



Dana Saulnier

Restless Measures

“Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.”

Rainer Maria Rilke —from letter one of 'Letters to a Young Poet'

Dana Saulnier Restless Measures

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First Street Gallery
526 West 26th Street #209
New York, NY 10001

www.firststreetgallery.net

www.danasaulnier.com

danasaulnier@danasaulnier.com

Works Exhibited

<i>Silent Reading, 2015, oil on linen, 74 x 92.5"</i>	3
<i>Trap, 2015, oil on linen, 84 x 73.5"</i>	5
<i>Surrender, 2016, oil on linen, 78 x 104"</i>	7
<i>Signal, 2017, oil on linen, 75 x 100"</i>	9
<i>Untitled (116), 2016, oil on linen, 52 x 75"</i>	10
<i>Untitled (1016), 2016, oil on canvas, 40 x 46"</i>	11
<i>Untitled (317), 2017, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 47.5"</i>	12
<i>Untitled (516), 2016, oil on canvas, 32.5 x 40.5"</i>	13
<i>Untitled (417), 2017, oil on canvas, 32.5 x 40.5"</i>	14
<i>Untitled (517), 2017, oil on canvas, 47 x 41"</i>	15
<i>Drawing (7516), 2016, charcoal on paper, 21 x 28"</i>	16
<i>Drawing (516), 2016, charcoal on paper, 21 x 26.5" not pictured in the catalog.</i>	



Silent Reading

Artist Statement: October 2017

In these works, embodied forms grow and decay. The forms are tentative and are often undone. The nominal subject is 'the figure in landscape' but these figured and disfigured forms are more haptic events. Boundaries between figure and ground are open and permeable evoking transience and uncertainty. These 'bodies' are under pressure; they dwell within forces that exceed any temporary integrity they possess. Still, these fleeting beings achieve a circumspect vitality — a place cycling condition and contingency.

My paintings evolve from sets of drawings and studies in oil or collage. I experience a lot of 'not seeing' as I work out my seeing. I often have some subtle intuition. I sense multiple potentials in a configuration. Something 'takes me' and my seeing is a kind of 'leap.' I see only enough to sense that there is something more to see. This gets built into the work and structures how the viewer receives the image. I want the work to 'speak' to the viewer's perception before they habitually constrain their visual experience with categories that name visual experience. The inherent tension of perception and category is generative. I want both modes of reception to be incommensurate and 'fragile.'

Painting is frequently thought historically and contextualized by its continuities and revolutions. Viewers of my work almost always comment upon

the dialogue with historical paintings. This is both understandable and troublesome. I know that I am making some kind of 'history painting' — but it is inadequate to think of it narrowly: as appropriation, or memorial, or documentary project. All three are relevant ways to think about 'history painting.' But, for me, achieving an image that captures an emotional sense of our being within history is important. We are historical beings and living emotionally is a condition of our being. We know that those who lived before us also lived this condition. We hope that our emotional lives will somehow connect with the lives of those who will follow us. Finding this condition, we center and de-center ourselves. We share and are enlarged. In the arts, themes of tragedy and comedy are repeating historical projects. I find the subject of the figure in landscape fertile ground for realizing such themes. My dialogue with painting locates both my connection to the past and my distance from the past. The distance is crucial to my work. I want to paint this differential as forward momentum. I endeavor to make a new image that dwells within history.

Painting lives best when it devours our attempts to theorize. I seek to make works that are absolutely specific while being productively resistant to analysis.



Trap

**“You might as well get one thing straight,” he said, relaxing,
“I’m not an abstractionist.”**

Mark Rothko quoted by Kenzo Okada
in conversation with Seldon Rodman, 1957

“The strange assertion quoted above leads to an obvious paradox. Frustrated by having surpassed in the studio where words could follow, Rothko and several of his colleagues, notably Barnett Newman and Clifford Still, maintained hypersensitive postures regarding the interpretation of their work, which explains the appeal such fraught opinions held for them. Rothko’s atmospheric color made him particularly sensitive to the dilemma of spatial ambiguity because he held so firmly--quixotically, one might say—to the physical credibility of the surface. He meant his reductive methods to read as sonorous, not strictly formalist. The confusion is understandable.

