

Tactile Abpressionism - Kóan Jeff Baysa



Charles Michael Norton. Second Summer 6, 2006. Acrylic on linen, 22" x 30".

Charles Michael Norton, trained and renowned in Europe and the West Coast of America as a sculptor, now transliterates three-dimensional objects into remarkable paintings in his "Sudden Springs Suite." The physicality of gathering, the materiality of emotion and the concretization of thought are hallmarks of his sculptures. From his background, he brings the concept of building structures, an architectonic methodology combined with the archeological metaphors of excavation. This current New York exhibition of his newest acrylic paintings on Belgian linen gathers most of the breakthrough pieces that he painted over the last three years. They are partly inspired by the recently acquired country property he and artist-spouse Ruth Hardinger named Sudden Springs because of the land's abundant aquifers.

Worked primarily with cadmium-based colors for their vital intensity, these paintings have more organic references than do his previous works, yet these similarly retain their architectural concern with the line. Painting without brushes, but instead with spatulas and tools identical to the mud knives that he used during a stint as a taper in drywall construction, the artist employs the vigorous physical gestures of this type of manual labor in his artwork here. To achieve specific effects, Norton arranges and blends the paints on the blade before their application to the canvas. He also employs tape to mask out certain areas and uses subtractive rubbing to reveal, blend and negate the underlying layers and colors. Areas of raw linen canvas underscore the palimpsest-type nature of Norton's resonant paintings. Layers are created through sweeps of the paint spatulas and are also exposed by scraping. In a technique the artist describes as reverse drawing, pigments protected by overlying tape are flayed as the tape is drawn away, breaking up space, apposing and exposing layers. The drawing analogies are extended to include the strategies of shadowing and outlining with black pigment. The artist often creates a genealogy of paintings, and in the same way that an image might receive the residuum of pigments on the knife from another sweep of the same nature. Windows and portals created by masking with tape reveal labyrinthine passages and strata of paint, analogous to overlapping membranes or layers of tissues, thick and opaque in some areas, tapering and diaphanous in others. Rubbed areas showing direct evidence of the artist's hand lay open and raw like exposed nerve endings. Within these illusionistic interstices, the materiality of the medium is revealed. Scabrous surfaces and congealed colors stir visceral reactions as the biomorphic agenda opens up the potential for narratives about all of the stories that are borne and cached within.

Norton has the depth and the chops to imbue his smaller paintings with the gravitas of his larger works. In *Second Summer 6*, the physicality of pigments troweled onto canvas is made even more evident through its intimate scale. The cresting, green-pink-black bead of paint near the top edge of the painting demonstrates this, as well as the escarpment of built-up pigments near the lower left edge. Skinned in some areas to reveal its understructure, the painting bears an ovoid area rubbed raw down to the red. Ultimately self-referential, this work evinces dripping, oozing, melting, smearing and smudging, from the laying up of buttery pigments onto assorted surfaces while differing viscosities result in colored dribbles and drools. Eddies of pigments swirl at the vertical edges; flecks of paint

adhere to the rough surfaces over which it was dragged. Visual poetry results from the dance and the dialogue, the immediacy of communication between the artist, the paint, and the surface. "It is all about the paint," Norton remarks, "with forms servicing forms, colors servicing colors, creating feeling and emotion. It is abstract and it is expressionistic, but I seek a freshness that stands apart from Abstract Expressionism."

In his prognostication of the value and utility of abstract art summarized in his book of collected lectures, "Pictures About Nothing," former MOMA curator Kirk Varnedoe reminded us that more than just pure looking is required to even begin to understand its manmade and intentional experiential language. Within the nuanced references of these complex paintings lies a sensate humanness. At their core, the paintings evince mark making that invokes their genesis as essential human gestures from the exceptional persona of Charles Michael Norton.