

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery

Galleries: Painting turns conceptual as you look

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Under what circumstances does painting turn into conceptual art? You can see it happen in the work of German artist Markus Linnenbrink at Sweetow, which at first looks excessively optical. Viewer fatigue effects the conversion.

We reasonably demand that a contemporary painting invite and withstand prolonged scrutiny. It ought to hold the promise of surprise even after many encounters. Linnenbrink's work satisfies these criteria, yet it also proves that they are not enough.

Consider the long picture "FALLAWAYFALLAWAYFALL" (2007). At 12 feet, it makes a generous, even epic impression, characteristically consisting of vertical bands of color made by carefully pouring epoxy resin down the panel's surface. When the eye probes the details for some logic in the sequence of colors, it finds none. Linnenbrink acknowledges making decisions as he goes.

But knowing that improvisation guided what we see does not stop the eye's increasingly frustrated search for phrasing in the color bands. Thoughts of the stripe paintings of Morris Louis (1912-1962) and Gene Davis (1920-1985) may arise. But Linnenbrink really belongs not to the color field lineage but within a much longer modernist research into the dialectic of intention and chance, of spontaneity and deliberation, in art practice.

Uncertainty about the artist's measure of control or conscious intent evolved into a kind of content with a fascination of its own. But Linnenbrink overworks it. The more you look at his paintings, the less their profusion of detail matters. Instead, it seems to implode to a conceptual posture that implies the ultimate futility of careful looking. Linnenbrink does not seem to know that his work has this effect.

The wall painting with which he blanketed the mezzanine lobby at 77 Geary St. initially delivers a jolt of optimism just by the square footage it claims for contemporary art. But it too finally leaves a visitor feeling strangely depleted and ignored rather than enlivened.