

The New Criterion

Gallery chronicle

By James Panero

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On “Gary Petersen: Not Now, But Maybe Later” at Theodore:Art, “Philip Taaffe” at Luhring Augustine, “Through the Valley: New Paintings by Devin Powers” at Lesley Heller Workspace, “Fran O’Neill: Painting Her Way Home” at Life on Mars, “Sideshow Nation III: Circle the Wagons” at Sideshow Gallery, and “Paperazzi IV” at Janet Kurnatowski Gallery.

At the opening for the painter Fran O’Neill at Life on Mars, another gallery, like Theodore:Art, along the always-rewarding main drag of Bushwick’s 56 Bogart building, I found myself puzzling over an important question with the artist Dee Shapiro and anyone else who would listen in.

How does she do it? What I meant was, how does Fran O’Neill achieve what I consider to be her signature sweep of color across canvases over six feet square? A sponge? Some kind of squeegee? We had our theories, but none of them seemed quite right, and indeed they weren’t. The textures of her line, especially where they skip a beat, are somehow too natural, too “shimmery” (to take a title from her best work), for any of those tools.

The answer came when the artist arrived and I asked her myself. She pointed to the underside of her arm. After a few moments of mental processing, the gracefulness of O’Neill’s paint handling made much more sense to me. For her big strokes, O’Neill uses nothing more than herself to push oils across canvas. It’s a uniquely physical process, one sized to the canvas and her own frame, and results in something I now see, in part, as a set of movements captured in one long exposure. This is not at all to suggest her work is merely the result of some actionist happening. Her paintings are nothing like Yves Klein’s raunchy “human paintbrush” performances, which would today certainly land him in the court of microaggressions.

A native of Wangaratta, Australia, O’Neill started off as a landscape painter. The turbulent thunderstorms of her former home are never far from her work, helping to explain the title of this exhibition and also her increasingly gestural paint handling, as she finds a way to tap her own physical atmospherics. Sometimes these movements can get messy. Perhaps that’s the idea behind *Meeting You*, a two-paneled work joined as one from 2014. Best are the works that sweep the mess away with one final flourish.