

MODERN PAINTERS

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Johnnie Winona Ross

Stephen Haller Gallery//

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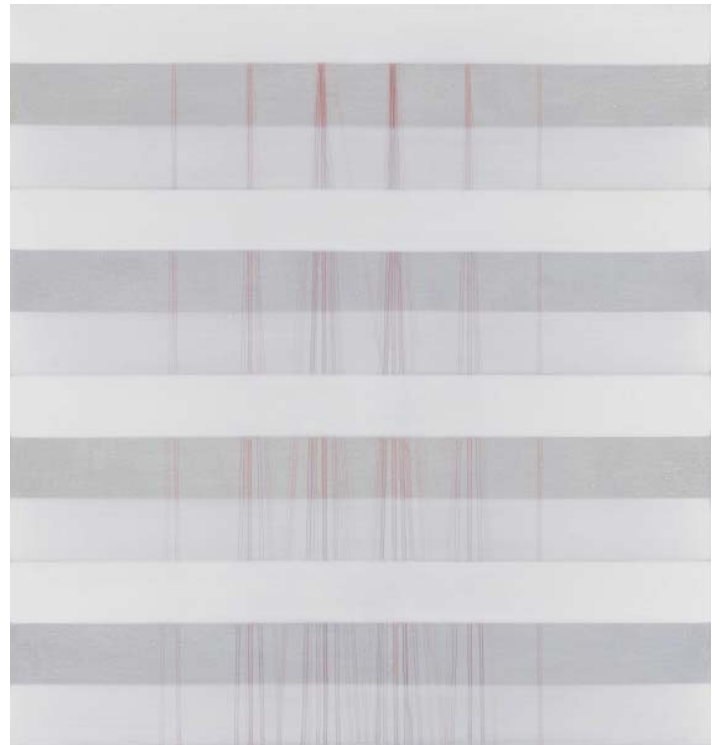
YOU COULD CALL Johnnie Winona Ross a landscape painter, but don't look for actual depictions of the countryside. Ross, who lives and works in Aboyo, New Mexico, strives to evoke a place through heavily worked and highly polished abstractions.

The dozen or so canvases in this show are all based on the same structure, in which horizontal bars, rounded off at the edges of the canvas, dominate the remnants of scraped-away vertical drips. Despite these grids, Ross is not an heir to Mondrian and the geometric abstractionists. Most critics point to the influence of Agnes Martin. In their evocation of the American southwest, however, Ross's paintings also recall California Minimalists like Peter Alexander and Larry Bell, who sought to capture the light and space of their beloved West Coast. Again like many of those artists, Ross smooths his surfaces to a fine finish. But while the former used industrial materials to achieve their sheen, Ross burnishes his canvases with a Pueblo potter's stone.

If there were a time signature in Ross's pictures, it would be geologically slow. *Deep Creek Seeps 08*, for example, was completed over two years and contains more than a hundred layers of paint. Its subdued palette is typical of Ross's canvases; soft blues, reds, and yellows are heavily mellowed by layers of zinc and titanium white. The horizontal bars call to mind striations in a cliff face; the vertical traces echo minerals seeping from old rock. There are no sharp edges; the borders between the bands of color are like fog on the horizon, evident but hazy. On the side of the stretcher, near Ross's signature, are his personal notations: petroglyphlike tally marks that tracked his progress as he plodded along.

Ross is a consummate craftsman. His wood stretchers are hand built; his linen canvases are river-stone smooth; even the tacks he uses to attach the one to the other are handcrafted of copper. His laborious practice demonstrates a rare degree of patience and persistence. Although the work is hardly anti-intellectual, it conveys the sense that intuition and even instinct - gut feelings - are Ross's principle guides. And they appear to be leading him to good places.

- Charlie Schultz



Deep Creek Seeps (Red Bluff), 2010,
Various paints burnished on bleached linen 36x35 inches