

Confronting the Void: Bill Richards's Paintings

By Donald Kuspit

Bill Richards's poured paintings are gestural, dramatic, majestic: the "gestures" are grand and bold, their interaction seemingly confused yet oddly coherent - they seem to converge and diverge simultaneously, forming a kind of fluid Gordian knot that seems to unravel as it is tied - and their colors are fresh and luminous. Mostly the primaries red and yellow, sometimes more one than the other, with fragments of blue thrown in - but the diptych *Double Blue*, 2012 is all blue, sometimes dark toned and dense, giving it certain epic intensity, sometimes thin and linear, lyrically meandering in space - and also the complementaries green and purple, all flowing, indeed, rushing and surging across the white canvas in a *Torrent*, to refer to another painting of 2012, and into the space beyond it. That is, the viewer's space, making the painting all the more overwhelming. We are engulfed, clinging to each wild gesture as though to a straw, lest we fall into the void - the void that is the white plane.

Flow and Void, 2011 makes the existential point clearly. The colorful, painterly surfaces have a hedonistic flamboyance, but they are also madly driven, their energy peculiarly desperate as it confronts the emptiness of the white canvas. What Richards calls his "streaming space" - "the multidirectional, anti-gravitational drips and streams of pure color" (suggesting that the painting is more chaotic than composed, as much a demonstration of creativity in the service of destruction as of destruction in the service of creativity) - never fills the space of the void that is the flat white canvas. It remains conspicuous through the torn curtain of frenzied gestures, implacable, absolute, and still despite their meteoric movement across it, which seems arbitrary compared to it. The absence that the inert white plane signifies competes with the presence of the dynamic gestures. It seems like a stand-off, but I suggest that the white void has won the war, the colors collapsing on it like wounded soldiers on a battlefield, their uniforms in tatters.

The gestures seem peculiarly traumatized, or the expression of some trauma, an emotional catastrophe. We can read *Twined Space*, 2012, *Crossover*, 2012-13, and *Grand Central*, 2013, as wonderful displays of interactive colors, crowding together as though to suggest the energy of the urban crowd at rush hour, as *Grand Central* implies, but they can also be read as abstract expressionist emotional storms. Art historically, they have a certain affinity with the "streaming" colors in the abstractions Hans Hartung made late in his life, and with Sam Francis's abstractions, their similarly dazzling colors streaming across the white canvas. Hartung's "touch" is more delicate than Richards', who, like Francis, uses drip, spatter, and gesture to haptic effect. But Richards's abstractions are much more emotionally intense, powerful, and "projective" than theirs, which are more self-contained - introverted rather than extroverted, as Richards' seem to be.

I am arguing that Richards's paintings are not the pure paintings they seem to be at first glance, but belong in the tradition of Sturm und Drang Expressionism, as their turbulence suggests. They are erotically exciting, but also aggressive and unsettling. I am suggesting that the matrix of gestures is a kind of torn net above the white void of the canvas. The viewer clings to the loose strands for dear life, as Richards does.