ALMINE RECH

Justin Adian
Heaven on the highway

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Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present the second solo exhibition by Justin Adian with the gallery.

For the past few years Justin Adian has been busy refining his practice. He works painting by painting, moving from one to the next based on the aesthetic implications he intuits in the most recent ones. Deeply engrossed in the physical labor of making each of them, ideas arise for Adian as a side-effect of his engagement with every aspect of their execution. He has, for example, recently traded the unstructured pliability of a foam support for the still buoyant, but more cleanly articulated curves made possible by a felt one.

Adian's use of felt betrays his interest in Joseph Beuys, who was famous for using the material. More precisely, they indicate the impact on Adian of the particular model of painting as object advanced by the German process-based painters who emerged from Beuys's class at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the 1960s: Blinky Palermo, Sigmar Polke, and Imi Knoebel. Adian is fascinated how Beuys—who was never a painter per se—was so influential for a generation of painters, who have in turn had a big impact on contemporary art, including Adian's. For example, in the creative placement of the work. Palermo's work, to give one example, often extended across multiple planes of its architectural container, as in his wall paintings. Similarly, Adian likes to position his work in atypical parts of the room, such as the corner, a space he continually returns to as a favored site, pushing the traditional boundary between painting and sculpture, a distinction which is also queried by the emphatic volumes of his panels.

The most recent development is for Adian to put a canvas wrapped panel behind, and extending just beyond, the edge of certain shapes, accentuating them. This developed out of an unintended effect Adian noticed, where the painted sides and backs of his shaped canvases sometimes cast a colored halo on the wall around them. Embracing this effect, Adian made it literal. What seems at first to be a glow given off by the panels, amounts to a physical, as well as colored, silhouette of them. This is not unrelated to Robert Rauschenberg's innovative backlit works on plexiglass, which used actual light to render literal the luminosity painting has historically suggested through illusionistic means.

Adian always keeps a notebook close at hand in which he makes sketches of prospective pieces. These are very schematic, just general ideas for shapes, and how certain of these might be paired to comprise a successful work. Accordingly, a lot changes in the translation of these sketches to finished works. Not least the relative imaginative freedom of drawing meeting the pragmatic material possibilities of canvas stretched over felt and a shaped panel. These physical conditions, along with scale, determine much of the work's ultimate appearance.

Despite the playfulness inherent to Adian's vocabulary of plush organic forms and bright pastel colors, and even the inclusion of glitter in some paintings, he is always concerned with getting his work to operate successfully as abstract painting, which is to say, in relation to the formal issues that abstract painters have grappled with over the past century or so. With his vocabulary, as pop-inflected as it is minimal, there is the danger for the work to get too cartoon-like. For example, for a circle to look like a speech bubble. This aligns him with Joe Bradley, who also walks this fine line in his shaped canvas works.

There is, however, room for traces of the hand-made aspect of the works to come through. Adian handles every stage of the making himself. This means that lines in Adian's works are always irregular and hand-rendered, never getting too straight or geometric. There is a bodily relationship to such hand-made lines, which—when combined with the pliability of his panels—means that we relate to them in terms of our own bodies, considering the way that one panel touches another as akin to how one person exists in proximity another, not unlike the questioning provoked by the curious fiberglass casts Bruce Nauman has made of parts of his body.

This is not the first time that Adian has made use of stacked panels in his work, but it is his most emphatic. For Adian this is a way to evoke the compression of information that has long been a concern of his work, and also of contemporary society and culture more broadly. To layer is to both conceal and condense information, but it is also to nuance it and render it more complex. For these new accentuating panels are both physical and illusory, an actual object with a certain profile, and something that we read as a two-dimensional plane of color. The kind of information that Adian wants to deliver is, of course, painterly in nature—formal and pictorial, as his work remains fundamentally a juxtaposition of particular colors and shapes in space, delivered via his signature eccentric supports, with their soft materiality.

- Alex Bacon