

Art Reviews

A Painter Suspended Between Beauty and Waste

Something about Phillip Allen's visual preoccupations speaks to the viewer's mind and eye, the connections and ruptures between physical and visual sensations.



John Yau March 3, 2024

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Phillip Allen, "Low Memory (Redshift Nostalgia Version)" (2023), oil on panel, 40 x 32 1/2 x 3 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York)

Phillip Allen's paintings are paradoxes that have stayed with me ever since I first saw his work in 2013 at Kerlin Gallery in Dublin. As I stated in my [review](#) at the time, it was evident to me that "Allen doesn't define his commitment through style but through an exploration of materiality." This was the beginning of what I saw in his art.

Seven years later, during the first months of the pandemic, when New York was shut down, I saw his debut exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery. By then, I had

come to think of him as “one of the most wonderfully challenging painters around.” After visiting his current self-titled exhibition at Miles McEnery, I feel even more determined to pinpoint exactly what Allen does in his work. Something about his visual preoccupations speaks to the viewer’s mind and eye, the connections and ruptures between physical and visual sensations, in tandem with our capacity to daydream and to reflect upon the bond between the ephemeral and the permanent. The paintings embody the joy of looking and the space of self-reflection such elation might bring us.



Phillip Allen, “Low Memory (Single 2nd Tear Version)” (2023), oil on panel, 40 1/2 x 34 x 3 inches

The 12 oil-on-panel works in the exhibition, all dated 2023 and ranging from mid-sized to large, and all sharing the general title “Low Memory,” are simultaneously paintings and objects. The titles, each with a different subtitle, suggest that each painting is a “low memory” of an experience that the artist has had.

Allen’s attention to materiality manifests itself as thick gobs of distinctly colored paint that he heaps around the edges of the panel. Their color and size don’t seem to follow any order, and occasionally he adds a smaller gob in a different color to a larger one. In most cases, the peripheral colors echo those in the painting’s interior, and a gob of paint might appear in the central composition or its shape might echo one of the composition’s flat, carefully rendered forms. The imperfect, changing alignment between the work’s edges and interior is part of the overall meaning; the dialogue between them is open-ended.

The palette changes from painting to painting; some elements connect and others do not. Even though Allen's paintings are recognizable as his, each one distinguishes itself from the others. His resistance to style and repetition shares something with the older artist Thomas Nozkowski (1944–2019). Like Nozkowski, Allen is not trying to settle into a groove of production, nor making any grand claims for what his work is about. He feels no regret about rejecting the masterpiece tradition as well as the idea that a painting lives in perpetuity, defying time.



Phillip Allen, "Low Memory (What's in It for Me Version)" (2023), oil on panel, 55 1/2 x 48 1/2 x 3 inches

In "Low Memory (Single 2nd Tear Version)," tear shapes in muted violet, yellow, olive green, and denim blue are surrounded by multicolored clumps of dried paint, recalling an artist's palette that has not been used in many years. Varied aspects of the painting are visually engaging. The layered tears invite us to see into the painting and call up associations with cartoon voice bubbles or even cartoon sperm. The different color palettes in the center and on the periphery of the panel beg the question of what these areas of the work have to do with each other.

The elegantly shaped tears and crusty clumps, the defined and ill-defined — does one lead to the other? Does the creation of something, whatever it is, always produce inordinate waste? What do the creation of beauty and waste share?

In one of the most complex, enigmatic, and rewarding paintings, “Low Memory (What’s in It for Me Version),” Allen complicates the demarcation between exterior and interior by depicting two white circles rising from the painting’s bottom edge, and one at the top, partially obscuring them with clumps of paint. A two-dimensional surface, a layered space of overlapping forms, a receding illusionistic space, and world of cast shadows coexist in the painting and, in fact, are dependent on each other.

Allen possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of modern art. Geometric forms, receding perspective, impasto paint, shadows, and transparent planes all come together in his work. We see arabesque forms that seem to come out of Aubrey Beardsley, but with an animated presence that reflects the genie rising out of Aladdin’s lamp. In “Low Memory (What’s in It for Me Version),” he combines multiple viewpoints: looking at the painting, looking into it, and seeing a circular opening as if we are standing at the bottom of an inverted tunnel. His fluid approach is unrivaled. His combined accumulations and imagery evoke the relation between creation and waste, flights of the imagination and an awareness of mortality.



Phillip Allen, “Low Memory (Ribbon Cut Glow Version)” (2023), oil on panel, 56 x 49 x 3 inches

Allen seems to want to have his cake and eat it too, and why not? Haven’t we finally gotten past the ideologies, assumptions, and rules that were once used to oversee and evaluate art? Isn’t art one of the few domains where you can make up your own rules? His desire to have everything in play results in a formidable achievement — gravitas with a light touch.



Phillip Allen, "Low Memory (Strange Roads to Walk Version)" (2023), oil on panel, 56 1/2 x 49 x 3 inches

Phillip Allen continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 23. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.



John Yau

John Yau has published books of poetry, fiction, and criticism. His latest poetry publications include a book of poems, *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012), and the chapbook, *Egyptian...* [More by John Yau](#)