

Not Brown
Lee Henderson

Recent paintings by Matthew Brown, featured in his most recent solo show at Tracey Lawrence gallery, are derived from two complicated thematic points. Brown's paintings are not precisely abstraction, and they are not figurative either. Not descriptive, not narratively driven, not purely organic, but not altogether synthetic, Brown's shapes, his colour palette, his paint-handling, are all chosen with exemplary gusto, and are all unusual, his own. These are not regular colour combinations seen here, pictures not full of received ideas about composition, not deliberately provocative, though it's not by accident that the works seem so critical. These are not easily reducible images, they do not mount any grand proposal, and they are not easily thematized. They are paintings full of nots. His work is full of contemporary double-negatives. Not digital. Not painterly. Not censored but not prepared to articulate. If there is a grammar to painterly technique, Brown's grammar is bad. Brown's is, in fact, a new grammar. A negation of all options (or all of the above) or none. Somehow both. Bad grammar sometimes sounds better. The organizing principle behind Brown's work is not familiar, but the imagery somehow is. Like looking at your mother's sister. On his canvasses, Brown creates a fighting dialectic, a contradictory set of images very much in keeping with the contemporary dilemma: real vs. not real.

Call it what you will, Brown has faced down this dilemma in his medium. he has made it question its own veracity, its own position in the hierarchy of images. "Body without Organs." "Matrix." "VR." Real versus not real provided by Phillip K. Dick's skinjobs, Deleuze & Guattari's thousand plateaus, popcorn movies, cylons, and friend networks...all are contemporary examples of the unreal engine. Identity extensions and artificial intelligence. In the future, the history of painting will show that the computer had affect on the medium like was seen with photography a hundred years prior. The invention of a coding language to generate a visual interface not only changes the way we perceive the process behind art making, but requires painters to once again adapt to a changing environment. In Brown's case, he begins many of his paintings with sketches he's developed through random abstract Photoshop renderings, which are then extrapolated on to the canvas. The result is not a literal representation of anything online, it's not like his paintings are digitalia, there is not the same translation from one tongue to another as you see in the abstractions by Julie Mehretu or Sarah Morris, and the process only helps serve Brown's themes, it does not define them. The question is what is real.

Of the painters I've seen who explore the implications of digital literacy, Matthew's canvasses appear to have expressed the complexity of the viewer's new visual

landscape with the very least amount of sacrifice. Unlike most abstract painters, the viewer is not scolded for seeing faces, animals, and landscapes in Brown's paintings. You are not appreciated for seeing floor tiles in Sarah Morris's work, but in Brown's work, that instinct Jung so thoroughly observed for the audience to look for faces is rewarded. Some appear with antennae like carpenter ants, squiddy tentacles, and otherwise fragmented body parts tottering between superflat and three-dimensional skinjobs.

Brown's paintings are carved out of geometries reminiscent of what happens when you use the digital drawing tools that autofill your shapes. I remember these shapes best from the earliest drawing apps for the first Macs on Apple computers. You could lasso them randomly, copy the parts, then paste them anywhere, creating new unexpected shapes. Parts of these geometric faces are painted with organic swashes easily distinguishable as paint, while other areas are filled in more electronically, hard-edged and patched together. Visible are humanoid faces, botanical stamens, and other origamis. Flattened out features float in an illusory landscape of defocused cliffs, textured fields, and grainy skylight. His paintings produce all these secret shapes and Jungian insinuations, adding up to something, it's just not an entirely clear what. Only your animus knows. There is no physical dimension to these figurations, no definitive process of absorption and excretion that answers the question of how these works are meant to be digested -- they are post-modernly psychoanalytic kitchen sink dramas. The works consume you. Conscious representation has been cracked open and peeled back to expose something more cerebral. Brown's works are best appreciated by the mind's reptilian core. His use of painterly opacity is more reminiscent of a tool selection on a screen. Gradients. Blends. Real paint. His figures are like trematodes, chemistry equations, spiro chete, stencil graffs,

alien assimilation

space canticle

antennae respirator

eyes patchy artificial mouth

nostrils

mandibles

testicles

dotcom bubbles

floating over a bog, the first exhumation of another vampire's sunrise.

A frosted-over lake.

What feels familiar about Brown's imagery is something well-concealed, these allusions to domesticity. To humdrum. Domestic arrangements make for the unseen structure inside his work. Look for the potted plant still-life. A view of an inhabited room. A portrait. A garden scene. Brown's paintings give off the difficult impression of being unreadable, but it is this combination of domestic furnishings and synthetic paradoxes that feels familiar. High-speed computer living rooms. Any observation about Brown's paintings must also accept its opposite: Brown's paintings have notes. Therefore they are domestic and other-worldly. To express the contemporary dilemma, it's possible to see Brown using techniques from the work of Impressionists like Felix Vallotton and Edgar Degas, but heavily medicated on the stained glass of a Kandinsky, in order to find a way to represent today's dissolution of a singular identity. The average four-person family has a combined total of seventeen avatars. What if all those avatars were to meet in a room. Voykin C, I'd like you to meet Lions.

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