

Never Not Moving

One of the enduring fascinations of painting—one of the medium’s perpetual pleasures—is that the components of a factually, objectively static visual field can be made to suggest the unfolding of a process, a not-at-all-static matrix of rhythmic counterpoint that implies temporal duration. Regarding his new work, Erick Johnson poses this paradox as his fundamental motivating hypothesis: How do you get something to ‘move’ that’s not really moving at all?

This painter’s solution is to get the viewer’s eyes to move, to scan the painting’s surface, initiating a series of reiterative cognitive events. As a compositional device the grid is reputed to be visually immobile, but the viewer’s awareness of even minor variations in uniformity prompts a search for difference amid repetition. In Johnson’s hands, the pictorial surface is broken up into complex irregular polygons, each with as many as 10 sides but no two quite the same, which are further divided into three roughly triangular sections. This modular schema established, Johnson populates it with luminous transparent color—often overlaid, optically blending glazes—that build up the rhythms through one luscious, surprising juxtaposition after another.

Johnson’s touch is crucial, though at a remove. On his favored substrates, canvas and paper, he uses an array of scraping tools with slight irregularities along the leading edge that leave variously subtle or pronounced striations in the paint film. When parallel to one of the triangle’s edges, these distinctive traces reinforce the overall shape and facilitate a figure/ground reading; otherwise, their direction complicates the interplay of shape’s surface treatment to its edge in a sort of thrust-and-parry situation that introduces a gentle but persistent and altogether engaging tension. The paintings seem to pulsate. Johnson calls the effect “escape from stasis.”

This exhibition’s title, *Cross Currents*, underscores the presence of countervailing preoccupations that can be construed as binaries: mastery/improvisation, system/glitch, map/territory, *disegno/pittura*. And the orderliness of Johnson’s masked edges and fastidiousness application, the viewer eventually discovers, belie a particular type of looseness—not the looseness that’s achieved via wrist action, but loose in the way that a knot or bow might loosen as surfaces slip against each other, relaxing their grip. For many years, Johnson has imbued geometrical structures with a depth of soulful feeling. In these paintings he finds a new groove, like a great drummer deep in the pocket but not metronomic, getting air in the hi-hat, moving the crowd.

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