

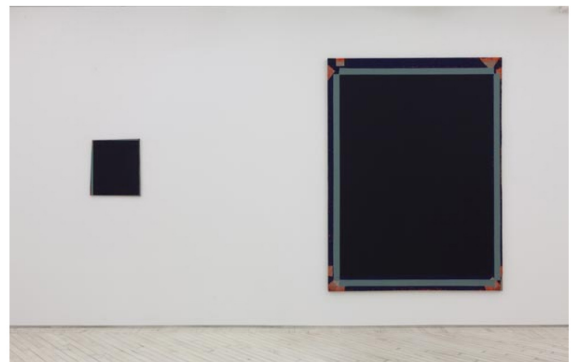
JULIA ROMMEL *The Little Match Stick*

by Alex Bacon

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Julia Rommel has installed just two works in the first room of her current exhibition: a large, ravishing creamsicle orange painting, “Punkin Chunkin” (2014), and a small, mostly white canvas, with accents of grays around the edges and sides, “Sandpipers” (2013). Together these two paintings succinctly summarize Rommel’s achievements up to this point. The border that frames central orange field in “Punkin Chunkin” is the result of her signature process of stretching and restretching her canvas. What were previously the painting’s edges became the work’s main compositional element after Rommel decided to lay them out flat, the linen pinned down to its support like a taxidermist’s specimen. However, the effect is far from cold and clinical, as that metaphor might imply, for the viewer connects with Rommel’s paintings primarily via the coloristic experience each engenders, and which varies from the effusive, as in “Punkin Chunkin,” through to the taciturn, as in “Sandpipers”; its shyer but no less visually rewarding cousin.

Process—stretching, unstretching, and restretching the canvas—and materials, like a given painting’s wooden stretcher bars, are always the motors that generate the chromatic life of one of Rommel’s paintings. Both act as tools to imbue a specific mark with meaning, removing the artist’s hand, and by extension her subjectivity, or, more precisely, redirecting it into the act of selecting and then guiding, the processes and materials by and from which the paintings take form. The new work on view here shows that the problem of how to make her marks convincing remains primary for Rommel.



Courtesy of Julia Rommel and Bureau New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

If the two paintings in the first gallery represent the concerns of Rommel’s work to date, then two works in the back gallery, “Cal Ripken Jr. (Kidnapping)” (2014) and “Three Little Babes” (2013) indicate new and future ones. Rommel typically leaves her central monochrome fields unmarked, but in “Cal Ripken Jr. (Kidnapping)” she has found that folding the canvas in half to create a groove that bisects the central navy field allows her to make a mark that is determined by the material, and thus isn’t sidetracked by the arbitrariness of her hand. The most radical new direction, however, can be found in “Three Little Babes,” where Rommel has not simply tacked up a manipulated canvas, but has also chopped off one of its edges and affixed it to the left side of the composition. This is a surgery that does not contribute to an experience of disjunction, but rather to a new kind of pictorial unity, which extends to the incorporation into that composition of a panel of the upper left of the linen to which the predominantly gray canvas is affixed. This work is exciting

because it reveals a further evolution of Rommel's solution to that problem of how to make a convincing mark; a full third of the painting has been taken over by something other than a monochrome field and, further, by something of great formal complexity, with its bands of washed out blacks and pink.

Why should it matter if Rommel has discovered new forms of mark-making? In what way is she engaged in something more than an empty formalist exercise? Rommel's formal investigations are significant because, through them, we relate to her paintings somewhat as we do to other people. I realize now that this is what has led me to anthropomorphize her paintings, as Rommel also sometimes does when she speaks and writes about them. Not with regards to their formal attributes, but rather as a way to describe how I connect with one work versus another, as well as the nature of how that connection unfolds in time.

This begins to make sense when we consider the life that each of her paintings has led in the course of being made, which is present in the finished product—in the dense layers of paint, in the underpainting that peaks through along creases, corners and folds, and in the marks of use and workmanship. Combine this with the way the paintings relate to us at the very human scales of head and body, evoked by the two sizes Rommel favors, one small, one large, and it becomes clearer how the paintings elicit something of the immediacy and complexity of encountering another person.

In certain works, like "Punkin Chunkin," a striking color draws the viewer in from afar, while others, like "Sandpipers," "Eraserhead"(2014), and "Around Woman"(2013), seem to stand apart, reticent with their muted palettes. Still others, like the two "Cal Ripken Jr." paintings, fall somewhere in-between, neither withdrawn, nor effusive. All this leads to a sense of psychological and experiential depth that we intuit, but cannot fully plumb, since just as we cannot know everything about a person's history neither can we know the entire story of the creation of one of Rommel's paintings. Even Rommel admits that she is something of an outsider to her own process, only able to access the "interiority" of the work at select moments when she suddenly feels her subjectivity matches up with the shape the painting has taken. This is not unlike our relationships with one another, where moments of empathy become the meeting points at which we connect, even if the majority of our interactions never move far beyond the superficial.

An encounter with one of Rommel's paintings has something of this varied texture and density. The paintings seem to alternately open up and retract from the viewer, an experience driven largely by the chromatic life of a given work, which in turn has been determined by Rommel's formal and procedural decisions, and by each viewer's idiosyncrasies. As such there is great humanity in the way Rommel's works address their beholder, and ideally Rommel's paintings foster empathy, relating her work to the humanist phenomenology espoused by Abstract Expressionists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt.