

Merlin James

Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

Evening Sun; Night; Big Landscape Painting; Windmill (Blue Sails) (all 2010–11). As their titles make plain, Merlin James's recent works were fashioned with landscape in mind. Their topography is filtered, however, through a baffle of layers, both material and metaphysical. Each of these relatively small works is stubbornly, mischievously paradoxical in its encasement. A frame presents its contents frontally. Yet they form, in fact, the back of another undressed canvas. Stretched over this exposed support, in turn, is a transparent scrim, which occasionally opens onto miniature wooden houses perched on a transverse slat; or a beaded necklace strung behind (in front of) the flimsy, see-through pane. In nearly every instance, paint appears smeared over the gossamer surface, only occasionally congealing into a house or a tree.

Unlike this somewhat tortuous description, the works are straightforward – which is not to say facile. There is humour here, amusement in the reversals of front and back, inside and out; pleasure in stripping painting to its skeleton, hanging back onto its exposed bones some playful flesh. Stripped bare, James's imagery conjures less Marcel Duchamp than Francis Picabia: something of the latter's *Danse de Saint-Guy (Tabac Rat)* (1919–20) – its spare and mordant anatomization of painting – lurks about James' work. Perhaps it is the practiced spontaneity of the acrylic daubs on the delicate gauze of polyester, but there is more of Picabia's wise-ass humour than, say, Joseph Cornell's dream-boxes or even Giulio Paolini's telescoped frames. In James's refusal to settle on any one medium or manner, there is also something of another self-appointed mentor, a fellow traveller of Picabia's Dada set: Serge Charchoune, about whom James (also an art historian in his own right) has carried out some incisive scholarship. Charchoune's intermittent adherence to everything from Cubism to Dada to Purism set into relief less his own studied ambivalence, than the frequent arbitrariness of those designations themselves.

James's work, too, vacillates between the cerebral and the basic stuff of paint. Staggered with 'ordinary' landscapes and other recent paintings – rendered less ambiguously on canvas – his assemblages beg the question of their larger place in his oeuvre. How do they bear upon this more painterly practice? Just as James's assemblages are not one-liners, his paintings refuse to play the dowdy foil to a more conceptual practice.

About this review

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By *Ara H. Merjian*



Merlin James, *Green, Blue and Grey Composition*, 2009, Acrylic and sawdust on canvas

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Their simplicity belies a subtle self-consciousness. Seemingly improvised in a breezy and impressionistic acrylic – featuring a light-dappled dome and gondola-filled waterway – one image inscribes its Romantic bona fides at lower left: the word ‘Veduta’ (View) admits the image’s duly Venetian commonplace on its very surface. *Building with Hoarding* (1989) stands as the painter’s earliest extant effort here, an acrylic landscape that bears all the moodiness of an oil painting. An earthy green abstraction at left is set against a dark pink sky, sheltering a few trees and a house with a Native American-looking face in profile, eyes closed and lips pursed. A couple of decades later finds the painter still accommodating basic forms to a tightlipped figuration. James’ non-abstract imagery over the years has focused on humble envelopes of space – building corners, box-like houses, a milk vase. The simple architectonics of *Toll Booth* (2000–06) stand in for that wider practice. Granular and stippled, the structure’s geometries appear both still and a vector of something less definite, like a site glimpsed through haze or reverie. Many of the works in the exhibition take landscape or weather as more shifting phenomena of form. *Anvil Cloud III* (2005–09) and *Cove* (2007–11) have held James’ attention for several years of work, as if waiting for their components – condensed water or the side of a hill – to congeal or disperse. The paintings themselves, in any case, persist in that expectation, to notable effect. The diminutive house in *Cove* echoes those inserted into James’s contemporary assemblages, suggesting the rapport between their respective abeyances: coy landscapes that refuse, in plain sight, to come into view.

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Frieze

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