

## Galleries

# Jacob Kainen, Abstractly

## At Middendorf, the Painter's Transcendent Expressionism

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The recent luminous paintings of Jacob Kainen all have titles. But in Kainen's art, titles are essentially meaningless; appended to the works after completion, they only serve to sum up a highly personal mood or visual impression for the artist. So forget about the titles.

Kainen, who will be 80 in December, is one of the last of the old guard of Washington's abstract painters. But he is a painter in the tradition of the New York School, which he was involved with for many years, rather than the Washington Color School. And so, like the late work of Gorky, Rothko or Clyfford Still, Kainen's paintings, a number of which are on view at the Middendorf Gallery, evolve as pure abstractions; no preconceived ideas or subjects inspire them. The business of manipulating paint on canvas is the essence of his art, and even for veterans like Kainen, that's plenty. Nonobjective artists find more than sufficient room for expression and content in wielding a brush without resorting to the depiction of specific objects—which is to say, anything that bears a specific title.

Kainen knows all the painterly tricks, and half the fun of looking at his work is in noting the various effects he achieves. Although best known for his feathery dry-brush technique and use of opaque white and gray values, the artist scrapes and scumbles, glazes or spreads paint with his fingers, depending on what the work demands. And when his efforts are successful—as they generally are—the results can be sublime.

Needless to say, Kainen's kind of painting—relying entirely on a highly refined sense of visual "rightness"—is no longer much in vogue. For the last 20 years or so younger artists have dismissed such work as "elitist" and "inaccessible" to the common viewer, and only the German neo-expressionists, despite their figurative approach, really have anything to offer by way of sheer painterly exuberance. You can't help but wonder why, because in the presence of Kainen's better compositions, you feel transported. Their unabashed beauty and unearliness transcend political or social considerations, which are the linchpins of most contemporary (read representational) art. Sure, it's possible to see in their pastel colors, blurry ovoid and tendril-like forms views of a misty, jungly world—perhaps the surface of some strange planet with two or more suns shimmering indistinctly overhead. But that's a misleading simile; merely an attempt to describe them to you.

Kainen had his fling with figurative painting about 30 years ago. But he's back to pure abstraction, and in this genre he has few living peers. A truly fine nonobjective painting is an entity all to itself, an expression of art at its most basic. It needs neither title nor simile—any more than a glorious sunset does. Certainly, we call a sunset a "sunset" because it connotes a particular action. But even the term is misleading: The sun isn't going down; the Earth is revolving until it is out of



Manon Cleary's "Mystery I," at Osuna Gallery.

sight. Still, facts have little bearing on the sheer beauty of the phenomenon, and nothing whatever to do with the innate aesthetic impulse that enables us to enjoy it. It's this aesthetic upon which Kainen's new paintings depend. Come into the gallery as if you were about to sit down and enjoy a good sunset—or a moody thunderstorm, or the taste of a fine wine. Ignore the titles and enjoy Kainen's paintings. They're splendid.

## James Hilleary at Carroll

In contrast to Kainen's generally heavy, opaque applications of paint and careful attention to texture, veteran Washington painter James Hilleary works in the stained-canvas tradition of the color school painters.

A number of recent works on view at the Susan Conway Carroll Gallery reveal just how close are Hilleary's ties to the work of his former colleagues Howard Mehring, Kenneth Noland, Paul Reed and Morris Louis. Like theirs, Hilleary's art is fundamentally about transparencies, pigment as a metaphor for pure light. The paintings here are particularly interesting in that he has begun to make a distinct break with the style and format of his earlier work, which for many years was concerned with large-format, "fountainlike" compositions reminiscent of and aesthetically related to Mehring's and Louis's "veil" paintings. These were generally composed along a series of arching, rainbow-like patterns radiating from the center or bending inward from either side of the canvas.

Only one picture in this collection recalls such work to any degree, a painting in deep yellows and amber-browns titled "Serenissima." Divided in the center, this horizontal work is composed around a series of radiating arches resembling the double-vaulted ceiling of a 14th-century cathedral. But the other works are far less typical, concerned with fields of regular, flowerlike patterns separately framed as triptychs or, in one instance, organized on the wall to resemble a rough cross.

Typical of these new pieces is one titled "Florentine," a triptych of two small and one larger panels; a harmony of mottled blue, lavender and pale rose. Hilleary's works of this nature are interesting and attractive. But overall they come off as rather static next to larger canvases such as the lovely "Japanese Bridge." This striking composition in turquoises and vivid thalo

greens dominates the entire gallery. It is something of a compromise between the old and new styles, incorporating the fairly rigid structure of the earlier paintings with the growing concern for flat fields of the recent efforts. By way of tightening the composition, Hilleary has divided the vertical "Bridge" horizontally with a distinct horizon line, and edged the entire composition with a band of pale blue-green. This serves to render the piece more traditionally windowlike.

The "Japanese Bridge" of the title probably refers to the bridge across Monet's famous lily pond at Giverny, which Hilleary visited last year as a reprise of an influential journey he made there 35 years ago. Certainly his tour, which also took him to Venice, had considerable impact on his approach to these paintings. "Bridge" successfully evokes the play of reflections on still water, and the haunting silences of memory.

## Manon Cleary at Osuna

Preminent Washington realist Manon Cleary has been the central subject of her own paintings for years. A complete retrospective of her work would show in bald and usually honest detail not only how the artist has aged physically (she virtually always depicts herself nude), but also how her perceptions of the world have grown or altered.

Working largely from photographs, Cleary generally sets her symbolically autobiographical compositions in semi-darkened rooms, in which shafts of light, partially illuminate various components meticulously arranged in shifting shadows. As her one-woman show of recent works at the Osuna Gallery attests, she is a masterful painter, handling pigment in a way largely forgotten by all but the most sedulous students of Renaissance painting. Cleary's stark chiaroscuro technique is strongly reminiscent of Caravaggio's, with its sensitive use of deep, glowing, Indian reds and ambers, and translucent flesh tones.

In other words, it's hard not to be seduced by Cleary's images.

The artist's recent paintings differ from those in her last show several years ago in that they are more overtly symbolic, more intentionally ritualistic. Against the decorative green, red and gold wall motif of the famous Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (circa 50 B.C.)—a purposefully evocative setting for this "Mystery" series—Cleary poses herself in various quiescent positions with the bones and skulls of animals. Like a sorceress, she holds aloft a string of vertebrae, or reaches out a slender hand toward a bleached pelvis. In these works the artist's face is often partially or wholly concealed, her head bowed or her back to us. And in one titled "Mystery IV," her features, half revealed under straggling hair, hint at premonitions of her own skin-stripped skull.

These paintings are both morbid and erotic. There is a further reason for setting them in a re-created Villa of the Mysteries: That hall was the seat of a thriving Dionysian secret cult; a cult of, among other things, sexuality and phallic worship. The original hall is worn and ancient, its mural-decorated walls stained and cracked. But in only one of these pictures does Cleary actually describe the effects of age on the fresco. For the rest, the ravages of time are clearest on her own features, and hinted at by the symbolic presence of the bones.

Jacob Kainen: *Recent Paintings*, at the Middendorf Gallery, 2009 Columbia Rd. NW, through Dec. 2

James Hilleary—*Abstractionist Abroad*, at the Susan Conway Carroll Gallery, 1058 Thomas Jefferson St. NW, through Nov. 11

Manon Cleary: *"Mysteries,"* at the Osuna Gallery, 1919 Q St. NW, through Nov. 25