

The Paintings of Lloyd Martin: On or off the grid?

By: Henry McMahon

The exhibition *Lloyd Martin: Mettere*, recently on view at Stephen Haller Gallery, in Chelsea, reminds us that an artist's adherence to strict formal parameters need not keep him from pushing his aesthetic in new directions. Martin, a Providence-based painter who has been showing with Haller for a decade, makes paintings composed entirely of vertical and horizontal rectangles. His parameter is the grid. But he has moved away from large rectangles of color in favor of narrow horizontal bands, and has begun painting with increasingly bright hues, particularly on the warm end of his palette. These shifts are more than stylistic, as they have taken the artist's work from a somewhat recognizable transcription of his motif and brought it closer to the realm of pure abstraction. As such, they raise important questions on the nature of abstraction, and what is gained and lost as abstract painting moves further from its sources in the perceptible world.

Martin has long taken for his subject the decaying factory buildings that surround his Providence studio. His work from years past hewed relatively closely to this source material. Works like *Finestrae (7)*, (2006), and *Circuit*, (2008), are abstractions, to be sure, but the former, its bands of color forming vertical rectangles around grey grounds, looks very much like a window, just as the latter, its thin black rectangles sealing off an architectural space, looks very much like a plan for electrical wiring. The artist's arrangement of colors and shapes in such paintings appears to have closely corresponded to his visual experience of a certain building or interior. Like Josephine Halvorson, whose work displays an affinity for capturing the particular qualities of specific painted objects and surfaces, Martin's work from this period seems rooted in his desire for pictorial truth.



LLOYD MARTIN, *Large Mete*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery, NY

The paintings in *Mettere*, by contrast, with their high-keyed palette and increased use of narrow horizontal building blocks, seem geared more toward an experiential truthfulness. Gone are the overt references to structures or forms, replaced by nothing but bands of variously modulated color.

How do these new works reference the same motif? Helpfully, the gallery maintains a collection of the painter's source photographs on hand, which reveal just how much the work is informed by the artist's surroundings. Exterior shots show brick structures, patched in places with cement blocks, terracotta tiles, sheets of plywood and particle-board. Interior shots reveal raw spaces: exposed pine studs, light blue insulation panels, and off-white drywall. In the windows, mismatched panes of glass are held together by lead muntins, painted shades of industrial green. The light that passes through each window does so in accordance with the properties of each one. It is no wonder that this motif has sustained Martin's interest for so long. His factories are beautiful and complex lessons in perception; the properties of their various materials are made all the more explicit by their relationship to each other.

The paintings in *Mettere*, lacking the obvious figurative or architectural reference of Martin's earlier work, rely on establishing the kinds of color and surface relationships that are evident in his photographs. Martin is a dexterous and versatile paint handler. His paintings contain striking and varied contrasts between and among their various components. Brush marks of all speeds are present. Thick paint sits on top of thin. Thin paint washes like watercolor over thick. Stains of fluid paint bump up against hard walls of more viscous stuff. In some places, drips bisect horizontal blocks. In others, blocks divorce the beginning of a drip from its destination. In *Large Mete*, (2010), bright bands of heavily saturated cadmiums are interspersed with cool white ones. A central rectangle of crimson picks up some of the pale blue-white from the rectangle below it. The border incised in the paint between these two rectangles is hard, but not impenetrable.

The artist's love of the medium is evident in his fantastic array of colors and textures. Their sheer diversity brings to mind the work of many others. Individual blocks could be miniature Richter squeegees or Joan Mitchells. A rectangle in the lower left corner of *Large Mete* could be a bit from de Kooning on Long Island. Its neighbor could be Monet at Giverny.

Having embraced an abstract language in which the meaning of his work is derived solely from the plastic properties of his paint, Martin has liberated himself from the need to use recognizable imagery. As he develops this language and finds ever more ways to put color down, who knows where further liberties may take him. Maybe even off the grid.

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