

Art in America

The World's Premier Art Magazine

REVIEW OF EXHIBITION November 2004

JOHNNIE WINONA ROSS at Stephen Haller



Johnnie Winona Ross: *Saltcreek Seeps*, 2004, acrylic, mixed mediums on linen, 24 by 22 3/4 inches; at Stephen Haller Gallery

Johnnie Winona Ross must grow weary of critics who invoke Agnes Martin when discussing his work. Yet the comparison is hard to resist. Not only do both artists paint pale horizontal stripes across roughly square canvases, but they also share residency in New Mexico. While a certain esthetic kinship is indisputable, sustained examination of Ross's paintings reveals rich, layered histories of pigment that are absent from Martin's more spartan canvases.

In most of his recent work, including the nine medium and large paintings in this show, Ross has first covered linen supports with thin veils of oil paint. Using a graphite pencil, he then draws orderly horizontal bands across the canvases in widths ranging from 1 to 3 inches. These preparations recall

Martin's signature techniques. But Ross proceeds to embellish this minimal scaffolding through a more complicated process.

Tilting his canvases at steep angles, Ross drips thin pigmented rivulets from top to bottom. These initially dribbled, vivid shades of red, blue, gold and violet are soon scraped away to reveal only traces of the cascading colors. While creating these vertical striations, Ross also fills the ruled horizontal bands with white paint. These stripes often alternate between dense opacity and a milky translucence that barely hides the underlying layers. Ross's labor-intensive process, which can involve hundreds of coats of painted and scrapped pigment, may be likened to weaving. In the pink-toned *Wire Canyon Cutoff* (2002), for example, the matrix of interlaced verticals and horizontals suggests the warp and weft of a tapestry.

Ross's principal inspiration is not textiles, however, but the landscape of the American West. Seven of the paintings are titled "Saltcreek Seeps" in reference to a site Ross has frequently visited in southeast Utah, where water erodes and stains the face of a rocky canyon. The muted ground colors of these paintings, which include beige, gray and pale green, certainly seem to be rooted in the natural world, and the contrast of dripping vertical elements and horizontal bands may well evoke water seeping through the earth's strata. But to my mind, at least, the rigorous geometry of these paintings suggests a more man-made experience. Standing before *Saltcreek Seeps* (SCS 32), 2004, a gray-toned canvas traversed by insistent white stripes, I imagined a view through a window hung with louvered blinds and spattered with rain.

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