



Harold Ancart

Art reviews in NYC 2015,
by John Ganz

art reviews in nyc

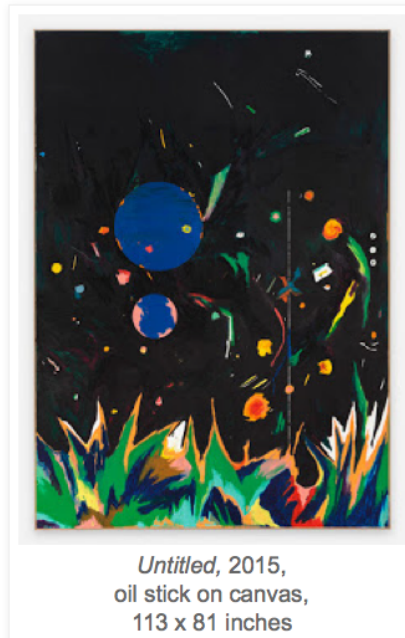
Tuesday, June 16, 2015

Harold Ancart at CLEARING

The modernist canon continues to inspire contemporary painters, even if they don't take its pretensions seriously. In his current show at CLEARING, Harold Ancart raids the larder: one can see Clyfford Still's scratchy textures and jagged rips of color, and streaks of Kandinsky's theosophical elan. The result, however, is more penetrating than the by-now conventional interplay of cynical send-up and nostalgic homage.

His large landscapes—most of which are monolithic verticals—are installed in intimidating succession and tower over the viewer. We are firmly in Abstract Expressionist territory, another legacy of Ancart's close study of Still. This might be cause for concern. After all, Still is an emblem of the Ab Ex period's worst excesses. He was prolific, but oppressively single-minded and almost monotonously intense in his pursuit of tragic grandeur. Cy Twombly once dismissed him as the "American Wagner," which nicely summarizes both Still's bombast and his provincialism.

But provincialism is not a problem for the Belgian-born Mr. Ancart, and the drollness of his paintings wards off suggestions of Still's grandiosity. Mr. Ancart is not interested in dated painterly ideologies; he borrows these formal and stylistic accomplishments in the service of his own idiosyncratic sensibility. The best of his paintings simultaneously create and negate space, switching between an exterior and interior sense. You cannot be sure if you are looking at vistas of alien worlds and orbiting moons or at the half-lit undergrowth of a dense jungle. The resulting feeling is uncanny rather than sublime. The work recalls odd moments of childhood reverie, brought on by binging on cartoons or reading at length about outer space. The playfulness of the oil-stick drawing is belied by its strenuous application, and in his paintings there is something hostile to life: a vacuum that pushes you out rather than sucking you in.



Untitled, 2015,
oil stick on canvas,
113 x 81 inches

This pervading sense of air-tightness signals Mr. Ancart's awareness that stylistic conceits, even those deployed in the service of transcendence or pathos, can easily collapse into solipsistic mannerism. In admitting as much, Mr. Ancart manages to include in his new work's monumental scale an element of self-deprecating humor. Not an easy accomplishment.