

Malone, Peter. "From Goya to Ab-Ex in a Series of Brushstrokes", *Hyperallergic*, Hyperallergic Media, Brooklyn, NY, October 24, 2014. Web. November 22, 2014.

Full text:

Dana Saulnier's ostensibly expressionist canvases at First Street Gallery carry a bravado reminiscent at first glance of mid-century abstraction. Yet they flaunt an obvious distance from their action painting precursors by the employment of allusive figurative references. Even among the growing number of painters inspired by a mingling of spatial illusion and surface event, Saulnier reveals an acute sense of impunity in his work. More than any paintings of recent memory, Saulnier's merge painted illusion and painterly gesture into a compelling vision that embraces 19<sup>th</sup>-century articulation without definitively describing anything.

Light, mass, and atmosphere, all fabricated through the artist considerable skill at the easel, are melded into scenes that prove both mysterious and physically credible, while refusing to specify their more dynamic elements as human, flora, or fauna. In this regard they share a sense of secret symbolism with the early, Surrealist-inspired canvases of proto-Action painting's idiographic period (1945 – 48), just prior to that generation's expansive and decidedly flat look. But, in reaching for the large brush and the bold gesture, Saulnier does not actually follow through with Abstract Expressionism redux; instead, he reaches back a century and a half to Francisco Goya.

Modeled in dark, muddy tones, sparked at significant passages with impasto whites and judiciously applied notes of intense red, Saulnier revisits the nightmare environs of Romantic melodrama with imagery that seems to twist itself into gravity-defying mayhem. Wrestling forms hover over horizontal planes affecting a dystopian atmosphere of indeterminate scale. Sometimes landscape, sometimes still life – this toying with scale allows him to tie the early Romantic sublime to the more shallow pictorial ether of modernist abstract painting.

The ambition Saulnier demonstrates in bridging such a wide cultural synapse is at first startling, though further consideration reveals that the implied chronological markers are not as detached as one might think. The idiographic picture of the mid-1940s that preceded Abstract Expressionism applied the visual dialectic of Surrealism, which had evolved from French Symbolist Poetry, which in sensibility evolved from Baudelaire, whose birth and whose subsequent taste for decadence correlates with Goya's late work. We do well to remind ourselves that the fluid that nourished modernism's long evolution toward unfettered expression was fundamentally poetic. In his 2003 biography of Goya, Robert Hughes characterized the artists eccentric late paintings as "seem[ing] like freakish, vivid precursors of modernity" because, as Hughes suggests, Goya chose to "bypass explicit symbolism" – in other words, he predicted modernism by choosing to bypass the chief characteristic of academic art: identifiable narrative.

As with Goya's *Black* paintings, Saulnier's canvases at First Street derive much of their visual power from the fact that they can never be fully deciphered. "A Month's Mind" hints at

monsters struggling over a vast landscape, their teeth (if that's what they) are clenched in mortal combat. In "Untitled", one of the more clearly delineated of the canvases, a pair of what may be wine bottles protrude from what appears to be a net resting on the floor of the cave – or perhaps the seafloor, in a nod to environmental issues (the operative word being *perhaps*) – while the light illuminates what could be a debarked tree trunk or the flayed limb of a more sentient creature. Each canvas provides more than enough visual information to stimulate the imagination without becoming literal, allowing for a fusion of essences and emotions ranging from the ordinary to the macabre.

Several studies hanging in the smaller, rear gallery are easily matched to larger canvases in the other room, indicating that Saulnier's process involves sophisticated control over whatever spontaneity initiates the imagery itself. That he can maintain a level of painterly abandon while keeping the structure of each composition within predetermined limits illustrates a willingness to harness the offspring of his improvisation and keep it within the requirements of each painting's unique disposition.

Tempering what could easily become an affectation of historical appropriation (I could not confirm this at the gallery, but the dull, greenish tone of the larger paintings appears to be the result of an overall glaze), Saulnier manages to maintain a sense of painterly invention. He achieves a wonderful balance of control and abandon, avoiding the fussiness of laborious style raiding while making the most of an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century look. His atmosphere, though superficially indebted to Goya's palette, does not pander to the older painter, nor does it caricature Romanticism's darkness. His vision is as distinctive and as personal as Goya's, or Turner's, or De Kooning's, for that matter.

What is most refreshing here is that the historical reference is not the point, but merely an aspect of the painter's vision. It is a tool used in achieving that vision. To paraphrase Robert Motherwell, who was something of an expert on French Symbolist poetry: all painters carry in their minds the pictures they have seen. Saulnier's paintings add a new sense of freedom to the potential implied in that sentiment, a freedom poets, novelists, and filmmakers use without reluctance.