Several generations later, Dana Saulnier’s asserted a less ambiguous yet equally ambitious attitude in the statement accompanying his 2014 one-person show here at First Street, an attitude that grows prevalent among his contemporaries, as their work reflects a critical environment that has for decades eased off narrow ideologies like the strict formalism that so vexed Rothko. Saulnier explains that for his generation, “...what persists in history are tensions and dilemmas that we will never resolve”, and then adds,

“I recognize a generative depth in dilemmas. I am always seeking to make a new image, to make something never seen before that speaks to our ever-present projects and difficulties.”

It’s no secret that abstract painting today is largely free of theoretical régimes concerning illusion and surface. And yet for many contemporary painters, anxieties remain. The paradox of surface and illusion is at the heart of the medium. And though a general acceptance of its optical dilemmas has clearly unseated theoretical imperatives, painters now face the arguably greater challenge of how to negotiate this wide-open terrain.

Among that cohort of painters who unflinchingly address the issue, Dana Saulnier is one of the more inventive practitioners. This is not to suggest he is committed exclusively to a coldly formal emphasis on merging figurative and painterly modes. And by his own words we know he stands unambiguously aside any self-conscious historical jockeying. He does not quote history but lives it. He bridges the gap between painters long gone and our experience of the ever-present human moment that nurtures all



Surrender

art. Engaged in a more demanding manner of painting, one that welcomes contradiction, his approach is unrestricted but for a concerted effort to maintain a substantial visual poetry.

Saulnier is an abstract painter dedicated to the timeless essence of painting in its fullest and most comprehensive form. To confront the energy in his unique approach is to feel the exhilaration that is in many ways the subject of his work. Each canvas confesses a visceral feeling for perceived space. Consider “Untitled (516)”, which presents a cluster of forms that do not resemble so much as hint at a figural entity. As one attempts to imagine or somehow mentally complete this implied figure, the more it behaves like a mirage. The viewer is then compelled to back up and reassess the full composition. Earth tones are again confirmed in the lower foreground region, and variations of cooler tones still scatter across the upper reaches of the frame like a late evening sky. The initial landscape feeling remains, leaving one with the sense that those forms dominating the central composition are laboring to realize their own existence. To feel their energy is akin to absorbing the emotional intensity of a foreign libretto by allowing the music to prevail over the unfamiliar language.

In painting’s silence, light and color provide the essential drama. The vivid light in Saulnier’s canvases seems to emanate from both outside the frame and from the color itself, and accounts for much of the intensity one feels in their presence. A pronounced tenebrism, fed by a loose and painterly attack, resonates in each canvas through an elemental palette

that seems to enunciate the muscular forces of earth, wind, fire and water.

Regarding improvisational precursors, Saulnier’s candor toward pictorial space registers a greater affinity with De Kooning and Gorky than with Rothko’s classic AbEx iconography. Saulnier is at one with that pair’s outlier willingness to integrate form with surface. And though it is far less iconoclastic to do so today, Saulnier has raised the bar considerably in this regard, which is what sets him apart from both his precursors and his contemporaries.

He strives for an intense self-animating quality that is not easy to characterize. Again, words fail. He gives us form and space in dramatic flux, creating imagery almost sentient in nature—bursting and contracting in several directions at once. Many canvases allude to a resolution that is clearly unlikely to materialize, yet the feeling one gets of impending catastrophe is formidable. Inevitably, the viewer’s awareness of their own yearning for resolution feeds an emotional engagement with each picture’s strange physical inferences.

A mere glimpse of his work indicates that he plays fast and loose with our expectations of what an abstract painting ought to look like, but does so—and this is crucial to understanding the significance of his achievement thus far—by acquiescing to the timeless spell of his chosen medium and to a source of inspiration that seems to have chosen him to voice its will.

— Peter Malone



Signal



Untitled (116)



Untitled (1016)→



← *Untitled (317)*

Untitled (516)



Untitled (417)



Untitled (517) →



Front cover: detail from "Signal"

Back cover: detail from "Silent Reading"



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