

Focusing the Field

by Brett Baker

Expanding the visual field is one of the essential innovations of the New York School. This innovation redefined scale in painting so decisively that subsequent movements including Color Field, Pop, Minimalism, and even installation art all adopted it without question. Yet, while nearly every other aspect of abstract painting has been exhaustively investigated and re-imagined, examples of focusing the field to a small scale have been isolated and few. Miniature abstract paintings are almost non-existent.

My first encounters with Abstract Expressionism's signature expansiveness, in works by de Kooning and Rothko, made me want to be an abstract painter and convinced me that scale was a crucial component of the language of abstract painting. For a over a decade, I painted almost exclusively on a large scale, until circumstances forced me to radically scale down my work.

I moved from a large studio upstate to a small Manhattan apartment that functioned as both a studio and a home for my family. The change was fortuitous, though, for it opened my eyes to new painting problems. Instead of rehashing the problem of creating an intimate experience from immense scale, I concerned myself with preserving that immensity on an intimate scale. At first, a two foot square painting felt like a postage stamp to me, an impossibly small area. Ten years later, many of my works measure only 4 x 5 inches.

Recently, it's been a pleasure to discover other painters - Sarah McNulty, Kazimira Rachfal, Dan Roach, Henry Samelson, Altoon Sultan, and Ken Weathersby - equally invested in small, even miniature scale abstraction. Though sharing a similar format, each artist challenges and extends the language of abstract painting in a different way. These painters use scale not as a commentary, but rather to push the boundaries of gestural abstraction, site-specific painting, materials, and process while forging fresh connections with painting's past.

Henry Samelson's paintings, for example, transform the heroics of gestural abstraction. For Samelson the canvas remains very much an "arena in which to act." (1) Yet, the arena is not scaled to the body, but to the mind. The near miniature surface defeats the expected association between gesture and lyric athleticism and frees the gesture from the burden of signifying itself. They employ the visual language of Abstract Expressionism to create a new kind of Intimisme. His physically charged gestures and high-key color evoke a sense of enthusiastic movement and the outdoors rather than a quiet interior. The paintings evoke the effect of old snapshots or blurred polaroids, remembrances channeled and rendered as an emotional response.

In Sarah McNulty's paintings, form and color are born of a process of natural selection; each must survive the process of making. As she paints, McNulty notes, the marks "writhe and jerk, and spaces become indistinguishable. Braced by the tension of making and ruining, they become something not foreseen as an end-point, where the linear route of actions recedes. Stubbornly uncomfortable yet familiar, they feel outside of my own physicality."

This process-based approach has led McNulty to create increasingly smaller paintings. “Previously working in boundless, sprawling formats,” she notes “I’ve come to small surfaces in order to face the difficulty of the border. You cannot hide in a small painting. A small surface speeds up paintings that resolve immediately, and more densely builds up the history of longer, hard-won paintings.” In McNulty’s work, scale is active, a container and intensifier of pictorial events.

Eric Holzman has written that in Kazimira Rachfal’s work “it is as much about the touch, the physical layering of the paint, as about the nuance of tone, color and shape. There is extreme care in the transitions, as the artist moves over the surface from painted edge to painted edge.” The small dimensions of Rachfal’s work permit subtle transitions to be fully investigated; their adjustment becomes an element of drawing as well as evidence of the artist’s hand.

Mark Rothko, another master of enigmatic transitions, has been cited as an influence in Rachfal’s work. Rothko, painting on a vast surface, however, is like an architect, planning, placing, and adjusting. Rachfal is a mason, seeking solidity and wholeness on a different level, each painting shaped slowly by the hand. This care is evident in Rachfal’s, “layered and often scarred surfaces,” as described by Mario Naves.

As a realist painter, the near miniature dimensions (6 x 6 inches) of Altoon Sultan’s current paintings amplify the abstract qualities in her work. Her recent paintings zoom-in on the agricultural machinery that populated her earlier, large scale landscapes. This reduction in scale allowed Sultan’s paintings to deepen their formal dialogue with modernism; however, scale has also suggested other dialogues, most notably with the contemplative nature of medieval manuscripts.

This new conversation is functional as well as formal. Sultan notes, “a small work invites a close look, an intimate relationship with the eye; it is like holding a book in your hand. A book inspired me to paint on calfskin parchment: the medieval illuminated manuscript, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*. The sensuous calfskin surface asks me to pay attention.” Sultan’s approach suggests that the modernist emphasis on the objecthood of a painting, has a natural expression in miniature abstraction.

The inherent portability of small paintings finds its natural and untapped potential in Dan Roach’s site-specific approach. In Roach’s hands, site-specificity, a practice often associated with large commissions, installations, and earth works, becomes the realm of the secret, the hidden, the sacred. Roach sites his paintings as treasures, tucked into environments, waiting for discovery.

For Roach scale is “a fluid matter. Depending on where work is to be sited, I’ll make decisions as to how a discourse can be set up in relation to the site and the painting (by painting I’m referring to both the image and the physicality of the painting itself). I’m interested in remembrance and mis-remembrance of internal spaces and how through employing recurrent motifs, the potential of abstract painting can comment on these matters.”

Roach has extended this interest beyond his own work to inform his curatorial efforts. He recently curated an exhibition of paintings that inhabited the time-worn nooks of Worcester Cathedral. A cathedral is surprising space to find serious abstract painting

(the setting could not be further from the white box gallery), suggesting contemporary painting need not be limited to typical gallery venues.

Ken Weathersby's interest in miniatures was sparked by a scale model for a gallery exhibition of his larger works in 2010. He recalls, "it started as just a pragmatic process. But the feeling of seeing things reduced very small or, when next to full-sized pieces, seeing the huge leap in scale, became interesting, trippy, like Alice in Wonderland. It becomes uncanny and gets the imagination going."

His tiny "model" paintings led to a group of diminutive works exhibited together as one work entitled Time Is the Diamond at Some Walls, an apartment gallery in Oakland, CA. In his essay for the exhibition Chris Ashley wrote, "To call [the small works] miniatures would not be an insult or diminution, but instead a useful label to place these small pieces as a specific set within Weathersby's body of work. And though small, each works scale reads as large and full-sized, or, rather, right-sized"

"Rightness" of scale is significant to the achievements of each of these painters, born of individual visual concerns yet essential to the expression of each artist's vision.

Notes

(1) Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New*, Da Capo Press, 1994, p. 25.