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# Cynthia Hartling

by James Kalm

## N 3 Project Space

Painting is dead. No painting is alive. No it's dead, no it's alive, no dead, no alive, dead, alive, yada yada yada. Actually painting is not dead; it's more like Neil Young's "Rust," in that... it never sleeps. If anything about painting has died, (besides its fashion appeal) it would be the ability of the general viewer, as well as some art world "pundits" and polemicists, to understand and "read" contemporary painting. It is not my gig to play victim (as a painter), but photography, video, and other forms of "mechanical reproduction" have encouraged the last few generations to "see" only in terms of "photographic" reality. Consequently the viewer's prerogatives of interpretation towards graphic abstraction have been crippled. This complex language of visual incident and syntax has developed over millennia and was an example of some of mankind's highest forms of perceptual cognition.



Cynthia Hartling, "Untitled" #5 (2003), oil on panel.

Cynthia Hartling's paintings bring a treasure trove of references, touchstones, and echoes of this ancient and instinctual language. Like Tom Nozkowski, Andrew Masullo, Geoff Davis, or Peter Acheson, Hartling has consciously chosen to make small-scale abstract paintings. This choice, made by some of today's most interesting painters, may be a generational reaction against the gargantuan scale of the AbEx-ers, and their heirs apparent, the "heroic" Neo-Expressionists. Maybe it's simply a pragmatic solution to storage problems. "I like the intimacy of a work that can be held like a book, something that can be contemplated all at once" commented Hartling. A further differentiation from the mythical shammanistic spontaneity of the New York School is Hartling's attraction to spending years reworking the paintings. This leaves a rich textural surface and a "memory of its history."

The small group of paintings in this gallery debut bears testimony to Hartling's subtle color sense, which evokes weathered frescos, or illuminated manuscripts. One canvas, "Untitled" #1 (2003), is almost heraldic in its symmetry. The upper two thirds of the panel are centrally divided into squares, a dusky ochre on the left and a coppered terra cotta right. These are contrasted by a wavy sea blue foreground. In the upper right a yellow form is circumscribed by a silvery oval which extends equally into the yellow ochre ground, but on that side is filled with rusty red arcs over a lighter toned yellow. This painting in particular seems to proclaim the artist's partiality to the Sieneese and Florentinian masters Giotto,

Uccello, and Piero Della Francesca, a fondness acquired during a year spent studying in Italy.

"Untitled" #5 (2003) presents a pair of oxblood red intersecting circular lines on a gray-green ground. Smaller elements, some floating, some rooted to the edge, may be remnants from over-painted passages. A ring of three receding colors lies over the right side. All together the effect seems a rather disquieting yet satisfying conjunction, somewhere between the mystical organic abstractions of the American Modernists, and perhaps the more obscure though fascinatingly wacky works of the "Indian Space Painters," most notably Steven Wheeler. When I commented on her use of copper and gold metallic pigments in several of the pieces Hartling confided that it came out of her admiration for Medieval altarpieces and the gold leaf used in illuminated manuscripts, like the Book of Kells. "I don't really want to use the word, but I would have to say that it's the 'spiritual' that attracted me, though in a more optical way." Many people mistake religiosity for spirituality. Perhaps that's why there's a current vogue to disavow any mention of it. Maybe it's just a consequence of the skeptical cynicism of contemporary hermeneutics. Perhaps the "s" word is another aspect of the contemporary practice of painting that is invisible to viewers immersed in our mundane world of slick and shiny materialism.