

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Howard Hodgkin

THE MARK OF COLOR

by Jennifer Samet

There's something impossible and almost greedy about Howard Hodgkin's paintings -- the way his marks, dashes and curves of viscous paint on wood create dynamic, emotionally resonant objects. In the clear white space of Gagosian Gallery, these boldly colored, widely brushed paintings glow and overwhelm; they exceed their space.



And, in fact, Hodgkin is an artist who brought painting forward from an era of sculpture and installation, by treating the whole picture -- the frame included -- as one experience. As an artist, he embodies this subtle space of transition. Hodgkin has had an impressive career -- he won the Turner prize in 1985 and was the subject of a Metropolitan Museum retrospective in 1995 -- but he's also a solo traveler in the art world.

The exhibition includes 21 paintings, made over the last 10 years. Although Hodgkin's paintings look spontaneous and rapidly made, many are considered or worked over for years. They vary in scale from 10 x 13 inches to 80 x 105 inches. All are painted on wood, most with frames that turn them into three-

dimensional objects. Moving through the gallery, we meet and re-visit themes and types of marks, which recur on differently sized panels, with varying colors and moods evoked.

On one wall near the front of the gallery are three paintings with a window motif: broad marks that form a loose rectangle or frame atop the actual frame of the painting, and more transparent strokes of color within, suggesting a landscape in the distance. They test the possibilities of creating illusionistic space and a host of natural associations with that most basic of means -- the mark of color.

In *Early Morning* (2010-11), the rectangle is outlined with umber, inside of which is rich, clear blue. On the same wall is *Knightsbridge* (2009-11), larger and more three-dimensional with its molded white frame. It has the same window format, but here, a blue becomes the frame, while deep, drippy, loose strokes of red and green form the "landscape," calling up very different sentiments. Opposite these paintings is the small but richly condensed *Dark Evening* (2011), with short daubs of blue-white paint becoming the window frame into a nocturnal space in the distance -- suggesting the sea, rain, an encompassing dampness.

Around the corner is the mid-size painting *Flag*, where black strokes outline and are partially submerged by a "rainbow" of red, orange and green. Here the central motif floats to the foreground, instead of vice-versa. It echoes some of the marks in the painting that greeted us at the entrance -- the diptych *Blood* -- where red, green and black marks meld and interlock against the white surface, and where Hodgkin dispenses with the frame.

At one of the end are the two largest pieces, part of a four-painting series titled with lines from the American folk song *Home, Home on the Range*. Painted on a blond, unframed wood panel, *And the Skies Art Not Cloudy All Day* is the most provocative and curious, comprised only of green marks -- punctuating the surface, clustered at the top, and becoming sparse to empty at the bottom.

It succeeds mostly as part of the group: contextualizing his goals and the range of his experimentation. Hodgkin simultaneously references the heroic scale of Abstract Expressionism and the panoramas of the Hudson River School, and is determined to show that emotive range, and the creation of space on the picture plane, is not dependent on spectacle.

Hodgkin moves in and unapologetically overtakes minute spaces of art history, turning them inside-out into complete paintings. He recalled that early in his career, a writer described his paintings as a "brutalization of intimisme." Hodgkin admits he has been a "fanatical admirer" of Edouard Vuillard, and one can see the marks and surfaces of Vuillard in close-up examination in Hodgkin's paintings.

He distills the goals of painters from various eras, but he highlights and admires aspects of them we might even recognize. Hodgkin has stated, "It's a major concern of mine that every mark I put down

should not be a piece of personal autograph but just a mark, which then can be used with any other to contain something. I want to make marks that are anonymous as well as autonomous.”

Surprisingly -- since it's hard to associate the 18th-century painter with brushwork -- Hodgkin's role model for this is Jacques-Louis David, in whose work he sees “a circular motion of the brush . . . which makes a surface” in the background. Hodgkin condenses from de Kooning the usage of the mark to make space, and in this he points to the work of contemporary painters who do the same, like David Reed, Andrea Belag and Amy Sillman.

Hodgkin's colors and gestures have been frequently linked to Matisse, but Hodgkin said, “I've always personally felt that [Matisse's] influence on me was not through his physical practice as an artist, but his identity as an artist, his moral identity as an artist.” Hodgkin undoubtedly admired Matisse's insistent, almost brutal, esthetic challenge of the status quo. A link in their work is a fierce beauty that comes from a simultaneous synthesis of feeling and distillation of painterly means. Hodgkin's paintings are about a radical harvesting of a naked, vulnerable life experience into a few lush marks.

“Howard Hodgkin,” Nov. 3-Dec. 23, 2011, Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10075.

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