



Paul Shakespear at Howard Yezerski Gallery, and Brian Dickerson at Seraphin Gallery in Philadelphia

In the past I've remarked on how hard it can be to see contemporary figurative art in Boston, and how different this is from Philadelphia, where good figurative painting seems to be everywhere. Philly's painters also manage to ignore the science-based abstraction of many Boston artists, with their silence coming as a subtle rejection of that interest. But I stumbled on two shows this month, one in each city, which argue against these regional distinctions. Neither has Philadelphia's figurative leanings, nor does either slide into the biomorphic abstractions that dominate galleries in Boston. Paul Shakespear and Brian Dickerson have both mounted shows that focus on material and surface qualities, with similarities in tone and composition that stand for another, shared direction in American painting.

That being said, both shows make a direct reference to other countries. Paul Shakespear has titled his show *Corrientes*, after a regional capital in his native Argentina. Brian Dickerson's works are all from a residency in Ireland, and I find it telling that each artist could find such similar geometric shapes under the spell of such different places. This tempts me to see a set of shared values in current American painting as the link, values that emphasize a deep surface, a long viewing experience, and craft.

It's difficult to imagine *Corrientes* and Ballinglen giving equal inspiration for the transparent and forceful rectangles of these shows. I would also like to think that Philly and Boston's architectural similarities might have inspired these paintings, but that just isn't what's happening. There is certainly precedence in art history here, but the complex surface quality in these shows is in direct opposition to the work of Piet Mondrian, the late paintings of Barnett Newman, or other modernists who share Paul Shakespear and Brian Dickerson's geometric interests but who strove for flat surfaces. I'm left hoping that the surface depth of Dickerson and Shakespear's works is a sign of a more long-lasting visual interest in art, one that's different from the figurative dominance in Philly and the biomorphic obsession of Boston. Two artists don't make a national movement, but to see these shows in the same month in such different artistic climates gives me a flicker of excitement.

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