

Bendik, Joe. "Making Tragic Paintings: Dana Saulnier continues to reach into abstraction for something deeper." *Chelsea Clinton News* 21 May 2009.

Full text:

Last week I wrote about one of the first Modernists, Nicolas Carone, a pioneer who combined the figurative images with abstraction. In a way Dana Saulnier reminds me of Carone, but in a very different way. Saulnier's exhibition, *Sense and Absence* at First Street Gallery, consists of large dense paintings that invite the viewer to participate. Examining these works is like a meditation; abstract shapes become reality as textures and colors completely engulf the environment.

Prior to painting these works, Saulnier does extensive drawing explorations, thereby anchoring and providing a structural template upon which he layers his vision. This vision consists of larger spaces that dominate the various figures, creating a whirlwind of layers, shapes and movement along with a strange sense of serenity. You don't feel like you're looking at a landscape, you feel like you are in a landscape – a landscape of otherness. When I walked into that gallery, these paintings made me feel like I was in an alternate universe. The earth tones gave off a mood of familiarity, yet the images themselves were foreign (but not out of place). Saulnier focuses on decaying figurative forms. The effect is an evocative, mysterious combination of other-worldliness with the familiar, which creates a tension between the elements. It feels like stepping into (and out of) a dream where you can't be sure what is real and what is not.

Incorporating a history of 20th-century reductive gestural abstraction while invoking a Baroque quality, Saulnier's paintings have gravitas. These paintings have a quality of purpose that is seldom seen in works of this nature. The careful melding of hues, textures and figures evoke a psychological underpinning that transports the viewer with its own logic. It is difficult to pinpoint any one element, but the sum of the parts achieve this magic.

Saulnier told me that he thinks he's "making tragic painting."

"I think that the toughest challenge for a contemporary painter is the task of re-imagining what we used to call intellectual depth," he explained. "This impulse is especially suspect within painting. Yet I think the tragic form still holds out the possibility of a deeper relationship to presence, to the dense web of complexity we inhabit. I think the tragic is capable of a deeper cut, that it better resist skittering along the surface."

As much as I tried to describe these works, Saulnier described them best: "The forms in the paintings are compressed, twisting, turning, seem to be reaching for another shape, or in contrast, sympathetic forms within the same composition exist as having been reduced, adumbrated and decayed. They move, grow, and fall apart, following their roles, circumscribed within rituals while forces pulse through them and beyond them. I think of these circumstances as rooted in two hierarchical tensions, nature, which I continue to think of as the most fundamental tension (presence), and the decayed languages of figurative art. The art that sought to locate our relationship to spiritual questions (absence)."