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Peter Tollens: Margarete Roeder Gallery, New York

By Joe Fyfe



Cologne-based Peter Tollens's nominally monochrome paintings are full of quiet dappled light. His recent New York exhibition constituted something of a survey, with works dating from 1991 to 2007. Most were very modestly sized rectangles, varying between 18 and 24 inches on a side, while one recent painting was approximately 3 feet high and another a foot taller. Tollens compounds oil paint's illusionistic capacities by slowly building up opaque but luminous areas of color. The individual works elicit an experience that might be called the visual equivalent of hearing a string quartet--a kind of fluttering sensation that hovers around the head. Each painting resolves itself differently, tuning proportion, hue, internal velocity and light to determine optical frequency.

In the earliest work, an untitled oil on wood from 1991 (16 1/4 by 18 1/2 inches), a cadmium orange over dark pink surface is made up of semi-dry brushstrokes dragged across the support to form an uninflected wall of color. By contrast, a more recent oil on linen (2006-07, 35 1/2 by 32 5/8 inches) is made up of stubby individual bristle impressions that fray into a shimmer at the painting's edges, & la Monet's "Water Lilies." Painted in a very close range of mineral grays, it has, remarkably, a more beautiful overall tone than any of the works shown in the "Jasper Johns: Gray" show at the Met.

In another recent work (2007, 49 1/4 by 43 1/4 inches), on linen stretched over wood, a prevailing orange-red color intensifies toward the center, while at the peripheries pinks and alizarins emerge, as does the gray-green underpainting. This work was also built from dry brushstrokes that leave bristle impressions, but here they seem to knit together on the surface into a fabric of knots. A predominantly white painting of 2007 (30 3/8 by 29 1/4 inches) is constructed of frothy or icinglike brushstrokes assembled into columns, which begin at the upper right and dissipate on the lower left into chunky steps that suggest a frozen cascade or a layered wedding cake.

One must also mention a lapidary oil and egg-tempera painting on linen over wood from 1998 (22 1/2 by 19 3/4 inches), in which a very dense blue-green evokes thick velvet. Like all the works shown, it is a carefully modulated color event full of subtle virtuosity.

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