

ARTFORUM

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Jessica Dickinson

JAMES FUENTES LLC

The title of Jessica Dickinson's recent show, "Here," signaled an unwillingness to look elsewhere—at, say, the history of abstract art—demanding instead that attention be paid to the situation at hand. The eponymous painting, which faced the viewer upon entering James Fuentes's small storefront gallery, lent force to this insistence on presence. In the 2008–2009 work, a shining slab of pale yellow leans precariously rightward in front of a blue-gray, green, and chalky off-white background. Up close, one could see that the near-solid appearance of this sunshiny block was illusive; it in fact subsists on the ridges left after thin grooves were etched into the limestone polymer base.

The materiality of the show's six paintings and works on paper required the viewer to take them in repeatedly from different vantage points to negotiate the interplay of light, color, form, and surface, as well as to map the relationships among them. The space was divided in two, with the three pieces in the front thematically linked through light as subject and content. *Distance—Come Closer*, 2007–2008, bursts with summery shards of swimming-pool turquoise, and it was only when one examined the work more closely that one saw that the paint is applied like spackle, filling deep gouges in the surface, which is elsewhere heavily sanded down.

A more mimetic and simultaneously more philosophical bent emerged in the third, closely related piece in the front space, a work on paper that complemented the sense of affirmation-in-spite-of-the-odds that dominated the paintings. Titled *Screen*, 2008, it depicts its subject with a grid of slightly irregular crosshatched lines; a blue shimmers here, too, though obvious only from a distance, when it emerges seemingly behind the surface. Like the conundrum of its real-world counterpart, the screen is at once a dense geometric grid and something almost imperceptible, designed to be seen *through*.

The complexity of Dickinson's works is built up through a six to twelve-month-long process of layering and erasure: Each is repeatedly scrubbed down, sanded, repainted, and modified in various ways. This procedure reflects the phenomenological basis of her practice: "Each piece," she has written, "is rooted in an exchange between a passing everyday perceptual experience and a psychological/cognitive experience over time—a silent, unfolding 'event.' . . . [T]he paintings are a materialization of this event, and become an event in themselves." The



Jessica Dickinson, *Here*, 2008–2009, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 x 53".

act of abstraction is here a rendering of density. That includes a temporal density, as the drawn-out process to which each work has been subjected is answered with a decompression that takes place through the act of viewing.

In the rear section of the gallery, a notably darker, almost nocturnal register prevailed, with a painting and a work on paper that from a distance look almost solid purple-black, the former, *Flash-Shift*, 2008–2009, overlaid with concentric circles and the latter, *Shift*, 2008–2009, with lines that likewise converge on an off-center point. Each is modulated with patches of lighter purple and the outlines of Rothko-esque interior rectangles. Dickinson's process has here become involuted, with the centripetal texturing of the surface adding to an introspective pull that is partially (but only partially) countered, when given time to play out, by the irregularly occurring brighter-colored areas.

The other piece in this space, *Before-Almost*, 2008, appeared at first glance to be the outlier of the exhibition. A sheet of paper that looks like it has been trod upon while lying on a gravelly surface, it is painted, we learn, on the reverse. The work seems a commentary on the rest of the show, most explicitly out to make a statement. Rejecting the autonomy or purity of abstract art, not to mention its occasional duty as standard-bearer for a latter-day Romantic sublime, it clarifies the assertion of the show's title through the immediacy of its own link with the nuts-and-bolts world.

An artist's book accompanying the exhibition, featuring photographs of graphite rubbings of her paintings, likewise explores the underpinnings of Dickinson's art. The images, titled "Remainders," look like depictions of dried-out mud. In addition to drawing attention to the sculptural aspects of her painted surfaces, they offer further evidence of the programmatic integrity of Dickinson's visually nuanced explorations of the interdependence of temporal processes and physical matter.

—Alexander Scrimgeour