

## Dawn and Dusk

While Michael Morrill works under the broad rubric of contemporary abstraction, he's located an autographic painterly idiom of his own. He chooses a startlingly sensual engagement with material organized in rigorous structures while he also generates profound visual depth through restrained, micro-thin layers. The artist purposely sets a tension: on one hand, he achieves distinct gestures and stratified traces of process through dragging and grinding paint; on the other, he composes with Cartesian regularities and horizontal configurations. He works in contrast to the strategies of pastiche, and rendering at the edge of figurative recognizability, that have become the new endgames for painting in the twenty-first century.

Still, Morrill maintains an engagement with the history of painting—certainly the splendid colors and textures kick against the austerity of minimalism, (as referenced by the series work and the latent stripes and grids) but the glazes point to oils as a vehicle for luminosity, suggesting the spiritual light of romantic landscapes and Northern Renaissance altarpieces. Morrill builds evocative jewel tones in color-saturated surfaces and complements them with matter-of-fact matte binders; within these fields, he shifts light on minute flats, voids and ridges. He often paints on two panels in which he meditates on difference in sameness, and sameness in difference; these intentional repetitions offer alternative solutions, whether through compositional shifts, color relationships, additional layers, or inserted lacunae.

Morrill's *Linea Terminale* paintings suggest upended horizons, and play on optical ambivalence. Based on Galileo's drawings of the moon, the "line" is nothing more than a perceptual division between light and dark—an optical phenomenon pointing to the idea that there is no figure-ground relationship across Morrill's work. As in many visual patterns, there is no hierarchy of form. This overt optical contrast references the physical distinctions among paint layers, especially since for Morrill, the layers underneath are as important as those on the surface, and these strata are revealed in his process of rendering and sanding oil glazes. The *Terminale* darks are hardly shadows, especially as those with lush material expression, as in

the garnet tones of *Linea Terminale 11.10* (2010), have expansive optical depth. The contrasted lighter surfaces, the “substances” are purposefully shattered, floated on dark, saturated underpainting.

The dualities set up by the artist are predicated on viewers’ receptions of the works, especially as the eye animates the implied movement and perspectival shifts across panels or from piece to piece. The distinctions fascinate both at a distance and through intimate looking. *ISIS 16* (2010) contains a layer of interference pigments that express colors differently at altered viewing angles, and again, this shift points to other contrasts—notably in this work, the linear rhythms that stir and vibrate across the surface, and the sensual differences arranged for looking through the painted layers. *ISIS 12: Dawn and Dusk* (2009) are psychologically activated horizons, creating sensations of uplift and descent through color weights and syncopation.

Titles such as “*Linea Terminale*” and “*ISIS*” are situated in mystery, whether they evoke the discovery of new aspects of the moon, or contemplation of divinity and ontology. Aware of mid-century abstraction’s unsatisfying signification of spiritual and philosophical universals, Morrill chooses a personal and believable (but no less profound) engagement with the numinous. He achieves this through material transformation, luminosity, nods to religious diptychs and their materials, meditative processes, and visual complexities that invite prolonged, contemplative encounters.

—William V. Ganis