

SEANKELLY

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Art in America

CALLUM INNES



NEW YORK Painting—unlike, say, sculpting—can reliably be called an additive process. And abstract paintings composed of paired monochrome fields don't generally invite the kind of reading we associate with text. These are two assumptions trounced in the new work of Callum Innes, a Scottish painter with a 20-year commitment to deceptively reductive abstraction. Split not-quite-squares, the paintings on canvas (all 2009) in "At One Remove" were each produced by applying sizing (rabbit-skin glue) to canvas, then several layers of gesso, then two adjacent rectangles of solid-color paint, one of which is thoroughly wiped off with turpentine; then two more rectangles of color are applied, and the other side is wiped. Each belabored but resolutely serene final image is divided vertically by a dark line, a residue of the four applications of paint; some evidence of the process can also be found on the edges of the canvas where it wraps around aluminum stretchers.

As Rauschenberg indelibly demonstrated, erasure is hard. No amount of turpentine can eliminate the stubborn ghosts of pigment or stains of medium that remain when all evidence of brushwork is gone.

Pillowed by shadows of paint at their edges, the not-quite-pristine areas of wiped canvas, some bright, some smoky, are foils for the rich, glossy rectangles of paint with which they're paired. Smooth, broad swipes of the brush leave faint tracks that catch light, slightly. A few painted fields are brightly colored—alone in a small introductory room was a roughly 2-foot-square example whose size and blazing red right side suggest a semaphore flag. Another, much larger work (76¾ by 75 inches) opposes canary yellow on the left with a white that looks much-laundered and is bordered with a pollenlike dusting. But several works feature shades of black or dark gray, and a particularly strong trio of Rymanesque canvases, hung on gray walls, sport heavy topcoats of gleaming white.

All these paintings, not Innes's first to rely on subtraction, suggest objects and their shadows—or recollections, or ghosts. Or, images and their exegeses. Even more, the new paintings evoke the divided field of a perceptual experiment in which one image is directed to the brain's right hemisphere (where, in simplified terms, visual processing takes place), and the other to the left (seat of language). You feel your mind's gears grinding. Most provokingly, Innes's new work creates a subtly disorienting physical experience, as of balancing on one leg for a while, then teetering when you've got two feet on the ground.

There were also tall oil paintings on paper shown in a third room (all 80¾ by 39¾ inches, 2008-09), Japanese-y images in which controlled drips of turpentine course like rain through dark fields of muted color. They're lovely, but nowhere near as rigorous, or as satisfying, as the quasi-sculptural, crypto-graphic, not quite monochrome paintings on canvas.

Photo: Callum Innes: Untitled No. 125, 2009, oil on canvas, 76¾ by 75 inches; at Sean Kelly.