

TWO COATS OF PAINT

October 3, 2017

Carolyn Case: The mythic and the mundane

7:34 am by William Eckhardt Kohler



Carolyn Case, Homemade Tattoo, 2017, oil on panel, 42 x 50 inches

The more I look at the paintings by Carolyn Case in her show “Homemade Tattoo,” on view at Asya Geisberg through October 14, the more surprising I find them. Defying spatial orientation, they slip and slide, sideways, up and down. Identifiable and abstract forms fly sprawl and spill with constantly shifting velocity, slashing strokes bumping up against spills and careful picks and pokes, making something one can almost put a finger on, but not quite.

Case digs in with persistence, perseverance, and painterly inventiveness. Seeing this, one might think that paint and painting are the subject of these paintings, but that is only true in part. The paintings have a quality of haphazard unplanned accumulation like a tent city: chaotic, alive, colorful and in the throes of creation or under threat of imminent dissolution. They also have a serenity in the way that Case repeatedly erases the paint, sanding back down to and through the white ground to create an ethereal glow. In this way the form and language of paint and painting strike me as inseparable from her experiences in life as a parent, teacher, and seeker.

Bookshelf Safety is a wild painting that holds a tightly compressed center constructed of vertical colored bands, presumably the book shelf of the title, interspersed with pointillist dots. Before viewers can become too certain about what they are seeing, though, fissures open in the painting’s architecture and snippets of mask-like eyes emerge. From its dense center the painting opens up into the surrounding area of diaphanous layers of color and light. The painting suggests both the interiority and intimacy of artists like Bonnard and Vuillard and the ecstatic expansiveness of a painting by Turner, the sublime and the spiritual emerging via the everyday.

Domesticity and fantasy merge in many of the paintings. The scattered forms in *Homemade Tattoo* suggest the disorder of a child's playroom. The topographical view is at once reinforced by blue lines and undercut by their faintness, as if from a waterlogged composition book. The lines can be read as part of a floor or carpet pattern, but they also lie back and become the stylized waves of some distant paradise. A few explicit images can be picked out from the sprawl: a tree, leaves, something that could be a face. The title for this piece and for the show comes from the artist's observation that her students accrue tattoos based on whatever is happening in the moment of their lives, which Case regards as analogous to her own working method.



Carolyn Case, *Meditation Mind*, 2017, oil on panel, 18 x 20 inches

Meditation Mind is the most compact of the pieces in the show. In it, a near rectangle with weird bulbous appendages floats at a slight diagonal in a field of glowing white and shifting blue lines. One way to read this image, going off the title, is as an analogy to the mind, not quite contained, floating on the sea of the unconscious, in meditation. Yet, despite the relatively languid tempo of the piece, there is something desolate about that central form, like a fragmenting piece of flotsam, a provisional and metaphysical raft of the medusa afloat in the ocean, without even a rescue ship in sight. Indeed, for all the beauty in these paintings—the lovely color, sensuous paint handling, playfulness, and general ebullience—they also seem marked by an awareness of our impending collective disintegration. And why not? The present world, in which we live and are raising our children, is an unsettling one.

“Carolyn Case: Homemade Tattoo,” Asya Geisberg, Chelsea, New York, NY. Through October 14, 2017.

About the author: A graduate of the Maryland Art Institute, Willie Kohler is a painter who works in Long Island City and is represented by Linda Warren Projects in Chicago. He is a regular contributor to the arts section at *HuffPost*.