

The approach

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

REVIEWS

Phillip Allen

THE APPROACH W1

In Phillip Allen's painting *Rich History of Foul Ups*, 2008, an array of banana-like forms in yellow and black pops out from a washy blue-and-brown backdrop, partially framed by a system of straight lines that vaguely suggests a stack of wooden crates. Running along the top and bottom of the panel—like the isolated strips of blue sky and green grass in a child's landscape drawing—are narrow multicolored bands of impasto applied in thick wrinkled squeezes and thinner dribbling lines. In contrast to the flatness of the main image, these unctuous additions seem almost comical in their exuberant physicality. The net effect is an unusually entertaining push-pull between surface and structure, representation and reality.

Allen has plowed this furrow for some time now, continuing to improvise from the same open-ended starting point, and the new paintings he gathered for this show, "Sloppy cuts no ice," are his richest and most invigorating to date. While works like *Rich History* and *Volume Champion* (both 2008) hint at figuration (the latter suggests a mildly psychedelic chunk of Brutalist architecture), others incorporate intimations of written language. In *ONM* and *WXY* (both 2008) the eponymous initials, rendered in red and yellow and piled one atop another, loom like monstrous advertisements for fast-food outlets that have somehow survived a nuclear war. In a bit of schoolboyish



Phillip Allen,
Sloppy Cuts No Ice,
2008, oil on board,
29 7/8 x 31 1/4".

optical trickery, they also stand in for male and female nudes, up- and downstrokes positioned to resemble limbs and appendages.

A comparable brand of visual-conceptual confusion is conjured by three entries from Allen's series "Pareidolia," 2008 (the title refers to a tendency to regard randomly occurring images or events as being of special significance to their observer; think of the miraculous appearance of the face of Jesus on a slice of burnt toast). In *Pareidolia (Commissionaire with Flowers Version)*, for example, a magazine clipping

with the image of a bearded man wielding a floral bouquet has been affixed to the rough center of a sheet of board spotted with blobs of paint, each of which is surrounded by a greasy halo. The likeness of blobs to blooms is far from precise, but in adding a dash of abstraction to figuration, or vice versa, Allen destabilizes both, underlining the essential artificiality of their conventions.

Still, Allen's most abstract and most painterly paintings remain his most immediately likable. *Postopia*, 2008, layers rounded L shapes, picked out in shades of yellow, under and over a stylized column of black smoke. The artist's signature impasto end zones are constructed here from intertwined ropes of silver oil at the base of the panel and a patchwork of lilac, olive, cream, steel, and baby blue at the top. The cheerily titled *Pinnacle Mind Hell*, 2008, meanwhile, suggests a kind of Sisyphian obstacle course in which a series of gates and globes recedes into the distance as a scumbled storm gathers overhead. And the epic *Lovejoyvian (Extended Version)*, 2008, presents two conjoined panels marked by a silvery starburst within which alternating hemispheres of brown, blue, and orange radiate from the picture's core to its edges. Finally, a grid of thirty-five drawings made between 2005 and 2008 hanging in the gallery's office points to a well-stocked library of variations—and a restless visual imagination.

—Michael Wilson