

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Tim McFarlane: Essay by Gerard Brown

At first blush, the paintings that comprise Tim McFarlane's "Inverted Dislocation" exhibit might seem a tad abstracted. Not *abstract*, but *abstracted*...as one might describe someone who is preoccupied in a conversation. On the one hand they are rigorously formal, like intelligent newcomers to the ongoing conversation of pattern painting (and its specific discussion of the stripe). But, at the same time, they seem to have something else on their minds.

That something else is life itself. Though overtly nonrepresentational, McFarlane's striped blocks inevitably suggest images. It would be simple to stop at their resemblance to the blank urban-modernist-dumb-box-office-building architecture that hems in Philadelphia pedestrians. More specifically, these fields are obstacles; they conceal what is behind them and impede the long view. For McFarlane, like many of us who are struggling to make sense of our day-to-day lives, says "the future is over there somewhere"¹ beyond reach, behind some towering barrier.

Patterns – like checks, stripes, and such – are happy things for painters. They could go on forever, they fill canvas quickly, and they don't require a lot of thought. Using them allows a painter to turn our attention to details like edges and slight variations from uniformity. Without imagery, we have to look elsewhere for content. Attending to McFarlane's paintings, one will rather quickly notice the absence of any governing formulae. Lines vary in width; stripes blur into one another. Peek around the corners of a canvas and you'll get a look at how many color decisions go into making a single passage of cool gray or warm white. What drives these paintings – as patterned as they are – is not any sort of system but a keen interest in sensation. When a painting "feels right" it has passed the litmus test for McFarlane. Even the paintings' titles (an example from this group of images is the plaintively titled "Between You and I" which at once signals intimacy and some kind of distance threatening to block communication) are more expressive than formal. This subjectivity – a willingness to be surprised by a painting's growth rather than to adhere to a fixed plan – further locates these paintings in the world of the day-to-day, rather than in the timeless empyrean of art.

A second body of work in the current exhibition, remotely inspired by images of architecture under empty skies, continues McFarlane's investigations of painterly and emotional spaces. In these compositions, lushly layered blocks of color squeeze thin ribbons of paint across the bottom edges of a canvas. The effect, which McFarlane notes echoes Dutch "big sky" landscapes of the 17th century, is one in which the viewer feels the weight of air and its openness. Is this availability, this unobstructed sky, really any more attainable than that which is concealed? Perhaps not.

Though Tim McFarlane's paintings imply barriers, challenges, and open spaces perhaps too full of potential to be really useful, they also encourage us to keep looking up. It would be easy to talk about paintings in terms of paintings than in terms of vision, but in this case, I fear it would be not only too easy (and academic), but cowardly. In his abstractions, Tim McFarlane boldly seeks what is out of sight and hidden from view. At the core of their strategy of concealment is a faith that there is something out there to pursue.

gerard brown, Philadelphia, 2004

¹ All quotations are taken from a conversation with the artist in January, 2004.