

Inferno Newspaper

02/07: Review of Long Distance by Kathryn McFadden

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It is frequently said that life is journey. Life's intimate relationships formed and unraveled over time are the subject of the works of Philadelphia painter Elyce Abrams. She applies the metaphor of emotional journeys literally and figuratively to her vibrant panel paintings for her third solo exhibition at Bridgette Mayer Gallery in Center City (April 23 – May 30). Titled Long Distance the name lends itself to a number of interpretations. For one, to examine the twelve narrow paintings that dominate the gallery the viewer must walk their extended span. From an interior perspective, a fractured or unstable personal relationship almost always entails physical distancing as well as emotional alienation.

In that vein, Abrams' works certainly contain an elegiac quality. A sense of narrative plays out too, as if reading a long poem with a start and a finish that is nuanced in movements of value changes over the expanse of the paintings. The extended 12" high wood panels are arranged on the east walls of the gallery and are stacked in twos, the lengthiest being 84" wide. Technically speaking, Abrams is a virtuoso with a brush. When I first examined the works, I thought she had implemented collage, but multiple layers of acrylic paint are built up over time with repeated episodes of sanding and taping off. It seems the concept of the emotional struggle of love is mirrored in Abrams' intense and time-consuming treatment of the panels resulting in areas of varied surface textures and juxtapositions of color: burnt orange and indigo, magenta and bright green, scarlet and cyan. Inky blacks evidence the trail of pronounced brushstrokes. One of the most striking aspects of her paintings is the stark and startling areas of white, which are unpainted expanses of the gessoed panels. They create a kind of painterly glare; an idea of a burning through of pure light that recalls photographic orbs or blind spots experienced in strong sunlight. These spots may symbolize the moments in an uncertain relationship where one is temporarily blinded with fear, passion or pain.

Whether in the long panels or the single ones, all of Abrams paintings recall a sense of landscape. The grass greens and sky blues of nature tend to dominate. A sense of distance or deep space is determined with a recurring horizon-type line in many of the panels while tree trunks are implied in the repetition of strong verticals right up against the picture plane. Textured brushstrokes evoke bodies of water or tree bark and the expanses of white sometimes suggest clouds. Abram's gallery statement includes the remark that her paintings are a "conceptual space that I occupied throughout the course of personal travels". I experienced Abrams' Long Distance as a fresh and affecting gallery exhibition on the familiar theme of emotional landscapes. It was exceptional in that it allowed room for the viewer to embark on their own contemplative journey of insight and memory while being transported by visual rhythms of color, texture and space.

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