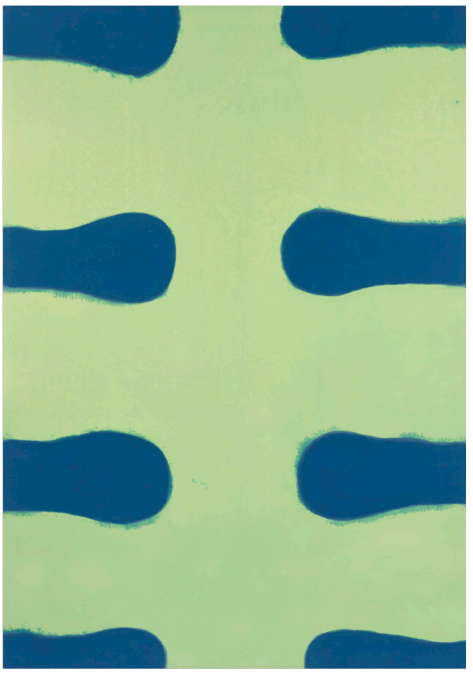
ARTFORUM
REVIEWS DECEMBER 2013

Paul Feeley

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY



Vespasian, 1960, oil-based enamel on canvas, 95 x 67".

Big, bold, and vibrant, Paul Feeley's paintings are hard to miss. Rarely shown in the decades following his death in 1966, the artist's sculptures and abstract canvases were given a major exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in 2002. Now we have this smaller show, featuring nine large paintings made between 1957 and 1962.

Feeley's style is distinctive. His forms hover on the cusp between biomorphic and severely geometric, consisting of a vocabulary of oblongs and rounded corners, simple shapes and curves informed by Moorish tile design and classical art. In the 1940s, Feeley broke with Abstract Expressionism. "I began to dwell on pyramids and things like that instead of on jungles of movement and action," he said to Lawrence Alloway in 1964. "The things I couldn't forget in art . . . were things . . . which made no attempt to be exciting." In *Ios*, 1957, and *Untitled*, 1959, this show's two earliest works, a washy backdrop of red encloses the blue shape of an oozing drip or drips (in *Ios* there is one; in *Untitled*, there are three). For both, he thinned his oil-based enamel paint before brushing it onto the canvas, adapting a technique he had learned from one of his former students, Helen Frankenthaler. Soon, however, Feeley's application of paint changed, becoming flatter, less yielding. At the same time, he moved toward an increasing symmetry and compactness, an almost iconographic rigidity.

Take, for example, the orange loops of *Caligula*, 1960, or the interlocking blue and crimson oblongs of *Untitled (January 12)*, 1962, forms marked by simplicity and graphic pop. *Petono*, 1962, has an affinity with Kenneth Noland's targets. A thin red line and a darker blue band enclose an unadorned orange shape—a square with rounded corners and its flat sides sucked in. In *Pijai*, 1962, Feeley gave a blue columnar form a perimeter of red, and set this design against a rectangular field of bright yellow that is itself bordered by a margin of bare canvas. The result is a subtle perceptual effect: As one holds the comparatively dark column in one's gaze, the brilliant-yellow paint and white canvas converge to form a luminescent halo. The column, in turn, projects outward—an ethereal, echt-'60s emblem.

Yet in other works, this centrality and symmetry break down. *Vespasian*, 1960, *Untitled*, 1962, and *Untitled (January 12)* all feature motifs repeated along a horizontal or vertical axis, and what is elsewhere singular and pronounced here implies an unending lateral expansion. This sense of infinity is sharpest in later works (not on view here), in which Feeley would paint the same motif four or five times on a single canvas, arranging the iterations in a grid. The alloverness is, of course, a hallmark of the "decorative," and that quality is only heightened by the fact that Feeley's paintings are so reminiscent of commercial design; if anything, his works evoke the textile patterns of a modish polyester dress. This is in large part what makes these works so appealing now. They suggest a different kind of painting—not Pop, per se, but an approach to abstraction that is unafraid of being polluted by the whole range of sources that resemble it. They suggest, in other words, the painting of today.

—Lloyd Wise