

ARTFORUM

Julia Rommel

BUREAU

The seven new paintings in Julia Rommel's "The Little Match Stick," her second solo exhibition at this gallery, presented the viewer with a series of false endings—or, rather, false edges, as the physical bound-works' lively titles—alongside *Punkin Chunkin* and *Eraserhead*, both 2014, are two canvases named for former Baltimore Orioles shortstop and third baseman Cal Ripken Jr.—might lead one to expect a practice with more explicit references to the wider world, yet Rommel is concerned primarily with painting's internal dynamics. In an accompanying statement, the artist writes about the struggle to find ways of making marks that look natural and at home on the canvas, that have their own personality rather than acting as a conduit for hers.

To create *Sandpipers*, 2013, the first work in the show, Rommel applied layers of gesso and white oil to stretched linen, forming a thick, opaque surface. Then, per her signature technique, she restretched the work's fabric ground in a new position. The block of pigment no longer quite fit the support, wrapping around its left edge but stopping short of the other three. The subtly off-kilter result makes reference to Robert Ryman's sensitive deconstructions of the archetypal painterly object but maintains a necessary distance from them. (Rommel has talked about her need to "mess up" a painting in order to head off a too-close relationship with existing artists and works.)

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Rommel abandoned her established preference for intimate scale; with the exception of *Sandpipers* and the deep blue *Cal Ripken Jr. (Rookie Card)*, 2014, all the other works shown here measured at least four by five feet. Rommel begins an accompanying statement by worrying over the proud and monumental tendencies of this new size, but she needn't have been concerned—there are more than enough fine details and gentle twists in these paintings to prevent them from becoming overbearing. In the aforementioned *Eraserhead*, for example, a layered rectangle of misty gray-blue



Julia Rommel,
Three Little Babes,
2014, oil on linen,
59¾ x 68½".

stops characteristically short of the edges of its backing, the intervening space tinted only slightly with a scrub of ethereal lilac and punctured at each corner by fine constellations of pinholes, traces of an earlier stage of making.

In other works, Rommel's instinct to remake was even more apparent. In *Three Little Babes*, 2014, a large rectangular field of white sits atop two fields of black edged in bands salmon, the artist having stretched and unstretched sheets of linen and laid them on top of one another. These have been stapled together and onto a still-stretched canvas base. But the pleasure elicited by the work, as before, is not so much courtesy of the process as it is of the accumulated marks, both planned and quasi-accidental—the slender line of electric blue that surrounds the black, the pale lines that converge on the corner of each block of color, recording the fabric's original folds. There's a currently minor spate of young artists playing broadly comparable games with the makeup and mechanics of the canvas—N. Dash and Daniel Subkoff spring to mind—but Rommel's sensitive, exploratory take places her in a category of one.

—Michael Wilson