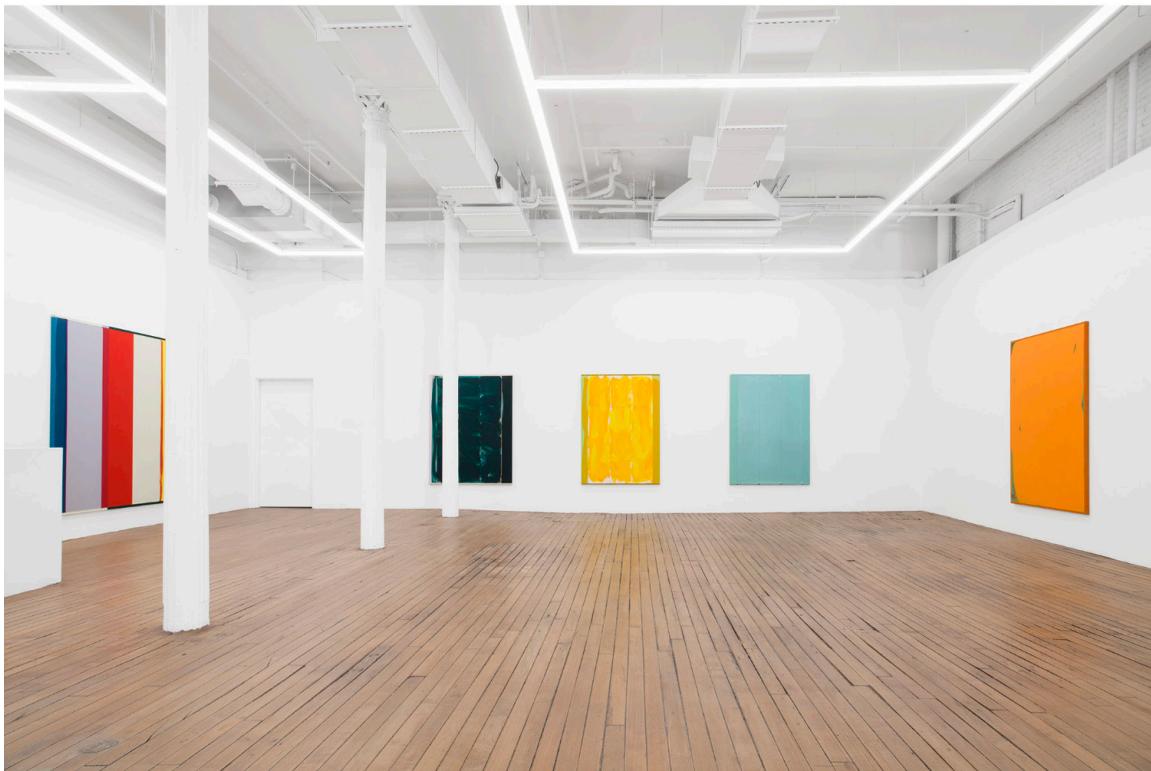




Julia Rommel at Bureau: an exhibition of large colorful paintings that have a solid foot in geometric abstraction



Julia Rommel: Staples, Installation View, Bureau, New York, NY

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Bureau

By **EDWARD WAISNIS** June 26, 2024

Bureau's relocation to TriBeCa, just around the corner from where I lived when I was eighteen years old, in a commercial space with unfussy wood floors and an exhibition of large colorful paintings that have a solid foot in geometric abstraction, put me back to the heady days of the late 1970s. This nostalgic moment brought up memories of exhibitions held at the Susan Caldwell Gallery, located on West Broadway in SoHo, by painters Doug Ohlson Frances Barth and Sam Tchakalian, among others, during that last decade under the sway of Modernism. In the spirit of this reverie it was a pleasure to come upon Julia Rommel's exhibition of paintings from the last two years.



