

Angel Otero New Paintings

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Puerto Rican-born, New York-based artist Angel Otero has refined a singular, labor-intensive process for making paintings. He applies thick oil paint to Plexiglas slabs and allows it to nearly dry before painstakingly peeling the oil skins away and reapplying them to canvas, to which he then adds and scrapes additional paint, resulting in an entirely new composition. Previously, Otero's work incorporated highly personal imagery such as household objects or family photographs from Puerto Rico, resulting in work that often depicted highly abstracted, but still decipherable central images. He has also referenced art historical antecedents like Nicolas Poussin, Cy Twombly, and Philip Guston, a diverse selection of painters whose work nonetheless shares a mastery of color.

Their specters hang in the air of Otero's current show of recent work at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, where he has plumbed the depths of his paint box and come up with a plethora of color combinations that are sure to dazzle the eye, not to mention stimulate the other four senses. One painting feels like a breath of salt air at the seaside, whereas another elicits a shiver like a chilly wind on a gray day. Synapses fire as one ingests the rich colors, thick, physical hunks of paint, and sensual cross-hatchings of the artist's cutting tool.

Otero pushes deeper into abstraction with these new paintings. There is no longer a stabilizing central image (or text, as Otero has also used before); rather, the canvases are entirely given over to great swathes of paint, rippling contours, and sometimes demanding lacerations from the blade. It is only when

very close to an individual canvas that one may detect indications of the figurative lurking amongst the shadows and whorls of paint. His prior canvases were heavier—the reapplied oil skins were thoroughly crumpled and wrinkled, like an abandoned blanket—resulting in an effect that looked as if the paint was about to slide right off the canvas. Here it seems to be mainly contained within the frame, and while still textural, it does not ooze and wrinkle with the same unruliness. Though not mannered exactly, the new work is more controlled, more tightly refined and considered.

Certainly, Otero is an accomplished spelunker of the color spectrum. A work like *Woodshedding* (2015), the first painting one encounters upon entering the gallery, easily draws the viewer in with its unexpected but fluid array of hues. Tangerine collides with wintergreen, which bumps up against periwinkle and goldenrod. The unlikely combination succeeds, and the eye spends quite some time skipping around the canvas, absorbing the undulating brushstrokes and painterly arabesques. Another standout is *Wind Chimes* (2015), the show's darkest painting, with all color offset on a rich black background. Up close it's easy to get lost in the cakes of black paint, the noirish purple and midnight blue. At a distance, the ghosts of the figurative emerge, the suggestion of a reclining nude in one corner, concentric shapes indicative of sound waves elsewhere. Sexy and animalistic, the painting is a wild saxophone bleating from an open door on a warm, rainy night.

The psychological moodiness of *Wind Chimes* is so fervent one anticipates more of that raw, emotional resonance in other pieces, but it sometimes seems as if Otero's commitment to process and strict adherence to abstraction come at the expense of spirit. A painting like *Moonshine* (2015), for example, with its downy grays and creamy pinks, is pleasant to look at but ultimately trifling—abstraction for abstraction's sake with little inward reflection grounding its diaphanous qualities. In interviews, Otero has said that he's fallen away from the intensely personal narrative that once drove much of his work for fear of seeming too sentimental for the contemporary art world. In a 2012 interview with fellow artist José Lerma in the catalogue published in conjunction with his show at the Contemporary Art Museum of Raleigh, Otero noted, "People have told me they love my work but they don't care about my grandmother." But with too much excision of the teeming and organic qualities, the work runs the risk of becoming spiritual bubble gum—initially full of pop and taste but soon lacking flavor.

One hopes that these perceived shackles are not too binding, and that he is able to break free of their encumbrance to consider the intimate, the emotional, and the philosophical freely and deeply. A painting like *Wind Chimes* shows that Otero is capable of not only tapping into the personal but also plumbing the subconscious to reach new depths, and points the way to his future.