ALMINE RECH

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet
So Far, So Close

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Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present 'So Far, So Close', an exhibition of new work by Brussels-based artist Jean-Baptiste Bernadet. His first solo exhibition since joining the gallery last year, Bernadet will stage a presentation anchored by examples from his celebrated series of 'Fugue' paintings.

Bernadet produces these paintings through a deceptively simple technique. He builds up a field by taking a thin brush and progressively and systematically, if always intuitively, laying down a flurry of quick marks in his bright, almost pastel palette of oils mixed with wax and alkyd. There are slight variations in the application of each mark; the overall effect, however, is towards unity, with the field being built up in an all-over fashion. Bernadet's goal is to prevent the eye from being able to definitively locate any points of focus such that, as he paints, the artist constantly adjusts any passages that seem to jump out at him. For this reason, any natural analogues suggested in the *Fugue paintings*, especially of landscape or sky, exist in terms of experience rather than iconography. His carpets of undulating color vibrate in the eye suggest how one might feel standing in a landscape, a light breeze rusting the grass, and causing a pond to sparkle, rather than directly indexing the literal view one would have.

In making the *Fugue paintings*, Bernadet has always been directed by the way a given work has taken shape in the process of making it. This most recent iteration of the *Fugues* shows that Bernadet has developed such a degree of both sophistication and familiarity with the act of making this body of work that he can begin to diversify individual paintings in terms of both facture and color. While the new paintings retain the unity integral to the all-over, optical orientation characteristic of the series, they do so with a less tightly knit fabric of painted marks. In a related way the paintings now take on a greater diversity of color, both within each canvas, and from one canvas to another. The older works, while always built up out of a combination of red, yellow, green, blue, orange and purple, often tended towards one or another overall shade—a pale yellow or green, or a strident pink, for example, much like the musical compositions the title *Fugue* alludes to. Now, for example, in certain paintings the blue takes over, something which before Bernadet had accomplished only rarely.

The *Fugue paintings* operate as a center point or fulcrum for Bernadet's practice as a whole. On one level this is formal, in terms of the artist's interest in color, and in an art historical tradition of coloristic, optical painting with both American and European antecedents from Claude Monet, Eduard Vuillard, Odilon Redon in the past to Josh Smith and Joe Bradley in the present. On a conceptual level, these paintings exemplify Bernadet's interest in exploring and questioning the nature of perception in our moment. Like his forebears in color painting, Bernadet uses the ways that colors, and their interaction, both activate the senses and allow the viewer to reflect back on the nature of that sensory activation, something which we realize in conditioned by both us and the artist being products of a certain time and place.

In our moment images and the colors and forms that comprise them have become part of the circulatory system of the networked condition, taking on new meanings and valences. Thus Bernadet is drawn to explore, among other things, how the colors particular to the backlit, liquid crystal materiality of the screen, saturated and artificial as they are, affect this circulation. It is for this reason that he remains a non-representational painter, knowing that this form of meta-critique is far more effective than any micromanagement of specific images. Bernadet extends this ethos throughout his practice, not only in the way that sprays of vibrant color spill across ceramic surfaces as much as canvas ones, but also in how in such three dimensional works he explores the collapse of image and object. Color not only destabilizes the contours that establish an object in space, but so too do the material deformations inherent to clay and the firing process.

For example in a new body of work included in the exhibition Bernadet applies patches of color, much as he starts the *Fugues,* and then uses a roller to spread black paint in linear tracks across the painting surface. This fragments that surface into facets; both revealing and negating Bernadet's signature atmospheric bursts of color, troubling our easy optical access to what seems to lie behind those mechanically rendered black marks. In the process showing how Bernadet moves forward by both expanding and revising his practice.

—Alex Bacon