

Jessica Dickinson's Paintings Are Full of Emptiness

by Paddy Johnson | 11/23/2011



Installation view of Jessica Dickinson: Before/Beside courtesy James Fuentes Gallery

"A canvas is never empty." Robert Rauschenberg wrote in his 1959 artist's statement. That quotation opens Wikipedia's entry on [monochromatic paintings](#), and is a reminder to critics who think there might be little to talk about in such work.

Applying this sentiment to [Jessica Dickinson's](#) exhibition [Before/Beside](#) at [James Fuentes LLC](#) (through December 11) reaps some rewards. As far as I can tell, her monochrome paintings are wholly about what one sees, which means that long careful looking is the only way to understand the work. Dickinson's meticulous gauging, scraping and staining of the limestone surface creates subtle color and texture vibration, a quality that defines many great monochromes.

Appropriately, the front gallery isn't brimming with work—unusual for an exhibition by an emerging artist. The careful manipulations in each of the four single-hue paintings—blue, red, gray and white—took several months to make, and require a space that accommodates proportionate attention.

"Always Also," the most visible work from the entrance, pulls the viewer in with its bright, reddish orange, the limestone surface serving at once as a container for the stain of the paint, and its conduit. Pools of paint accumulate in cheesecloth and other scraped imprints embedded on the panel; the color pops from being juxtaposed with "Give," a blue painting facing away from the

gallery door.

All this may sound a little boring to some, a problem I acknowledge but am not sure needs to be solved. The truth is most viewers will need to care about paint and process to enjoy this show, and those qualities neither appeal to the majority of casual viewers, nor translate well into words. While I can observe that the virtuosity of the blue in Dickinson's "Give" lies in its ability to mimic the translucent—it is at once reflective of the light shining into the gallery and the pools of turpentine used to lay down the paint—I can't explain why a viewer should care. The best I can offer is that it moves me.

I can also observe that the graphite rubbings leading into the rear gallery don't look like much by comparison. This isn't too surprising given that each rubbing marks a substantial change in paintings that are defined primarily by their subtlety. In one piece she adds circular marks, in another she adds a square to the mix. But there are simply too many drawings (seven in total) to hold viewers' interest for long. One gets the impression the works were made specifically to fill out the show.

Given the amount of time it takes to produce the paintings, I don't take issue with this curatorial decision; I just wish two or three of the drawings had landed in the office instead of the gallery. Even for someone who's interested in process and willing to channel my inner-Rauschenberg, there's more graphite on paper here than I can handle.

(Images courtesy the artist, James Fuentes LLC)