

Vaughn Spann's Dynamic "The Heat Lets us Know We're Alive" exhibit at Almine Rech

By David Graver
January 27, 2020



Photograph Courtesy Almine Rech

In the Upper East Side outpost of the Almine Rech gallery, New Haven-based artist Vaughn Spann presents 12 distinct works that converse with one another and the space itself. Oscillating between abstract and figurative painting (with swathes of mixed media nuance), the body of work (all made in 2019) tackles dualism, identity and the human experience. Entitled *The Heat Lets us Know We're Alive*, the sold-out exhibition (on now through 22 February) marks another milestone for the painter as it demonstrates his ability to captivate across numerous artistic styles.

For the sake of categorization, one can classify these stylistic explorations into three styles: dualist portraiture, abstract X pieces, and purely textural works. "I'm deeply invested in pluralism," Spann says. "I feel most engaged when I allow my practice to steer me in directions I need to go, whether the works have a relationship or not isn't as interesting to me." While he believes that's up to the viewer, he does see a connection running between all the works.

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“I was using the idea of heat as a way of merging the mind, body and soul,” he says. “We feel hot when we are angry, or frustrated; oftentimes people use the expression ‘seeing red’ when we are over-worked and need a break; we travel to be in warm tropical places; when we are in love and feel passionate, our bodies poetically feel warm and fuzzy. This show was a way for me to think about the senses in that regard through a series of moments. Some tranquil, some symbolic, some loud... but allowing those things to embody our existence as humans.”

Whether it’s his figures’ garments or the layers of paint and Terry cloth carpet slices in his abstract works, Spann’s use of color carries meaning and mood. “I do gravitate toward saturated colors as well as black; I enjoy the intensity of those combinations,” he says. “In some of my silk diptychs from the show, I’m playing with varying degrees of transparency with an interest in luminosity. As the viewer, you are looking at these paintings through various layers of pigment that are competing with one another, but finding harmony at the same time. That leads to a type of visual vibration that is also deeply meditative.”

The dual-headed characters might be the most mesmerizing works in the exhibit. Details—and their meanings—continue to unfurl with each gaze. That said, “These works are traditional in the sense that they are oil paintings on canvas,” Spann explains. “I typically work from my imagination but use anatomical references and will map out poses/scenes via sketches beforehand.”

“Ideas for new paintings can come from a plethora of sources,” he continues. “Sometimes I might be referencing a place I’ve traveled, a conversation I’ve had; other times it could be a book that I’m reading or even something I saw someone wearing down the street. I like to keep things open. I’m consistently centering both real and imagined spaces as a way of conjuring poetry and metaphor for these black bodies.” And that’s another through-line of all the pieces: an undeniable poetry.