

In Hot Pursuit: Fran O’Neill at the Studio School

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Fran O’Neill: Recent Work at the New York Studio School

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Fran O’Neill’s fine show at the Studio School demonstrates how the practice of gestural abstraction can remain very much alive in the hands of someone willing to explore and experiment. While Louise Fishman’s accomplished, historically aware exhibition at Cheim & Read shows us a mature artist committed to the lexicon of the New York School, in O’Neill’s paintings we see the pursuit of an originality that really pushes forward the vocabulary of abstract art. Her backwards glance toward the legacy of mid-20th century painting is transformed into a forward leap into the unknown—in the sense that the paintings do not appear to refer to actual things and that the artist is genuinely trying out a language of her own. Building a new vernacular in abstract art is a trying task, especially if the artist knows the history of the genre. In O’Neill there is both a sense of the past and an independence from that past.

It is difficult to work this way, in the sense that the great painterly moments of Abstract Expressionism occurred more than two generations ago. And yet the excitement of this show remains based on the movement of the hand. *rising* (2012) is an epic composition in which a series of long, horizontal orange stripes cover the top half of the painting, while beneath them, in the lower right quadrant, are a series of short, often angled gray lines that are a bit darker than the gray ground. The painting’s title refers to the generally upward motion seen in the composition.

O’Neill’s paintings communicate the pleasure of their own making. Her sense of drama is closely linked to the use of color, which offsets transparent use of compositional structure. In *earthly delight* (2012) for example, a six-foot-square work dominated by a saturated purple there is an angular clearing of yellow and green that runs from the center to the upper left.

mischievous (2012), another six-foot-square oil in canvas, is forceful, even startling with a v-shaped structure moving down the middle of the image, cutting into bars of red, gray, and black on either side of the form. Outlined in gray and possessing a center of white, the v-shape plunges toward the bottom of the painting, which is black. In each of these paintings, color is used to strong

structural effect; planes of pigment build formal arrangements that are vital to the experience of the work.

Karen Wilkin's catalogue essay speaks of the artist's "memories of her Australian origins" and additionally says that O'Neill's paintings are "united by their rich, saturated color." Perhaps her foreign bearings bring about the unusual color schemes that are such a striking feature of these works. It makes sense that someone from outside New York can reinterpret its history of abstraction according to her own lights. *memory down* (2011), is a square painting done in dark blues and blacks, with the blues forming verticals and the blacks moving across them toward the base of the painting. Melancholic but very beautiful, the canvas shows how emotional O'Neill can be—surely a basis for these works' memorable presence.