

Alexis Portilla's Layered Color and Circular Forms Create "Surface Tension"

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by Pat Rogers

Abstract paintings by Alexis Portilla compel and surprise. There's something about the quality of the brushstrokes, the layers of paint and glaze creating depth, and the use of forms that can conjure dreams of a cityscape that feels like his work belongs to both contemporary abstraction and the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. This is no accident—the impact is just what the artist is going for.

Paintings by Portilla are the subject of a solo show at Birnam Wood Galleries in Chelsea (closing today) with paintings continuing on view at the gallery's East Hampton location as part of a group show of gallery artists. The solo show, "Alexis Portilla: Surface Tension," which was extended through December, presents both a history and the current attentions of Portilla and the gradual changes that link series to series. Staying constant is Portilla's commitment to layered color that creates depth and a beckoning narrative in the recurring forms of rounded squares and squared ovals that activate the compositions.



“Fireside” by Alexis Portilla, 2014. Oil on canvas, 40 x 54 inches.

Between the two elements, it is the creation of unique colors that captivates even more than the forms born of self-reflection that appear to occupy the surface or are emerging to rise from a deep lake of color.

“The colors are not achieved by mixing,” said Portilla. “There’s a lot of depth created and the colors are direct layers on layers. The color should be the most distinctive part of the work and make an impression beyond the surface images.”

Separately, gallerist Patrick Dawson spoke of the relationship between the forms and color in Portilla’s work. “The almost square shapes and the squared oval shapes that operate as a figure—a character that rises prominently above the thick color drenched in the stew beneath it.”



“The Archer” by Alexis Portilla, 2014. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches.

Portilla’s paintings are marked by an expressiveness that is atmospheric and almost narrative. His paintings rise from the depths of well-considered planning and intellectual consideration; Portilla reaches unique coloration through careful layering while letting the process of painting and exploration reign free. Reacting to a 2008 review in ArtNews, Portilla agreed that the forms in his work reflect the cityscapes of New York, his longtime residence and location of his painting studio.

“I thought it was perceptive,” said Portilla of critic Meredith Mendelsohn’s observation. “I’ve been living in New York for a long time and it’s natural for an artist to absorb images from the place they see daily.” Going further, he said that while the incorporation is not conscious, the imagery reflects a “...saturated image of this city, and not an observation of what I saw.”



“Chords” by Alexis Portilla, 2014. Oil on canvas, 84 x 70 inches.

The new work exhibited by Birnam Woods was painted expressly for the show. They include canvases including red and chameleon lemon, colors that are new to Portilla’s palette. Gray and gray-greens feature prominently in the exhibition. Earlier works, exhibited in Chelsea, reflect prior fascination with bright colors and dark tones but contain the same elements of lush layered color and figures that seem to provide easy ways into the compositions.



“Midheaven” by Alexis Portilla, 2014. Oil on canvas, 56 x 56 inches.

While planning, considering and thoughtfulness are integral parts of Portella’s process, so is relaxing into the exploration that creating the paintings can bring. Discovering the different ways color and shades appear through the multiple layers of glaze continues to fascinate and intrigue Portilla. So does solving the modernist problems of painting on a single flat surface.

“There’s a combination of a lot of the familiar and it makes it easier to experiment,” he said. “I have a method of applying paint and a sort of composition as a structure and the richness of color as goal. I don’t know how I’m going to get there...that’s what keeps me tuned in, to experiment more. It’s a fuel for me.”



“Glyph” by Alexis Portilla, 2014. Oil on wood, 24 x 22 inches.

BASIC FACTS: “Alexis Portilla: Surface Tension” remains on view through December 20, 2014 at Birnam Wood Galleries in Chelsea. Paintings by Alex Portilla are also currently on view at the gallery’s East Hampton location and will continue to be exhibited there. www.birnamwoodart.com.

In Chelsea, Birnam Wood Galleries is located at 514 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011. In East Hampton, the gallery is located at 48 Park Place, East Hampton, NY 11937.

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