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“Some of the paintings are smarter than me”: Daniel Levine Talks Monochrome

by Noah Dillon

Daniel Levine talked with Noah Dillon after the January 9 opening of “The Way Around,” his show of monochrome abstract paintings on view at Churner and Churner through February 22.



Photo: Sylvie Ball

“Seriously?” So someone had written in the guestbook at Churner and Churner shortly after the opening of Daniel Levine’s first solo exhibition there, “The Way Around.” Levine’s monochrome paintings can be difficult. All of them here are hues of white and although their facture and size vary they are nonetheless alliterative and austere in their obsessive working and reconsideration. The question may not be surprising, but neither is it an inert pronouncement. Levine is eager to engage with and talk to it. In speaking with him recently, he told me, “I like that. It can go any number of ways.” For Levine, “Seriously?” is a conversation starter.

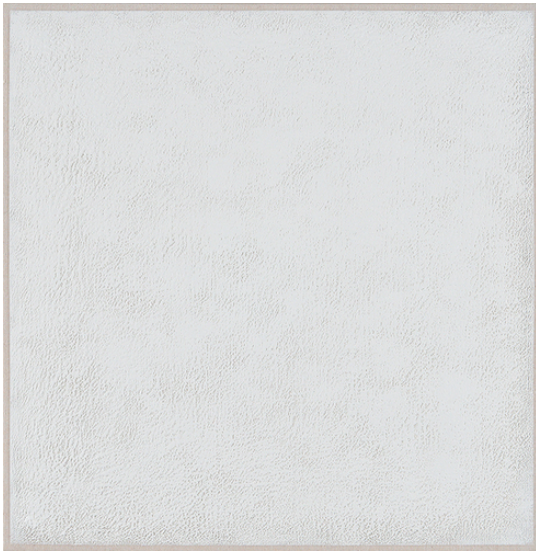
He has a predilection for talking around subjects, employing metaphors about music and photography and history (both personal and cultural) to make his point. That tendency is in part reflected in his choice of the exhibition’s title: “The Way Around” connotes circumnavigation of obstacles as well as a directions to follow or explore, the artist’s process in his studio and the way an audience interrogates an image.

Monochrome painting can be forbidding for a lot of people. It’s hard to enter that exceptionally reductive space, emotionally or intellectually. And it’s hard to say immediately what the important differences are between Malevich’s *White on White* (1918), Rauschenberg’s polyptychal 1951 white paintings, Ellsworth Kelly’s shaped aluminum panels, much of Robert Ryman’s whole career, and the paintings that Levine’s been making since the early 1990s. But simply by thinking about what white monochromes by each of those artists look like, one can begin to note distinct differences fully apprehensible by their formal, temporal, and ideological qualities. Those subtle valences are essential, and so too the differences between two white paintings by a given artist. It takes some patience and openness though.

The show comprises several discrete lines of investigation for Levine, distinguished largely by each painting’s execution. The differences between a painting like *Untitled III* (2013), of one series, and *Hester* (2012-13), from another, are visible in their size and the way the paint is applied—*Hester*’s flat opacity and *Untitled III*’s large expanse of seemingly woven gossamer. The paintings are, despite first glances, time consuming and slow, and these variations in execution mean something. For instance, how does one convey a complex idea with only the sparest means?

One can assume that “Seriously?” asks whether Levine has made the same white painting over and over. He has affirmatively not. He’s said, only half-facetiously, that, “To start with, the decision to make a monochrome painting is a bad decision. And everything proceeds from there.” But it would also seem that what follows first from the initial choice to make a monochromatic painting—naturally and automatically—is that every subsequent decision is pivotal.

Levine regards the three rudimentary issues of his paintings as “structure, surface, and support”—the intellectual and emotional foundation, the paint, and the paint’s cotton and panel backing, respectively. He takes great care in thinking about what the possibilities are in tackling each of the three elements in a given painting. Whether the paint appears as



thick impasto or thin as frost, he typically applies 15-20 layers, using various whites on cotton. The various techniques create different effects, different grades of opacity, thickness, and texture. The dimensions of his canvases are always just off square, which adds to their visual dynamism. Levine's edges are taped, leaving a uniform margin of a few millimeters on each side. He carefully selects titles for each named work (only eight of the 19 on display here are untitled).

He puts a lot of multivalent content into his titles, registering them on cultural, art historical, and personal levels simultaneously. But he aims to keep them open enough for the audience to develop fruitful misunderstandings. Levine's excited by the meanings people attach to his work, when they see it as something other than what he intends. The flexibility of interpretation, and the capacity of his titles to allude and point, allows Levine to direct viewers and keep them long engaged with the work and thinking about what it means to call one white painting *Hex* (2011-13) and another *The Idle Hours* (2010-12).

There are many entry points in Levine's paintings and more appear in the comparison of one work with another. He's said before that his paintings aren't as apparently "friendly" as other artists', though many viewers at the show's opening remarked that the paintings are peaceful and meditative. Although that sounds contradictory, "The Way Around" provides strong evidence that rigor and tranquility aren't *de facto* incompatible.

Daniel Levine, Untitled #3, 2009-2012. Oil on cotton, 713-7/8 x 13-3/4 inches.

Courtesy of the Artist and Churner & Churner

His relationship with the work remains a little unsettled. "Where do I fit in?" he asked, adding, "Some of the paintings are smarter than me. I don't know what to do with that." Although it's hard to deal with, as a person, work being smarter than its creator is something to strive for. Looking at the paintings, standing first to one side, the middle, then the other side, various distances, squinting, one has to really think about these white planes for a long time.



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