

Mary McDonnell's abstract paintings slowly reveal nuances of color and complex spatial relationships over time. Through numerous layers of paint, the artist creates fields of modulated color marked by incidental lines, specks, and splotches that, taken together, form compelling arrhythmic patterns. Although her use of earth tones and pale colors conjure associations with the natural world, her imagery suggests chemical activity, or energy or matter in the process of transformation.

To create her works, McDonnell pours or brushes mixed oil paints onto a wood panel, then uses a scraper or squeegee to pull the paint across the surface. The excess paint that runs off the edges of the tools leaves a residue of fine lines. Because McDonnell moves around the picture after she applies a new layer of paint, an irregular mesh of horizontals and verticals emerges from successive coats of blended color. Like Agnes Martin's ruled grids, McDonnell's randomly crisscrossing lines contain and amplify colors.

How the artist drags the paint across the wood surface—how much pressure she applies to the tool, how far she pulls the paint—partly determines the kinds of marks and tonal values produced. But there are contingencies incorporated into her process. It is not certain how a new layer of paint will jibe with previous layers of what marks will be left behind once the wipe is finished. Other incidents arise. Pigment catches in the wood grain's pits and other blemishes. The edges of the tools, worn with use, can produce irregular marks. Occasionally McDonnell manipulates excess paint with a brush or her fingers, but, for the most part, accidental residue replaces evidence of the ego.

Through the mesh of lines and the complex interplay of transparent and opaque colors, McDonnell crafts the illusion of endlessly extendable space. Her paints resist forming a fixed pattern in the viewer's mind, suppressing what Leo Steinberg calls "space calibration," visual cues that help viewers establish where the ground plane is. The lines, specks, and blips, the opaque areas of paint that seemingly float in front, behind, and in the midst of blended fields of color, create an immersive continuum, a momentum of abstract forces.

Many of her paintings display different degrees of linear activity. In *Blue Headed Friend*, stringy white lines read like vibrations traveling across vocal chords. A prominent thin white line hovers near the center of *Daylight Hours* 9.36, recalling Barnett Newman's zips. It seemingly comes forward and recedes into the painterly passages to either side of it, generating harmonies and dissonances with the other white and blue-gray lines.

Paintings such as *Go Around One, Two*, and *Chasing the Cuckoo* bring to mind projected 35-millimeter film leader—that foggy, pulsating portion of film, with its jumping lines and

aberrant flecks of dust and dirt, that runs right before a movie begins or after it ends. The diptych *Daylight Hours 9.34 (Johnny)* resembles a strip of X-ray film, in which translucent gray vertical strips are juxtaposed with opaque black ones. While differently striated gray areas bracket a tightly woven grid of black lines near the center, traces of the wood grain appear as spiraling marks.

Other works that feature more solid fields of color seemingly hum with latent activity. In *by ear*, hints of rust red and orange peek through a porous field of brown-black paint. Translucent pale yellow drips splattered on top suggest chemical reactions and corrosive acids eating away at a substance. *Daily Drumbeat*, a diptych in browns and whites, has the forcefulness of a Manichaeian symbol of lightness and darkness, good and evil, spirit and matter. The brown streaks that have seemingly migrated from the left panel encroach upon the predominantly white field of the right panel, disrupting its harmonies and formally uniting the diptych.

In some works a light source appears to emerge from behind the layers of color; in other paintings the surfaces reflect light. Often the two phenomena occur within the same painting. In the diptych *Lighter Later*, the central band of bright white streaked with lemon yellow is like the sun glaring down on an impenetrable field of snow and ice. The gray, brown, and yellow areas that bracket it suggest grit in snow and the shadowy light of dawn and dusk.

McDonnell's paintings are meditations of the transparency of color, which Robert Delaunay compared to musical notes. Like music, these paintings suggest the vastness of space where there is no absolute up or down, left or right, forward or backward. The artist's technique reflects her belief that randomness is the guiding principle behind nature and society. Her paintings meet the viewer halfway in that they are randomly generated fields containing visual activity that await transformation by the viewer's subjectivity.

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