



ART REVIEW: Quiet Beauty Whispered in Mike Solomon's "Under Water Color"

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by James Croak

The Bridgehampton location of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts is exhibiting mature paintings of quiet abstraction by Mike Solomon with the clever show title "Under Water Color" through June 21, 2015.

Solomon's technique for this show is both unusual and useful, creating a depth and mystique to the works that is not immediately apparent. In defiance of Clement Greenberg's flat-is-better critical hegemony, there have been multiple attempts to add depth to abstraction, with most only slightly successful.

Abstract illusionism comes to mind, with painters such as James Havard airbrushing shadows under squiggles of paint. But this kind of illusionism was a one-trick pony and the crowd drifted away without ceremony.

Mike Solomon's technique has greater staying power. He layers color on Japanese rice paper and then seals it with a layer of resin. Another piece of rice paper is then aligned atop this mix and color applied to it, making it brighter than the layer beneath, which is still visible but now slightly clouded by the resin. This layering procedure is repeated seven to 10 times, to the point where the original layer is a dim memory, and the simple grid strokes decay into a disappearing thought.

This technique shows high craft and experience, but would be an unmanageable mess if used by someone of less skill. This reviewer offers that caveat lest some painters run home and attempt to adopt it.

The primary and tertiary colors used in *Sister/Brother* (2014) make this work by far the best piece in the show. Other works such as *Rose Magnetism* are constructed of colors that are more vague, making the emotional import less precise. Also I'd like to see a larger format to heighten the experience; the works are refined but seem a little timid at this smallish size.



"Sister, Brother" by Mike Solomon, 2014. Watercolor on papers in epoxy, 24 x 24 inches.

Solomon's work would fit within the New York School of abstract painting, albeit a generation later.

That 1950s and '60s cadre of poets, painters, and dancers managed to continue with a small but loyal audience, as Warhol-derived pop art dominated the visual arts scene for the past three decades, and performance art for the decade before that.

Those genres finally wore out their welcome and individual expression through paint is once again gaining an audience. The lack of shiny pop-ism at the Frieze Art Fair was noticeable and a sea change from the Armory show a few months earlier.

That said, Solomon's more controlled grid-like abstraction seems to date from well before the New York School and is anchored in the early Modernism and grid structure of the De Stijl group in The Netherlands. A specific reference would be Piet Mondrian, whose *Composition in Brown and Gray* (1913-14) or *Composition in Line (Black and White)* (1916-17) derived from a geometric reduction of landscape would seem to be immediate ancestors.



"Composition in Brown and Gray" by Piet Mondrian, 1913.



"Composition in Line (Black and White)" by Piet Mondrian, 1916-17.

Solomon's *Seven Within* (2014) would fit the De Stijl mode of reducing a landscape to a grid and its simple colors are close enough to fit with the reductionist thinking of Nieuwe Beelding (neoplasticism in English).



"Seven Within" by Mike Solomon, 2015. Watercolor on papers in epoxy, 24 x 24 inches.

Skies of Sarasota (2014) is difficult to reproduce and much better in person. It's quiet beauty is something that takes time to see and appreciate, which is also true for most of the work in the show.

This kind of subtlety would be lost or ignored at what seems to be today's favorite venue, the art fair, which is typically a good place for shouting but not so much for whispering. The same is true

for Solomon's *Lingering* (2011), another good title for a show that invites hanging out with a painting and gradually seeing what is there.



"Skies of Sarasota" by Mike Solomon, 2014. Watercolor on papers in epoxy, 24 x 24 inches.



"Lingering" by Mike Solomon, 2011. Watercolor on rice paper, epoxy, 18 x 18 inches.

BASIC FACTS: "Under Water Color" by Mike Solomon remains on view through June 21, 2015. Kathryn Markel Fine Arts is located at 2418 Montauk Hwy, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.markelfinearts.com.

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