art. His work offers no narrative and no message. Instead, Mann’s paintings embrace the viewer and, as does music, call up an involuntary, subjective response that befits the incomprehensibility of sheer experience. **WM**