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JOHN WALKER: THE SEAL POINT SERIES

Knoedler and Company

John Walker (b. 1939)
Seal Point Series #KX
2006
Oil on Bingo card
7 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches



Those familiar with the heroically scaled, expressive paintings of English-born painter John Walker may be surprised by the tenderness and humility found in his current show of 66 shockingly small Maine landscapes. They are each painted on 7-by-5-inch vintage bingo cards.

The diminutive scale initially suggest the works are meant to be notational, perhaps sketches for larger works. But within their tiny format we find completely realized paintings. The limitations imposed by this scale serve the artist well, resulting in a surprising freshness in each piece.

The singular fixed vantage point establishes a preset structure for the artist to hang his paint on in order to respond to the particular nuances of the shifting moods, weather, and light of this rough tidal zone. His trademark painterly techniques often obscure the motif and, in this case, it requires time to decode the impasto brush marks, dots, blobs, and glazes. Yet as the eye adjusts, orchestrated marks become alert observations of landscape.

The printed numbers and lines of the bingo cards are an annoying, purposeful foil in the work, where, for example, an occasional fragment of print combines with a passage of paint to become a tree limb or a horizon line within the landscape. At times, a colorful riot of feverish marks and shapes can almost be misconstrued as an outright abstraction. At other times, rank and file strokes yield nearly straightforward landscapes that evoke traces of Courbet, Whistler, Marin, and de Kooning.

Mr. Walker's clever choice of Bingo cards as a support could suggest that the activity of making, viewing, and selling art may also be a form of play. However, in his hands, the "high play" which occurs on these surfaces is more serious and complex than a mere parlor game. These 66 works may be read as direct, imaginative, and heartfelt messages by an artist who has invented a language in paint.

— Jennifer Riley