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Olivia Booth on Allison Miller

“No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader”¹ rings visually true in Allison’s paintings, which put forth surprising moves that ask you to realign and shift in relation to them, moves which propel us forward into the work while also reflecting deeply backwards into the kind of move-off that went into making the work. One needs to pose, compose and recompose themselves in front of the paintings, as Allison must have, because they are as much if not more about how one imagines themselves—what attitude one takes—before them as they are about their own composition. But as the paintings unfold, the compositional unpredictability and the shifting that that solicits on our part purposely gets played out, pointing to the limits of compositional one-upmanship and giving way to what happens when that falls off.

In some of the earlier paintings, line worked to draw you in and then pull you around, but now the engagement feels more intersubjective, two subjects working it out together to tackle obstacles of circulation. What also strikes me as somewhat different from the earlier works is that recomposing— or recalibrating— is brought about less by literal circulation jams, where you find yourself knotted, lost, or needing to backtrack, and more by arriving at surprising and irreconcilable points where, say, a line has just been asked to become a net and then at once a ground, or where a mountain once grounded turns out to be hung like a mobile. At these times the painting and the viewer almost need to heave, accept the indeterminacy of the situation, and then see where the chips fall in relation to the general presence of the painting. Because this overall presence supersedes the surprising visual tangles and spatial shifts within the work, I am less inclined to *track* specific paths of recalibration and more inclined to take in the painting’s general presence in relation to my own.

I think this sense of collectively heaving or giving way accounts for why the paintings seem to bulge. In fact, the new smaller works bulge so much that they behave as if they are the same size as the larger works. They bulge with thick whiteness or by being tethered with visual anchors or being pointedly un-tethered on the edges. The bigger paintings often seem full in the center and have a central shape that looks like the thing that should be swelling, but often turns out to be just a scrim for the swell behind.

Moments of surprise, potential impasse and recalibration, like a shift from a super active weave-like area to a solid blue ground, call up the kind of pockets of reckoning and recalibration any social being experiences as they move through the social world, and the kind of gear shifting that that entails; at a party, engaged in a bustling conversation and surrounded by music and bodies doing interconnected but disparate things and then suddenly finding yourself alone, door shut, with the sound of the party’s din outside. In Allison’s work you’re never left high and dry, the din doesn’t ever disappear completely, there are only acoustical shifts in relation to it. Irreconcilable spatial shifts which go beyond simple surprise, like when one falls into a vacuum-like space with a hedge floating in it or through a sky-like ground that seems heavy, moments when composition disengages but doesn’t disconnect, call for a kind of self reflection and reckoning. (Are these the same moments when the painter is spent from having it out with the painting?). This is not a grandiose reckoning with self in relation to the sublime or the infinite, but maybe just in relation to general awkwardness.

In fact, I’d say there is a pointed resistance to the infinite in Allison’s work, expressed in the way that a far off site-line is always blocked by something, sky-like grounds are thick and rarely atmospheric, and linear horizons seem to loosen and become undone. There is a type of unbound horizon that I find lurking in a lot of the paintings, usually in the form of a continuous and swooping line that can go in any direction, even off the canvas, and that divides different kinds of space. In Allison’s earlier paintings I think festooning was a major move, so much so that one got the feeling that elements were hung upon the painting and this made for a kind of nerve based looking (it’s no wonder that surprise parties hang the word “surprise” across the threshold). Now the festooning has been ingested by the works; I still feel the work is held by this half slack - half taught unifying line which attracts you back into the painting and also flips to become a threshold and swing you out, creating an elastic way of looking, but this linear force is remote, not overt. In many works the painting seems to be hanging from a painting, hanging from another painting, hanging from a slack lyrical line, hanging from the canvas. Likewise, heaviness builds on lightness; even things that traditionally strive to be extra light in painting, like bubbles and shadows, can end up weighty and non-atmospheric. No matter how dreamlike some of the representation, the imagery has enough physical weight to seem ready to have it out with the viewer in the here and now. The sense that paintings are hanging from and blocking other paintings and only remotely held by line might be an active metaphor for Allison passing the buck from line to color as a way to un-ground an experience; before, line made you sweat, now, color is packed in decodable relation and non-relation and gives you a run for your money.

¹ Robert Frost