

N3 Project Space  
85 North 3rd Street, 2nd Floor  
Williamsburg (between Whythe and Berry)



Cynthia Hartling, *Smoke* 2003  
oil on wood panel, 12 x 16  
inches

Good painting has a way of eluding critical explication. It is often said in critical dialogue about painting that good painting has a quality of inevitability about it. Good painting, they say, could not have been otherwise. Like all truisms, this one often comes up short faced with the painting it describes. This is the case with Cynthia Hartling's nine small paintings at N3 Project Space in Williamsburg. Each painting feels like an interrupted moment

of evolution, as though in the making, another project richer in potential stole the artist's attention and gave the finish to the piece. They feel as though they might have been otherwise. One leaves the show grateful for these nine moments of insight into Ms. Hartling's creative process.

"(I'm) trying to piece through something," says Hartling of her painting. Such is the feeling evoked by her abstractions, most of which are untitled. Of the three that are, two are in Gaelic: "Teistimeireacht" and "Firinne," testimony and truth. These two gems date from '98 and rely on what Hartling calls a "networking of lines" for their structure. This networking resembles scaffolding in which horizontal, vertical and diagonal beams interlock to support a structure. Hartling uses her networking like a scaffold, improvising over it in form and color. In "Firinne," pink and yellow paint descends, hot and fat, to leave chunks of alizarin networking visible beneath. A grey band of the same streaks in from bottom right. These fragments float in tenuous yet pronounced relation to each other. "Teistimeireacht" is less flamboyant in its color scheme and the networking ascends in browns to break the canvas' upmost boundary. A narrow scrim of wavy blue and grey lines descends in the paintings center, while wet in wet red dots trail off to the right.

The linear structure of these two paintings seems to be determined by the brush and the hand. There are no traces of a straight edge. Although she loves Agnes Martin, Hartling claims to be unable to paint in her "cool" style. She'd rather try "to humanize geometric form."

The third titled painting, "Smoke," seems to do just that with Peter Halley's work. "Smoke" is, by far, the simplest composition of the lot. On a green ground fat with oil, sits an off-center rectangle, pink at the border and yellow in the middle, all creamy paint. Semi circles in impasto black flip upwards off the surface. Like Halley, Hartling seems to be dealing with geometric representation of organic systems here. Where Halley is big, crisp, and cool, Hartling is quiet, intense and warm.

In "Smoke," Hartling seems to allow the painting's first thin coat of paint to stand. She is just as willing to layer and scrape. In some instances, she chips away at thick paint, as though with a knife, to expose dried layers below. As a result her paintings often give the impression of spiraling in on themselves revealing worlds within worlds. From a distance, one of Hartling's forms may suggest a

face or a bit of landscape, an illusion that dims as one moves toward it. Her work functions as both form and image, containing both, insisting on neither.

"I'm trying to tame the chaos," says Hartling of her attempt to deal with geometric abstraction. Her words could easily be applied to the act of painting as a whole. Hartling's work, like all good painting, attempts to juggle and balance disparate, often violently opposed chunks of input. Good painting strives to synthesize and may just as likely reveal complexity as simplicity. Hartling's painting tends toward the former, complexity hard won and defiant of critical dissection.