

GAGOSIAN

HYPERALLERGIC

A Contemporary Master of the Brushstroke

David Reed has figured out how to bring illusionism back into an abstract painting while remaining committed to paint-as-paint.

John Yau



David Reed, “#712” (2010–11/2018–19), acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 96 x 54 inches (© 2020 David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagolian)

When it comes to David Reed’s work, there seems to be almost no middle ground, especially in the US (he has a bigger reputation in Europe). His color combinations and explorations of paint’s plasticity have either never quite gotten the attention I believe they deserve, or, in the case of one New York Times critic, they have been dismissed for possessing “no inner heat.”

I think the absence of “inner heat” is one of the most captivating things about Reed’s work. He doesn’t use paint’s flesh-like qualities to arouse a sympathetic connection. His refusal to count on the viewer’s compassion is in keeping with the strain of tough, cool, precise painting he practices, a mindset that also characterizes the work of Ad Reinhardt and Philip Taaffe.

Instead of counting on a sympathetic response, I think Reed is seeking a more intellectual engagement with the viewer, one that could open up a reflective space for contemplating the relationship between repetition and difference — the central feature of his early brushstroke paintings — and the unexpected shifts and cacophonous collisions that occur within that calculus of distinctions. In his painting, Reed seems to be asking: in what space do we actually live, now that we are busily replacing nature with controlled, artificial environments?



David Reed, “#726” (2005–10/2018–19), acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 108 x 56 inches (© 2020 David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagosian)

Born in 1946, and informed by his close study of Renaissance and Baroque painting techniques as well as the work of Pop Artists, Minimalists, and Conceptualists, Reed possesses a technical command that far outpaces other artists of his generation. His palette, which seems to include every existing artificial color, has no peer.

In his current exhibition, *David Reed: New Paintings*, at Gagosian (January 10 – February 22, 2020), he has pushed the strands running through his work into a new and remarkable territory.

There are 15 paintings in the show, whose formats range from tall verticals to panoramic horizontals. Both compositionally and color-wise, Reed has pulled out all the stops. Accused of having a similar look in his paintings, this exhibition overturns that judgment.

At the core of Reed’s project is the brushstroke, which he first explored in the early-1970s and showed in his New York debut exhibition at Susan Caldwell Gallery in 1975. In 2017, Katy Siegel and Christopher Wool reunited many of the paintings from the Caldwell show in *Painting Paintings (David Reed) 1975* (January 17 – February 25, 2017), his debut exhibition at Gagosian, following their installation at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

Taking his work from the mid-70s and his recent paintings as bookends, it is apparent that Reed has been exploring the brushstroke in myriad ways: as a wet-into-wet, one-shot encounter; as a viscous pool or mutable form; as spliced, coiling bodies and undulating folds; as filmic images; abstract graffiti; bravura flourishes; and stenciled signs, repeatable and unrepeatable — for more than 40 years. In the new work, he performs actions he has never done before, most notably, exuberant swipes of semi-transparent color gathered into tumultuous clusters. The animating

premise seems to be: what can a painting be made to do, especially after the sincerity of the brushstroke has been called into question?



David Reed, “#718” (2018–19), acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 28 x 116 inches (© 2020 David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagosian)

While many critics have mentioned the importance that Roy Lichtenstein’s stylized black-and-yellow brushstroke paintings, which first appeared in 1965-66, could have had on Reed’s work, it seems to me that Robert Rauschenberg’s duo of “Factum I” and “Factum II” (both 1957) is more central.

In “Factum I” and “Factum II,” Rauschenberg repeated the same composition, which includes paint, a calendar for the upcoming year (1958), two adjoining images of a burning building, a photograph of two trees growing side by side, and paired images of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, all of which have to do with sequence, repetition and difference.

The commonplace view is that Rauschenberg severed the relationship between brushstroke and sincerity by doing the same thing twice, but I do not necessarily think that this is the case. A pianist happens to play same concerto more than once. Is her performance any less sincere and emotional if she is playing it for the hundredth time?

I don’t see “Factum I” and “Factum II” as paintings with collage elements, but as collages with paint and printed images dispersed across the surface. Employing a diverse selection of materials (several kinds of printed matter and paint), Rauschenberg replaced the material unity of an all-over surface, which Jackson Pollock attained in his drip paintings, with a fragmentation and diversity.

