

Abstracted Biology

Franklin Ahrens, 2018

What was set forth as a summer project to create paintings of abstracted biology quickly became an investigation of much more. For starters, what can paint do? How can it be combined with other mediums to achieve certain effects? How can these effects be manipulated on a canvas to complement compositions in specific ways? Over the summer I found an investigation of material, technique, and approach usurping my investigation of biology, and this was a shift I gladly welcomed into my studio practice. Accompanying this shift came an investigation of light and space and how it operates within the parameters of a canvas. Very quickly, my work came to focus on various manipulations of the perception of light and space. Though biology is certainly a subliminal theme in my summer work, the final collection of over thirty paintings—many finished and some still in progress—represent visual investigations of material, light, and space. These investigations quickly broke into various different sub bodies of work.

One such sub body of work consists of six paintings that were made using blown air to move the paint around instead of a brush, creating an interaction of the paint with itself that simply cannot be achieved with a firm tool (i.e. a brush). These six works vary in their material composition. Five were made with faster drying acrylic paint and one was made with a combination of acrylic paint and slower drying oil paint. Four have various mixed mediums worked into them like wood putty, sawdust, and diatomaceous earth in order to create surface tension and 3-dimensional elements. Two are more traditional in their material composition in that only paint and paint thinner are applied to the canvas. All six focus on the organic process of moving different colored patches of paint into each other via the process of blown air in order to create aesthetic allusions to amorphous combinations of the cosmological and the microbiological.

Another body of work, consisting of three paintings, focuses on space in a very different way by manipulating the canvas itself in conjunction with manipulating the paint that is applied to it, therefore transforming the paintings into low-relief sculptures. All works on wood, I built up two of these paintings three-dimensionally with synthetic wood in order to give a subcurrent to the paint that was then applied. The third work involved cutting a completed painting into subdivisions and displaying it in a disordered rendition of the initial painting.

The largest body of work I completed this summer, consisting of over fifteen paintings, focuses on the perception of three-dimensional space within a flat canvas. These paintings were primarily painted using more traditional oil-painting methods, though many incorporate elements of mixed media as well. The main intent in these works is the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of illusory space. That is, they force the viewer to question whether there are realistic objects being alluded to in the abstract compositions or whether any such calls to reality simply do not exist. These works are very similar to the work of American abstract painter Arthur Dove (1880-1946) in his investigation of abstracted space, however, many of my works in this collection also embark upon questions about the abstraction of the emotional content within a painting. Through the use of variations in light and dark in the pigment values of my paint, many of these paintings are equally as ambiguous about their representations of space as they are about their representation of emotion, often torn between the disparate realms of hope and despair, embodying elements of both while simultaneously rejecting elements of each other.

These three large bodies of work, coupled with various single-painting endeavors, all surmise a rather diverse