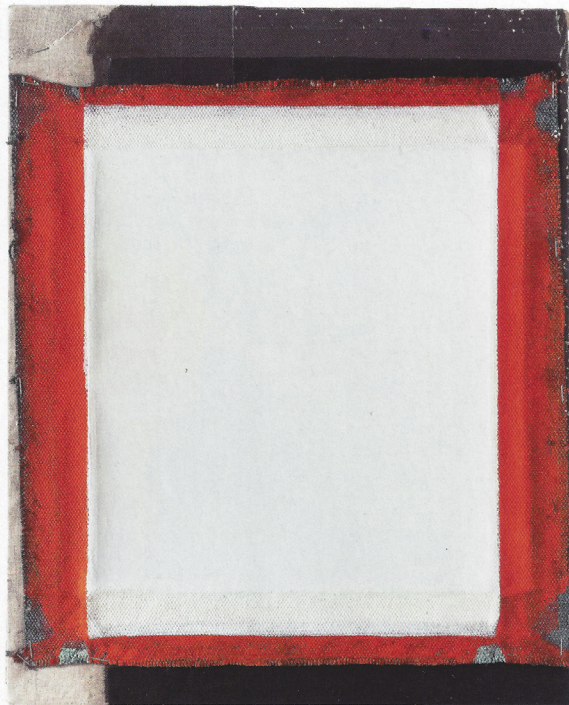


Art in America

FIRST LOOK



Julia Rommel:
*The Staten Island
Ferry Disaster*,
2013, oil on linen,
17¼ by 14 inches.

Julia Rommel

by William S. Smith

JULIA ROMMEL'S PAINTINGS strike a delicate balance, foregrounding the procedures by which they were made while resisting reduction to their materials and processes. The Brooklyn-based artist typically begins by applying an even field of color to a modestly-scaled rectangular canvas. Once dry, the painted fabric is detached from its wooden support, shifted a few inches and then re-stretched in a different position. What had previously been excess canvas affixed to the reverse of the painting becomes a new frontal surface; what had once been a flat expanse of pigment is warped and distorted, wrapped around an edge.

After Rommel works through multiple such transformations, a sense of parity emerges between the marks she applies with her brush and the patterns of creases that have formed through the repositioning of the canvas. Her finished compositions are structured as nested planes, some defined by subtle variations in color, others by differences in facture and texture, and still others by the trace imprints of the stretcher bars or rows of staples.

Sometimes comprising more than 50 layers of paint in various hues, Rommel's works are anything but monochromatic. Still, the artist has a keen awareness of her paintings'

occasional resemblance to the extreme forms of abstraction that fueled some of the 20th century's most contentious art historical debates. "Whenever I approach what looks like an existing modernist painting, I know I have to change something," Rommel told *A.i.A.* in her studio. "I try to mess up the painting to prevent a fixed reading that reflects an established tradition." The handmade appearance of her rough-hewn canvases ensures that Rommel's works cannot be mistaken for a manifestation of some affectless conceptual logic, and the warmth of color runs counter to the austere tone of much modernist experimentation.

Rommel knows a work is finished when it has a discernible personality, a quality affirmed by the piece's ability to sustain a distinctive title. A teal field, for example, she calls *Jackknife* (2013), a small, waxy yellow composition is *Big Soda* (2012) and a dark, nearly black plane goes by the name *Dr. Unk* (2012). The individuality of these works is also the source of their challenge to viewers: we want to relate to Rommel's charmingly rumpled objects—perhaps going so far as to anthropomorphize them—even as their basic material properties remain a focus of attention. ○

CURRENTLY
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