Done after “Factum I,” “Factum II” makes it clear that nothing was arbitrary. In contrast to Pollock, who, in his drip paintings, banished images and allusions to everyday life, while articulating a timeless physical presence inhabiting the same space as the viewer, Rauschenberg brought the outside world as well as a consciousness of time passing into “Factum I” and “Factum II” without being derivative of still-life painting.

With their insets and clearly defined sections, Reed’s paintings unify a surface of diverse elements and layers, while extending their allusions to include screens of all kinds. Whereas Pollock seemed to focus on paint-as-paint, banning illusionism from his materially based work, Reed has figured out how to bring illusionism back into gesture while remaining committed to paint-as-paint. Going further, he unites aspects of Color Field painting and gestural painting by making them new, which no one else has done. He did so by synthesizing gesture and color.

He has updated Pollock’s literal, incrementally layered space into a layered, illusionistic space that remains a puzzle as to how it was put together.



David Reed, “#709 (For Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan)” (2005–09/2018–19), acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 121 x 55 inches (© 2020 David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagolian)

In “709 (For Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan)” (2005-2009/2018-19, acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 121 by 55 inches), there is a series of mauve, semi-transparent, gestural marks, overlaid by solid green gestural marks, overlaid by their ghostly twins, which seem to exist in distant, filmy dimension. There are also a few dribbles and splatters of paint. Looking at and into the painting, we feel as if we are moving from the physical world of palpable marks into an ethereal one that exists behind a screen. But, contrary to what we might expect, Reed articulates this digital-like world solely through paint.

In the upper left-hand corner, there is a rectangular inset. Some of the swirling strokes from outside the inset extend into it, though the color changes once they cross the border. Other strokes and colors are contained within the inset. “709 (For Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan)” can be read as a concatenation of gestural marks, with some obviously related and others not.

The painting is Reed’s homage to Theresa Duncan and her partner, Jeremy Blake, who both committed suicide in 2007. Blake, whose video art played a central role in Paul Thomas Anderson’s romantic black comedy, *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), made what he called “moving art.” Duncan was a video game designer and blogger. She became increasingly paranoid after moving back to New York from Los Angeles. On July 10, 2007, she committed suicide in their East Village apartment. A week later, Blake wrote on the back of a business card, “I am going to join the lovely Theresa,” and walked into the Atlantic Ocean off Rockaway Beach, Queens.

Might we read the inset as an emblem of the isolation that Blake and Duncan underwent, as the world they perceived began to separate from the one inhabited by their friends? Reed’s longstanding interest in film — which took a literal turn when he inserted one of his paintings into a mock set based on Alfred Hitchcock’s diabolical film, *Vertigo* (1958) — is well known. That installation, *Two Bedrooms in San Francisco* (1992), could be viewed as the prelude to his interest in the work of Blake and Duncan. And to extend the connection even further, in *Vertigo*,

the character of Scottie (James Stewart) is in love with Judy Barton (Kim Novak), a woman who had impersonated his friend's wife, who died under mysterious circumstances. The ending is ambiguous: did Barton jump or accidentally fall to her death?



David Reed, “#715 (For Beccafumi—His Fall of the Rebel Angels)” (2017–19), acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 26 x 117 inches (© 2020 David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo by Rob McKeever, courtesy Gagostan)

“715 (For Beccafumi – His Fall of the Rebel Angels)” (2017-2019, acrylic, oil, and alkyd on polyester, 26 by 117 inches) is long and narrow, like a film strip, and panoramic in its sweep. Beccafumi painted two versions of this subject. The second, which is the one I believe Reed is alluding to, is in Siena; its vertical composition is divided into three levels, with the barely discernible fallen angels immersed in gloomy darkness across the bottom of the painting. The sword-wielding, golden-clad Saint Michael dominates the middle, and an extremely foreshortened God in a red robe raises his arm in judgment at the top. Beccafumi depicts God as an insubstantial being whose features are cloaked in inexplicable darkness, as impenetrable as the shadows engulfing the damned.

In his starkly horizontal painting, Reed has compressed red and semi-transparent black strokes into a turbulent field. A rounded violet inset containing a stenciled, blackish-purple brushstroke has been placed just off-center. The roiling forms across the horizontal field, at once insubstantial and palpable, suggest that Heaven and Hell and Earth are one, presided over by a dark presence. Or am I being too literal in my reading

Whatever the case, Reed has taken painting to a new place by expanding upon Pollock's all-over fields with cascades of lyrically riotous paint, while underscoring painting's reality as an artifice.