

John Walker: Recent Paintings
Alexandre Gallery
October 2 – November 15, 2014

Appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 6, 2014

by Alana Shilling-Janoff--

In an epistle from his “Cézanne Letters,” poet Rainer Maria Rilke, caught between rapture and melancholy, marveled over the chance discovery of page-pressed sprigs of heather redolent of “the scent of autumn earth...Containing depth...the grave almost...” For Rilke, that heather became an eternalized ambassador of the ephemeral. But the German poet’s metaphysical fantasy falters as he recalls, “I was not happy when I was able to walk about in it, in all the profusion One lives so badly, because one always comes into the present unready, unfit and distraught Rilke’s heather might have eluded time, but it is also the material reminder of the irredeemable moments in the past, moments cast in a forever unresolved subjunctive mood that unsettle the present, making it seem incomplete. The musings of an early twentieth-century mystic appear an indecorous preface to the latest paintings by John Walker (b. 1939), whose work has been characterized across decades in unsentimental, masculine terms as sinewy, forceful, bold, decisive. The thirteen works in “John Walker: Recent Paintings” hold true to such descriptions. Yet, the characteristically stern lines and spare compositional language of the works on view make them no less a stranger to nuance than Rilke’s heather. Though it may not be declared openly, what makes Walker’s oil paintings more than just another series of abstract landscapes lies in their unexpected investment in the fragility of paradox, the complications of ambivalence.

Walker’s paintings seem unlikely candidates to perform a veil-dance of indeterminacy. As part of Walker’s decade-long project that has been inspired by littoral Maine—known as the “Seal Point paintings”—the works are almost aggressively stylized, rarely diverging from a set compositional pattern. Each is crowned by an ostentatiously simple frieze, below which a series of stubborn lines dominate the canvas. Meanwhile, emphatic bouts of impasto gather at the tips of plinth-like figures, as if the weight implied by textured surfaces might pull the figures beyond the confines of the canvas. Brushstrokes at once tentative and insistent suggest an errant sailboat or footprints that brave erasure by the

turning tides. On occasion, an enigmatic white shape informally known as the “Alba” figure appears.

“Island” (2014) typifies this compositional pattern. A sepia strip presides over the scene, punctuated by an azure moon, the prelude to an azure storm, building in the painting’s right-hand corner. An irregular trapezoid hangs below, its shading making it appear an origami imposition collaged onto the composition. Lazy teal half-chevronns dominate the remainder of the canvas, plowing an imperfect course against a white background. An impudent spur of land fractures the water, the separation of shore and sea announced by a deliberate, mechanical variation. Lines that run horizontally across large areas of the canvas generate topography by turning vertical.

The series of 16 small oil paintings on vintage bingo-card canvases, “Selected Untitled Bingo Cards,” (2014) anticipates the large-scale landscapes in the main gallery. They depict scenes like a boating contest or a truculent sea. In each, a white form (a variation of the “Alba” figure) presides over the composition as unexpected as a non sequitur, as inevitable as summer. These “Bingo” paintings are more than curiosities or *abbazzi*; they are a literal palimpsest *in parvum* that echoes a figurative one, the hidden structure on which the Seal Point landscapes rely. Those yellowed bingo cards are traces of moments devoted to fortune. Everywhere, reminders are visible beneath Walker’s compositions as the number twenty-seven or an ornamental scroll of elephants emerges through the oil paint.

Walker’s large-scale landscapes do not invoke providence so overtly. And yet, each immortalizes a moment fashioned by chance: the embattled spur of land confronted with a restless sea in “The Sea No. II” (2014); the marine world that speeds past, visible through a window on a rainy day in “Untitled” (2011-2014); the forms that seem unmoored by a cobalt sea. Like those bingo-cards, the Seal Point series gives form to moments lost, their significance determined only by contingency. The compositional conventions that are repeated and deployed so deliberately become a concession to the futility of transcending time by giving form to the ephemeral. Perhaps the insubstantial inspiration of the accidental is best appeased by leaving nothing to chance. Indeed, the juxtaposition of heavy-handed abstraction with time immaterial echo in lesser paradoxes: a series of static lines somehow conjure kinesis; the frank two dimensionality of the works suggests variation, topography.

Walker’s works are governed by formal certainties: lines are hard and forms are archetypal. The rigidity and stylized regularity of Walker’s paintings seem to militate against

the untidiness of ambiguity. However, these works are fantasies, whimsical monuments to ineffable moments past. Each delights in the same cherished impossibility, the wish that paint can recover the evanescent and lose not a whit of it. The decision to articulate the complexity of reviving the ephemera of memory with emphatic, simplified abstraction seems to epitomize a paradox as old as Plato: the truest image of the world that art can offer lies in representing what it is not. Perhaps it is a commitment to this notion that gives Walker's paintings a quality of nakedness, formed as they are from the two most primal elements of art — line and color.

“Recent Works” reveals a desire powerful though implicit to not only restore a Eurydice from the Underworld, bring the past into the present, but also, in doing so to make the present more complete. In a sprig of heather, Rilke saw a fantasy of totality, a chance at a complete experience, a chance that made the present seem fragmentary. Walker's Seal Point landscapes are a celebration of fragments, a tribute to the fleeting moments, the giddy concatenation of spent experiences that not even the fixity of place can resist or, thankfully, still.