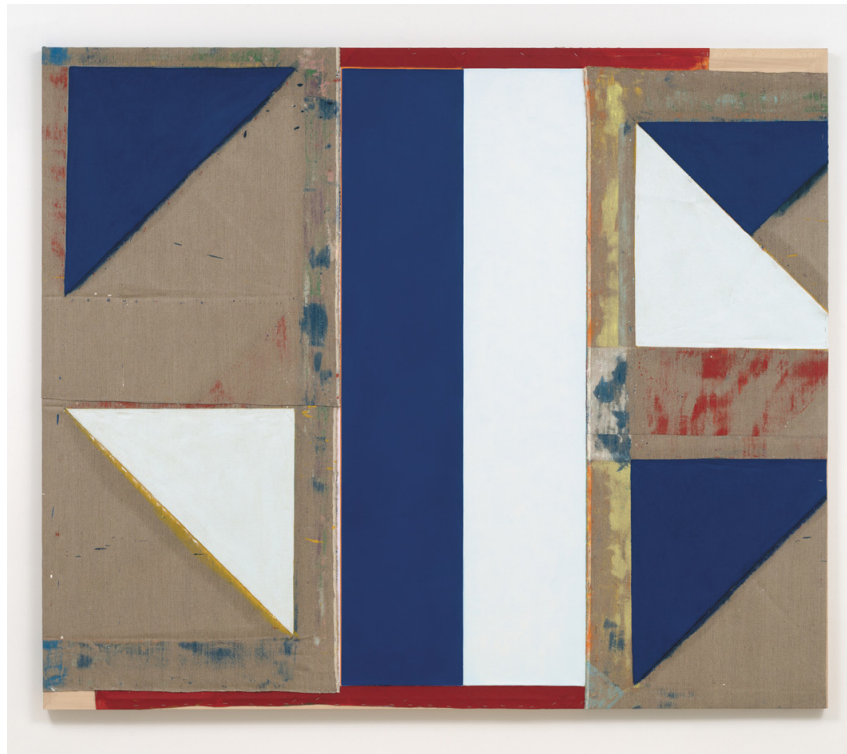


ARTFORUM



Julia Rommel, *Life Boat*, 2021, oil on linen on wood, 69 3/4 × 83".

Julia Rommel

BUREAU

It wasn't hard to surmise what was going on in the ten gorgeously luminous abstract paintings that made up Julia Rommel's exhibition "Uncle." The surfaces told the tale. It was all about process: laying down mostly broad swaths of rich color, or removing the canvas from its support and restretching it over another differently formatted rectangle before applying another hue altogether (or, sometimes, a brushy monochromatic pattern), and so on. The results of all this covering and revealing, folding and unfolding—leaving creases, rows of staple holes, varying thicknesses of paint—are geometrically divided fields suggesting that all the elements of the work's making were up for grabs and subject to revision until the painting was finally declared finished.

This sense of provisionality was even more pronounced in the largest and most complicated of the paintings, *Life Boat* (all works cited, 2021), which was made from separate pieces of stapled canvas. A Rommel work might vaguely resemble a semaphore flag or one of Gordon Matta-Clark's excised building fragments, but it mostly looks like areas of paint bumping up against one another. Take *Forgiveness*, which in any other context you could almost be pardoned for calling an abstracted seascape: The upper

portion is primarily made up of a creamy-white rectangle through which rosy light just barely blushes, as it does in an overcast sky at sunset. The exposed edge of this milky zone also reveals that a layer of solar yellow is buried in there somewhere. Below this is a narrower band of dryly brushed-on azure, which is more apparent around its edges than that warming pink. But the work's bottom and right perimeters supplement this abstract idyll with strips of cooler, paler blues and turquoise. The two main areas—candid, declarative assertions of color, each of which might almost have been a simple painting in itself—are held together by the ostensibly (and literally) marginal glimpses of hidden layers that frame them.

Rommel makes clear statements with endless adjustments, which bespeak an inward-turning poetics that reminded me more of Giorgio Morandi's work than of that by the 1960s abstractionists who might seem her most immediate precursors: artists such as Blinky Palermo or Robert Ryman. As Morandi tirelessly rearranged his bottles and bowls, Rommel rearranges the edges of her canvases.

However, I began to wonder about this tale of infinite revision when I noticed a few of the artist's works on paper in a back room—not part of this show. Looking more like records of finished pieces than sketches of possible future ones, they showed the same kinds of arrangements within the paintings but in a seemingly quite decisive and determined way. Suddenly I had to consider the idea that what I'd assumed was the result of canny improvisation might instead be the work of a pictorial chess master who had devised her strategy ten moves in advance. If Rommel's artist statements thus far have upheld the ad-lib as her *modus operandi*—as we see in texts for her first solo show at the gallery in 2012, where she claims to “lack clear ideas” while relying on “persistence and occasional impulses,” and for her 2019 Bureau exhibition, when she claimed, “I tried to be more decisive, but each painting quickly strayed from its initial plan”—I nonetheless noted that every one of those assertions has about it the air of autofiction. I may never really know which of these paintings' stories—the one of intuitive trial and error or the one of intellectual foresight and discipline—is truer, and that's probably as it should be, for it matches the works' affect, which somehow encompasses forthrightness and cunning at once, while putting both at the service of sheer sensuality.

—*Barry Schwabsky*