

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



John Walker: *The Sea No. II*, 2014, oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches; at Alexandre.

JOHN WALKER Alexandre

There aren't many painters making abstractions as convincing as John Walker's. This recent exhibition, with its combination of lyricism and aggression—fueled by hours painting from the spit of land outside his studio in coastal Maine—came at a moment when a lot of painters seem to have adopted, whether consciously or not, aspects of his method. He moves easily between representational and abstract imagery, and he mixes seemingly contradictory inclinations. For example, his process is messy and engaged, but his compositions are deliberate and playful; his work shifts suddenly from somber to slapstick; he has a sincere belief in painting's transcendent power but embraces absurdist anti-painting gestures.

Walker belongs squarely in the tough-guy visionary camp of postwar British painting, along with paint-splashers and big-tube squeezers like Peter Lanyon and Roger Hilton. Like them, he mixes the coloristic exuberance of School of Paris painting with a Wordsworthian belief in nature's spiritual power. At a time when the medium's many young (and not-so-young) practitioners are busy googling images of lesser-known midcentury abstraction to make compositions that carry oomph, as can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" in New York (through Apr. 5), Walker, who is 75, creates paintings as fresh and powerful as the artists in that show without need for the Internet.

Two main bodies of work (dating from 2013 or '14) were featured here: 16 small oil sketches on bingo cards (left in Walker's studio from its days as a grange hall) and seven large works (mostly 7 by 5½ feet). From these two groups—the sketches done directly from the landscape, the others in the studio—one got

a good sense of the process of abstracting that happens from painting and repainting what he calls the trash-strewn inlet outside his studio.

Walker's buttery, wet-on-wet small paintings tend to reveal more of the landscape's features—we sense receding space, shore and horizon, along with reflections and islands dotting the surface. The big paintings are, not surprisingly, very different from the sketches and from other works he has shown recently. Planes of roughly brushed zigzags and straight-ish lines are cut near the top by an implied horizon and, in four of the large works, the white rocks of the spit flatten into a sail-like white form, reminiscent of Guston's hooded klansmen. Gelatinous green islands and masked-out suns link back to the landscape. The preponderance of greens, blues and whites is undercut by smaller dots and strokes of ocher, brown and black. The surfaces in each painting veer from matte to glossy (often in the blacks) to pebble- and sand-mixed to viscous, as in the greens and whites in *The Sea No. II*. There's an occasional raunchiness to his colors and textures, the smears of earth tones alongside the waxy yellows exulting in real and metaphoric dirtiness. And drawing is never too far away: in *Touch*, thick white lines are painted over the majority of the picture, with rough charcoal lines drawn into and over them.

Walker's longtime combination of rigor and anything-goes dovetails with the current interest in a collage aesthetic. Like his canvases, paintings by Carrie Moyer and Charline von Heyl also wrestle with modernism on its own terms. This show was a welcome reminder of how good his intense and never predictable work can be.

—Julian Kreimer