

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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ART IN REVIEW

Howard Hodgkin

By Roberta Smith

More than most, Howard Hodgkin's paintings are concerned with the nature of painting. In ways both passionate and wry, they put quotation marks around the medium, paying homage to its history, its physical attributes (frames, for example) and its constantly evolving language.

Mr. Hodgkin also extends that language through his terrific synthesizing acumen, conjuring up pure painting in the tradition of Turner, Vuillard and the Abstract Expressionists, while also alluding to folk art, painted furniture and spongeware ceramics. He practices a joyfully opportunistic pictorialism.

Mr. Hodgkin's 11th gallery exhibition in New York since 1973 — and his first in eight years — shows him in top form, painting with a sense of abandon and urgency that befits his age, 79. The 21 paintings here — executed as usual on wood panels with frames both flat and molded — have a wonderful, slightly unhinged, even dashed-off quality, despite the fact that most of them have been worked on for two or three years or more.

They seem even more transparent than ever in terms of process, emotion and physical structure. You see through them, front to back, grasping their compositions whole and part by part, sensing the easy synchronizing of hand, eye and visual memory and enjoying the artist's refusal to observe niceties like the distinction between abstraction and representation, painting and frame or past and present.

"Breakfast" is a few swipes of paint, an off-kilter horizontal of blue-black edged with yellow-green over ochre. It suggests something vaguely edible, as well as Manet's little "Asparagus." Quite a bit of its panel and frame have been left bare, which is also the case with "Red Sky at Night," where several strokes of red hover above an acidic transition of green to yellow to a shadowy brown that suddenly implies a great distance. Others, like the dappled "Little Garden" or undulant "Lagoon," are more opulently worked.

Still, nearly everything here simultaneously celebrates painting as a pictorial language steeped in its own history while also insistently pushing the idea of what a painting can be to extremes of rawness or brevity. Repeatedly we have the impression of a familiar, even timeless kind of beauty's having been hustled, somewhat abruptly, into the here and now, and set before us fervent, nonchalant and renewed. This is a surprising, risky show.