

Marcia Hafif at Baumgartner

Since her involvement with the Radical Painting group of the late 1970s and early '80s (which included Joseph Marioni and Olivier Mosset, among others) Marcia Hafif has been concerned with the possibilities of monochrome painting. The genre calls attention to basics: materials, format, application. In her "Glaze Paintings," which she has been making intermittently for some years, Hafif complicates and enlivens the sometimes dreary austerity of monochrome by an unlikely courtship of the sensuousness that is usually considered its opposite. Her straightforward procedure is to apply a pair of unmodulated layers of differently colored glazes – using paint straight from the tube thinned to translucence with the addition of medium – over thickly brushed, bright white ground. The depth and the clarity of the commercial colors are preserved, while the light strikes the eye in a range of volumes, sometimes thumping and sonorous, sometimes whispering and ambiguous. Glaze painting: Flesh Tint/Indian Yellow approximates a pale reddish ocher, upfront and firmly holding its ground; Glaze Painting: Indian Yellow/Rose Madder is incandescent, a window onto a fathomless void.

Disembodied slabs of color with no referent but the paint manufacturer's color chart, these 12 works are mostly from 2005 and measure 16 x 20 inches, though two, both 2004, are 18 inches square. The stretchers are of a uniform thickness – about an inch – and the untouched white canvas around their edges attests to the controlled, empirical nature of the project. Glaze Painting: Cobalt Violet/Manganese Blue is among those distinguished by slightly denser pigment around the perimeter, where the brush meets increasing resistance as the taut canvas approaches the stretcher. Something in the work's matter-of-fact fabrication calls to mind Duchamp's quip that, as tubes of paint are readymades, any painting at all thus qualifies as an "assisted readymade"; certainly Hafif's painting is more "retinal" than the Dada master would countenance.

The more neutral of the paintings are particularly sensitive to the viewer's position. In Glaze Painting: Flesh Tint/Cerulean Blue, the slightly variegated density of blue glaze allows the warm underpainting to bloom through, looking stormy, even atmospheric, from a few paces away. On the wall opposite was its inverse, Glaze Painting: Cerulean Blue/Flesh Tint. When viewed head-on, the resulting gray approximates that of the gallery's concrete floor; from an angle, the relative prominence of the top glaze imparts a distinctly ruddy shimmer.

The horizontal format is a departure for the artist; hung at generous intervals, the paintings promoted a sweeping glance of the room, a scanning movement that was arrested by the two 18-inch-square paintings hung near the desk. The metallic pigment in one of these, Glaze Painting: Sap Green/Gold (2004), is alien to the orthodox palette, but the painting maintains its equilibrium, simultaneously veiled and ingenuous.

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