

Ron Johnson

GARY SNYDER GALLERY

Dam That Paint!

BY D. DOMINICK LOMBARD JULY 16, 2012

For his first one-person exhibition in New York, Ron Johnson offers up a collection of paintings that project a keen and sometimes-referential theory of color, a very curious technique, and a place between non-representation and our collective subconscious of catalogued experiences that flow through the exhibition in unexpected ways.

To achieve the sinuous interlocking and overlapping fields of color, Johnson employs pre-positioned dams to corral the poured paint and polyurethane mix. The dam walls, which are thin strips of canvas that sometimes bear the color of the previous pour, always leave a trace impression when pulled. In order to maintain as much precision as possible, each layer must be sanded flat to minimize the gaps where wet paint can escape. This sanding process, which is quite vigorous due to the hardness of the dry of polyurethane gives the painted surface a slight tactile quality that makes some of the colors, especially the gray backgrounds, appear to be natural or organic. In fact, if it wasn't for the paint drips on the side of *Give Me a Reason* (2011), one might assume it was painted on a piece of freshly cut slate.

Johnson's palette is, at times, reminiscent of masterworks. The colors used in *One of These Days* (2011) and the aforementioned *Give Me a Reason* remind me very much of Willem de Kooning's paintings from the 1940s. There is more than a little bit of Arshile Gorky in Johnson's work as well, not just with the palette, but with the shapes he favors and the feeling of weightlessness they imply.

Walking through the exhibit, you can't help but feel subtle suggestions of previous realities or experiences. Every time I see *Much Deserved* (2011) in the corner of my eye a crazed, wide-mouthed snake appears as if ready to attack or speak. One of my favorite works in the exhibition, *I Know the Pieces Fit* (2012), reminds me of a spacey cartoon animation background the incomparable Tex Avery might create.



How Many Miles?, 2011, acrylic and polyurethane on panel, 24 x 24 inches

These suggestions or subjects Johnson manages to project hinge upon the way he composes his art. To get a sense of the land, the artist only needs to include the hint of a horizon with works like *Easy For you to Say* (2011), which is also a very good example of how he includes the reuse of orange, green and black primed canvas dams. To refer to the figure, or some such animated object, Johnson runs his composition up along the side in *Talking with the Sun* (2011) and *Wise to the Light* (2011), or straight up the middle in *Give Me a Reason*, that, like *I Know the Pieces Fit*, has a decidedly cartoony feel.

One very waxy-looking piece, *How Many Miles?* (2011), has a multitude of powerfully pop-ish meanings from flavor bursts of chewing gum to a twisted and bloodied Barbie doll. However, the simplicity and straightforwardness somehow is strangely calming, and dare I say entertaining in a wicked sort of way.