

The Big (Juicy) Apple: Three current shows of abstract painterliness / artcritical

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October 18, 2011

Russell Roberts: Pockets of Accumulation at Heskin Contemporary, *Cynthia Hartling: New Paintings* at Janet Kurnatowski, *Wallace Whitney: Dream Feed* at Horton Gallery

Russell: October 21 – December 4, 2010
443 West 37th Street, between 9th and 10th avenues
New York City, 212 967 4972

Hartling: October 15 – November 14, 2010
205 Norman Avenue, between Jewel and Moultrie streets
Brooklyn, 718 383 9380

Whitney: October 14 – November 13, 2010
504 West 22nd Street, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, 212 243 2663



Wallace Whitney, *Quarry*, 2010.
Oil on canvas, 80 x 70 inches.
Courtesy of Horton Gallery

Like bagels and cream cheese, painterly abstraction is associated in the popular imagination with New York City despite its roots in Old Europe. The idiom's practitioners are everywhere on earth these days, but the most authentic stuff is still made in our five boroughs. Russell Roberts, Cynthia Hartling and Wallace Whitney are three mid-career painters (based, respectively, in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx) who engage with the problems and pleasures of painterly abstraction. Among the adjectives sometimes applied to this kind of work is "juicy," and the efforts of these artists exist along a spectrum of juiciness: Roberts apparently juicy but not really, Hartling moderately so, and Whitney having juiciness to spare.

Juiciness implies several distinct components, often present in varying proportions. These include a vigorous, painterly touch, a broad chromatic range that includes a healthy admixture of saturated colors, and a surface that might seem a little ragged to eyes accustomed to the homogenizing computer screen. Juicy painting is open to accidental effects and chance alignments. It is not necessarily emotionally authentic, but it conveys the painter's enjoyment of the act of mark-making. Joan Snyder's paintings are juicy, notwithstanding an undercurrent of skepticism regarding the

emotional efficacy of pure painting; Jonathan Lasker's paintings, despite their exaggeratedly tactile surfaces and frequently loud colors, are not. Based closely on preparatory sketches, Lasker's paintings are pointedly unspontaneous, and spontaneity (or its doppelganger, brushiness) is the juiciest attribute of all.



Russell Roberts, *On Foot #10*, 2007. Oil on panel, 18 x 16 inches. Courtesy of Heskin Contemporary

At Heskin Contemporary Roberts shows 19 new and newish paintings in oil on canvas and on panels in "Pockets of Accumulation," his lively and long-overdue Manhattan solo debut. Roberts's signature move is a deliberate, meandering line that blossoms into mutant filigree over membrane-like washes of evocative color. In *On Foot #10* (2007, 18 by 16 inches) that filigree is a transparent purple; vaguely biomorphic, it is stiffly brushed across a variegated ground of raw umber and thinned viridian green.

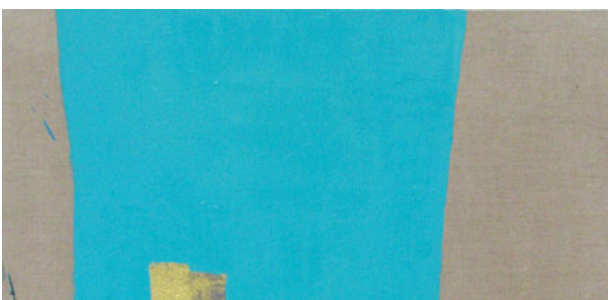
Pockets of Accumulation #31 (2010) compartmentalizes both figure and ground, as Roberts's meander is broken up into twisting bars of blue, violet, and meaty red that bounce around a hazy patchwork of neutralized

secondary hues. A billowing, warm-gray region anchors the composition. The artist's approach is essentially Constructivist, as his slow building up of the image is eminently reasonable, savvy about the risks it takes. *Pockets of Accumulation #29* (2010), the biggest painting here at 66 by 50 inches, flirts with disaster in its crumbling, amorphous upper left region—but is held in check by a wide band of roughly horizontal stripes that traverse the canvas like a plum-colored cummerbund.

In their veils of pigment, their adjustments and wipings-out, Roberts's paintings offer the initial appearance of juiciness, but their parsimonious materiality and self-critical heart—their sheer cerebralness—are fundamentally at odds with the sense of (at least provisional) abandon crucial to truly juicy painting.

Hartling's paintings are moderately juicy, owing to her jangly palette and painting-knife-centric, slathering application. While Roberts insinuates, Hartling declares. Sixteen canvases and numerous small, lovely works on paper form the artist's third solo at this stalwart Greenpoint venue.

The paintings range in size from under a foot square to nearly four by four feet; most are untitled; all are oil on linen. A 27-by-29-inch painting dated 2007-2010 assembles roughly rectilinear shapes in peach, tangerine and lime green amid burlier, dark reddish hues. The syncopated rhythms of abutting, overlapping shapes hint at the geometric jumble of cityscape, while a curling pale lavender band dominates the top—a touch of kookiness amid the tectonics.



Cynthia Hartling, untitled, 2007-10. Oil and gold leaf on linen, 27 x 39 inches. Courtesy of Janet Kurnatowski

These paintings are playful, knowing and a bit ironic. An 11-by-12-inch painting ramps up the sense of compression: between jaw-like chunks of salmon and mango floats a tiny gold-leaf egg. Hartling's sense of scale is strong in smaller formats, but her



intensity dissipates in larger paintings. An exception is a 43-by-37-inch canvas in which a tongue of clarion-clear blue-green lolls from the top edge, laid on with a knife and surrounded on three sides by raw linen. From it, a spot of gold leaf pigment dispersion drips copiously. A few blackish drips streak in from the left, apparently a felicitous studio accident.

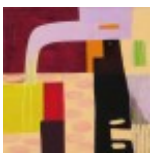
In addition to the touch, palette and surface that comes with the territory, Whitney's paintings court a fundamental turbulence of the visual field, a fluidity of boundaries between pictorial components. "Dream Feed," an exhibition of four major works from this

year, are all oil on canvas; *Quarry*, the largest, is 80 by 70 inches; the others are 60 by 48 inches.

Quarry is a riff the theme of bathers. Entwined limb-like forms in pink-to-rose, up to their knees in azure blue, cavort among and beneath woodland greens, browns and oranges. Whitney evidently thins his paint to a syrupy consistency, and paints wet-into-wet, so colors mix directly on the canvas. He embraces chalky, murky, and grayed-out extensions of the classic oil palette which, unlike acrylics, can take on a beguiling richness.

Painterly abstraction often alludes to landscape. Roberts and Hartling counter such associations with an underlying grid structure, which contradicts the illusion of bottom-to-top recessional space. Whitney deals with the problem by not fighting it too hard, and allowing effulgent washes of high-key colors to break through, here and there, the opaque paint he lays over them in bunches, like bundles of sticks.

Imaginary Numerals is a stunner. Both airy and dense, it is a tangled matrix of qualified primary hues—radiant coral, somber violet-blue, pale lemon yellow—stretched across underlying washes of acid green, magenta, and turquoise. The entwined fingers of paint are sustained throughout but not programmatic, so the shallow space feels about to break open. Having nailed each corner and struck a delicious balance between articulating a certain kind of space and suggesting its unraveling, the artist put down his brushes at precisely the right moment. That might sound easy to do, but few things in a painter's life are more difficult.



Hartling

Roberts

Whitney