Julia Rommel, 5 O'clock Shadow, 2023, oil on linen, 66 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches

Firstly, obvious visual correlations to Richard Diebenkorn's is what one encounters. However, the introduction to the depth in Rommel's paintings is made through heeding the title of the exhibition. The reference to, and focus on, the materiality inherent to painting is what is transpiring on more careful inspection. While one tends to 'read the room' when found in a gallery situation, and given that Rommel's work stuns on a quick read, introspection is demanded by the exertion, and attention, the artist has brought to her practice. For starters, staples are a major player, by dint of the artist bringing them front and center, as a compositional element as opposed to the usual humble role they play as discreet, usually hidden away, utilitarian necessities. Rommel concedes to these pedestrian implements that are in fact, an integral part of building a painting. By bringing them, literally, into play—somewhat akin to Robert Ryman's reliance on incorporating 'hardware' as inherent elements of his paintings—capitulation to a two-dimensional experience rules. In a fundamental way this plays into a notion I have observed amongst the latest outcropping of abstract twenty-first century painting wherein there is an absorption, and reckoning with the Greenbergian edict of a work's object hood.



Julia Rommel, Parakeet, 2023, oil on linen, 66 1/2 x 48 inches

Surface is everything to Rommel. Through a myriad of handling processes, from daubed and/or rubbed highlights, that delve into stained expressiveness, to thick applications, in a manner reminiscent of fondant cake frosting, to raised striations splayed across otherwise uninflected fields of rich color. This technique of built-up ridges that span across several canvases here is a recent addition to Rommel's retinue. Carried out by priming the canvas as it is stretched around a custom column—I am imagining a squared circle, or a somewhat squashed box—and, once several rounds of this preparation are completed, taken off and mounted on a proper stretcher, leaving the ridge lines created by the canvas having been wrapped around the contraption. This laborious process produces the ridges that 'pop-up' from beneath the weight of liberally applied pigment. At worst, these luscious expanses can resemble the luxury exteriors of high-fashion handbags. Ah but since art and fashion truly crossed in the 90s perhaps this is a logical iteration of, and incidence of, referential opulence?

The fraternal twins 5 O'clock Shadow and Parakeet, nearly identically-sized canvases, from 2023, revel in swirling cascades of thin color, green and yellow respectively, soldered between vertical rectangular cells, another Rommel signature go to. The brush handling calls to mind Moira Dryer's unmistakable brushy thinly applied matte passages that I am convinced has direct lineage from Barnett Newman. Plus, let's face it, that predominant yellow of Parakeet just sings!



Julia Rommel, Truce, 2023, oil on linen, 66 1/2 x 48 inches

Truce, 2024, is an uninflected version of this segmented compositional trope, reliant on a sea of teal. What is most remarkable about this canvas lies in its top and bottom edges which highlight pings of light produced by a combination of color, rows of surface stapes and residuals from Rommel's unique prep involving her patented wood column priming process. While Fuddy Duddy and Orange Roughy, both 2024, capitalize on sweeps of monochrome—in both cases on what might be referred to as creamsicle-inspired shades, literally addressed (called out) in the latter works title—with contrasting peek-a-boo stained accents and edges. Plus, Fuddy Duddy is the sole work in the exhibition that leans to a fey lyricism befitting its title. Incidentally, Orange Roughy is the smallest painting in the show.



Julia Rommel, Truce (detail), 2023, oil on linen, 66 1/2 x 48 inches

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the largest canvas, *Earth To*, 2024 is the one that throws me back to those heady days of the 70s, with a strong Brice Marden evocation, right down to the title that resonates with that painter's poetics. While *Husband Material*, 2024, nods to Newman's masterpieces—from the *Stations* to *The Third*, of 1962—right down to the buttery stripe (zip?) running along the right edge.

Tucked in the lower level were three additional paintings that worked as an appealingly discordant trinity. *Fireball*, 2024, a cherry red one, deploys three of Rommel's signature ridges in lock-step fanning, in rhythm, from upper right to lower left and focused by streaks of fuchsia banding around its edges. *Roger That*, 2024, reads like an open book, literally, rendered in cautionary yellow sitting on a scratched and pocked black ledge and surrounded by purple on the left and right. Again this is completed by a regimental line of eponymous staples on the face of the lower edge. Last, but far from least, *Victory Garden*, 2023, a joyous variation on the vertical cell strategy, that here wears a bucolic palette—cool white and blue alternating centrally bounded by the referential deep green, to the right, and a joyous melange of red, yellow and blue on the left, another reference to Newman. In point of fact, Newman's innovations, from sublime variation and contrast to the bravado of the ragged edge, abundantly live in Rommel's output.

Rommel has shown a tendency, in the past, towards overworking her repertoire. Something that is far from an issue in this exhibition, where variation—while at times raising a competitiveness between individual works—shows a command of balance and harmony that was enhanced by a smart curatorial hand here. **WM**

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