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'Deepdrippings': Painterly explorations that are both object and surface

Phillip Allen's doodles grow into densely packed impastos with a curious gravity

Deepdrippings: Phillip Allen

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Kerlin Gallery, Dublin



From left: "Deepdrippings (We Can't Make Coffee Like the Continentals Version)"; and "Deepdrippings (Ghetto Anglaise Version)", by Phillip Allen

Phillip Allen's *Deepdrippings* is an exceptional exhibition: focused, intelligent, lively and conceptually rich. Go back close on a decade and Allen was showing busy, involving paintings in which crisply delineated central arrangements of geometric or organic forms, not unlike doodles, were skirted, above and below, by dense clusters of impasto. These clusters were a bit like the debris and excess materials left over when the pictorial work had been done. They were part of each picture but also curiously separate from it. Their florets and lumps of pigment were in a different register to the orderly patterns of the interior.

It seems fair to say that Allen was at least in part exploring the dual nature of painting, in that it is both object and surface. In each work he unleashed a plethora of recessive surfaces between the two bands of concentrated substance. As if to underline the concentration, the pigment was often coiled in centrifugal masses, like little balls of matter spinning around a gravitational centre. The multiplicity of surfaces in the centre, meanwhile, showcased painting's slick, illusionistic potential. Not that his paintings were ever slick. He used and uses the gamut of painterly means, but never in a facile or ingratiating way.

Allen was born in London in 1967, and still lives and works there. He studied at Kingston University and then completed an MFA at the Royal College of Art in 1992. Early on, his work suggested a bridge between landscape and abstraction. Generally, his paintings are related to preparatory drawings, if not quite in a conventional sense. Rather he makes masses of drawings, with markers – repetitive, obsessive, they are not that removed from doodles – and occasionally one will strike him as being usable in a painting. So the drawings are like a pattern book, and at some point one of the patterns will seem right for the job. He is not afraid to change direction, sometimes dramatically, yet somehow his core concerns remain consistent.

More recently, for example, in his 2013 show at the Kerlin, he moved away from the binary, thick and thin arrangement. Now it seemed as if each painting's collection of circular forms was dissolving in a misty drizzle of metallic paint that dripped in rivulets down the canvas. They were tough works to like. It was as though someone had thrown acid over Italian Futurist compositions. A year later, Allen had considerably, even immeasurably refined this approach in work at *The Approach* in London. The intersecting circles were more fully articulated, and there was much more colour and complexity, more going on in every way.

Generous impasto

Now, with *Deepdrippings*, he has restored the generous impasto. In a series of small paintings, tangled masses of pigment are positioned like informal frames around the edges, with thinner pools of paint at the centre. Thinner, but still multilayered and interwoven. The level of complexity and the quasi-sculptural presence of the work, together with a sense of inexorable, relentless, incremental process and accumulation, bring to mind Irish artist Paul Mosse's "two-and-a-half dimensional paintings". Like Mosse, Allen has worked on individual pieces over several years. He is, however more decisively on the painterly side of the sculpture-painting equation.