

# ARTFORUM

## Nick Aguayo VIELMATTER LOS ANGELES

By Jackie Kadrnak | 21 October 2014



**Nick Aguayo, *Untitled*, 2014**, acrylic and marble dust on canvas, 96 × 96”.

Nick Aguayo’s abstract paintings have a collage-like sensibility, as if created by placing cutout swatches of color on horizontal surfaces. This effect—one that brings to mind Leo Steinberg’s characterization of the flatbed picture plane as “a receptor surface on which objects are scattered”—is heightened by the autonomous nature of each individual form. Departing from the scumbled brushstrokes in some of Aguayo’s earlier paintings, the eight untitled canvases in the artist’s first solo exhibition at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects were notable for their shift toward cleanly delineated shapes in uniform hues.

In several instances, the studied randomness of Aguayo’s arrangements recalls Hans Arp’s 1917 *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance)*. As in the famous earlier example—a piece whose formal elegance belies its origin story—the relationships among elements in Aguayo’s compositions can appear simultaneously arbitrary and highly orchestrated. In one work from 2014, for example, eleven black shapes—two triangles, two circles, five thick lines, one U-shaped form, and one irregular quadrilateral with a wavy edge—are evenly distributed

across a white ground; just as in Arp's collage, the forms float freely but without touching or overlapping. In another canvas (also 2014), a multitude of components—black dots, a dark-red triangle, some white squares, and many long rectangular strips of black, pink, purple-brown, gray, yellow, or blue—are piled one on top of another, resembling the leftover scraps of a Bauhaus Vorkurs exercise, or a child's art-activity kit.

Shape may trump gesture in these paintings, but that's not to say the artist's hand isn't detectable. Aguayo's unevenly painted surfaces (their impasto heightened by the artist's addition of marble dust to his acrylic paint) and the ragged contours of his forms betray his lingering attachment to the expressive presence of the artist. Having previously described his paintings as sites where "traces of decision-making are revealed and obscured," Aguayo seems to imply that the artist's subjectivity is more important than any specific set of formal concerns. While the impromptu nature of Aguayo's approach has its charms (his paintings, he states, are "never planned"), such an emphasis on intuitive process can create a hermetic logic; one wonders whether the artist intends his works to be in dialogue with issues outside their own self-contained ecology. This seems a fair question to ask given that both the history and the contemporary practice of abstraction are in the spotlight as of late—as evidenced by the Museum of Modern Art's 2012–13 exhibition "Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925" and the 2014 Whitney Biennial. What is the relationship, if any, between Aguayo's practice and the painted geometries of so many pre-World War II antecedents?

If there is a quality to Aguayo's paintings that is both intriguing and unsettling, it can be attributed to the individual elements of his basic visual lexicon, which are so autonomous as to take on quasi-anthropomorphic qualities. These simple geometric shapes carry over and repeat from one painting to the next, becoming recurring characters in a series of vignettes whose narrative arc remains unclear. Unmoored from both noncompositional logic and pure spontaneous gesture, these forms hover, uneasily, in that ambiguous zone between chance and intention.