



Harold Ancart: Traveling Light
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2020
(author: Susan Harris)
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THE BROOKLYN RAIL



Harold Ancart, *Untitled*, 2020. © Harold Ancart / SABAM, Brussels. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

Harold Ancart is a Belgian-born, New York-based painter who seems to have catapulted into the limelight in recent years. His first one-person show at David Zwirner in New York fills two of Zwirner’s adjacent 19th Street locations with large, dazzling paintings, all created in 2020, that provide ample opportunity to consider his contribution to the recent reappearance of a familiar conversation concerning painting. As galleries launch their 2020–21 season throughout the city and we carefully return to some semblance of “normal” life, there has been talk, too, about a return to painting—a claim made many times during this and the last century. The title of Ancart’s

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exhibition, *Traveling Light*, seems a wryly humorous nod to this general situation, given that travel has all but ceased and people have turned to literature, music, streaming media, and art as alternative means of transport. However, the title also speaks directly to the paintings on display here, which take the element of light as a primary subject.



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The first painting one encounters can be seen from the street, through the gallery's window. Unlike the other works in the show, in which depictions of nature predominate, the surface of this painting is largely taken up by a white, rectangular façade pressed up to the frontal picture plane, interrupted only by a double-paned window framed in blue. The crisply drawn lines of the rectangular wall, the painted slab on which it sits, and the horizon form a composition of geometries staged in an ambiguous desert landscape set ablaze by the sunset. All of this is unified by a smudgy painterliness that is

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shared by the other works on view. A painted sculpture on a plinth in the gallery's anteroom seems another anomaly in the show. A horizontal, frescoed, concrete slab into which a series of small steps and a dark, rectangular basin are cut; this sculptural swimming pool was previously included in an online exhibition Zwirner presented this spring.



Installation view: Harold Ancart: *Traveling Light*, David Zwirner, New York, 2020. Courtesy David Zwirner.

The viewer is drawn into immersive experiences of both painting and the natural world in the next gallery. On one side of the space is a triptych of the sea; on the other side is a triptych of the mountains. Both works are massively-scaled testimonials to the transformative power of nature and the materiality of painting. A strong horizon line at precisely the same height on both sides of the gallery grounds and reinforces the visual and experiential cohesiveness of the room as one moves back and around, and back and around again to take in the installation as a whole. While painted bands of

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dark, mottled sea contrast starkly with painted bands of light, sandy desert and mountain in the lower portions of the canvases, the skies in both sea and mountain landscapes are similar in their palette, their palpable and agitated physicality, and in their refusal to be clearly pinned down to either abstraction or representation.



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Mammoth images of individual trees line the walls of the west gallery. Painted between Ancart's Brooklyn studio and a provisional outdoor working space in Los Angeles, to which he traveled during lockdown, the images read simultaneously as magnifications of colossal trees and explorations into the pure expressiveness and materiality of paint. Bright holes of sky pierce bravura passages of dark and light pigment, as Ancart's deftly handled paint translates his memory of light and sky flashing through the gaps between trees on a drive in France. Despite this anecdotal reference, Ancart seems to

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take pleasure in shattering distinctions between figuration and abstraction, foreground and background, form and color. The colossal scale of the trees and their rich colors, untethered from the real world, offer impressionistic, rather than literal, depictions of the light, space, air, and surrounding flora. *Harold Ancart: Traveling Light* provides an immersive, pleasurable experience—a potent dose of both painting and nature that together serve as the perfect antidote for COVID-insular, quarantined existence.