

Figures and Grounds: Approaches to Abstraction

excerpt

or scattered shaved charcoal onto a prepared ground, as in his five-part piece *One Stick of Charcoal Shaved and Sorted* (2011). In his scraped drawings, just as in *One Stick of Charcoal Shaved and Sorted*, colorless oil pastel replaces the previously-used spray fixative binder, becoming an integral part of a process of layering and scraping that yields results often unforeseen by the artist.

- ★ Linda Stillman's *Daily Paintings* (August 2005–) is a single, ongoing work comprised of individual small panels, each measuring 3x2x3/8 inches. Stillman studied graphic design at the School of Visual Arts in the 1970s and ran her own graphic design firm in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2003, she received an MFA degree from Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA), in Montpelier, VT, where Byron Kim was one of her mentors.

Unlike works by Bernheim, Petropoulos, and Kenny, Stillman's *Daily Paintings* are predicated on direct observation of nature rather than on mediated imagery, or abstract form without a referent. The referent belonging to *Daily Paintings* is a section of the sky framed by the rectangular boundaries of a window pane in Stillman's upstate New York studio. The outline of the window pane provides a mental template for each day's panel, which Stillman paints no matter where she is. Each day, she copies a portion of the sky from the same 45° angle at any point before nightfall. Her goal is to duplicate the sky's particular cloud formation and cast—whether a shade of blue, grey, or white or a combination of these colors—beginning to paint after making notes and sketches. Unlike an artist such as Gerhard Richter, she relies on memory rather than photography to grasp quickly changing atmospheric conditions while aiming for a smoothly rendered surface. In the words



Linda Stillman's Studio, Hillsdale, New York, 2010

of the artist, "the difficulty of capturing the luminous and fast changing colors of the sky in paint is a never-ending challenge."¹²

The painted panels adding up to a year of the *Daily Paintings* are arranged and mounted differently according to the particular year, and with respect to the needs of the exhibition space. In *Figures and Grounds*, the full set of 2008 panels hang directly on the wall in linear sequences. Those from 2009 are also installed directly on the wall (as opposed to being affixed to panels, as are certain other years including 2006 and 2010), and are arrayed by month in calendar-specific format.

While they follow the conventions of painting, the *Daily Paintings* break from the medium's traditional confinement to a single canvas. In nontraditional fashion, Stillman's *Daily Paintings* function as an open-ended serial progression which allows for the continuing compilation of details that mount up over time to thematically address both spatial and temporal infinity. Each panel adds another fleeting glimpse of a tiny portion of the sky's unbounded expanse at one instant in the day. The *Daily Paintings* represent the flow of time "as an abstraction, not a narrative."¹³ Taken together as an evolving pattern of light and dark details, the *Daily Paintings* participate in a narrative about the modeling technique of chiaroscuro found frequently in Old Master paintings and drawings. Far from chiaroscuro's use as a means to give the illusion of three-dimensionality to objects on a two-dimensional surface, in the *Daily Paintings*, areas of light and shade portray details of the sky, abstractly blending with their ground without reference to figuration.

By different means and to different ends, Bernheim, Petropoulos, Kenny, and Stillman have questioned the formerly clear-cut distinctions between pictorial figuration and ground, or between sculptural materiality and vacant space. In doing so, they have tapped into new kinds of abstract imagery that may or may not touch upon realities in nature or in the world at large. In all cases, the work of these four artists calls upon the potential of abstract methodologies to further aesthetic self-referentiality.

Anne Rorimer, Chicago, 2012