

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS DUBLIN

Phillip Allen

Kerlin Gallery

By Declan Long | May 2017

Until about five years ago, Phillip Allen's paintings had two distinct—and dramatically contrasting—characteristics. One was an energetically inventive, frequently cartoonish style of colorful drawing. In each of his ebullient oil-on-board works he would essay illusionistic depictions of strange spaces, shapes, or structures—envisioning fanciful 3-D forms within the flat confines of a painting's surface. The other hallmark of Allen's art, however, was a preoccupation with the actual three-dimensional properties of paint: an interest declared in his prodigal application of heavy, viscous clumps of swirling, streaking, many-hued impasto along the top and bottom edges of each composition. These dense thickets became above and below boundaries, partially framing a central playing field of pictorial contrivance. Some paintings elaborated deliriously spacey sequences of swooping Op-art arcs or shooting Vorticist vectors. Others focused on strikingly peculiar, quasi-figurative imagery: chimerical shapes variously resembling monumental towers, loop-the-loop roller coasters, or proliferating speech bubbles. In all, though, the calculated artistic tasks of picturing, constructing, and communicating were conducted in parallel with demonstrations of painting's pleurably messy materiality. Illusion was set off against the haptic, allusions were set off against structures, and sign systems were juxtaposed with the pure substance of slathered oils.



Bombay Soutin, 2016, oil on board, 10 1/4 × 11 3/4"

Later, Allen started collapsing these distinctions. The large-scale works featured in his 2013 “oxblood” show at Kerlin Gallery, or in his 2014 “Tonic for Choice” at the Approach in London, projected a more miasmic, unsettled sense of space and more fluidly unstable internal structures. These paintings were full of melting and merging forms, simple shapes given a disorderly appearance: crumbling semicircles and triangles streaked with dripping paint, or roughly sketched, spliced-together assortments of outsize commas and quotation marks. Many such paintings seemed, uncharacteristically, like angsty experiments. The “oxblood” works, in particular, were considerably more somber and fretful than before. And even if “Tonic for Choice” signaled a return to sunniness and verve, the paintings’ jam-packed, motley arrangements of overlapping punctuation marks betrayed artistic agitation and uncertainty.

The entropic descent toward disorder in Allen's work lately has reached productive depths of painterly intensity. His recent show “Deepdrippings” displayed an altogether new forcefulness and concentration, just as it also saw the artist convincingly reengage with previously successful processes. Several small and midsize paintings in this exhibition were once again framed with absurdly lumpy and uneven rows of clotted color. But this time the space within was a flattened match for the outer edges: a central, loosely patterned plane composed of the same richly

marbled raw material that surrounded it. The crude, toughened mounds of blue, yellow, and pink paint in *Bombay Soutin* (all works cited, 2016), become refined as a beautifully flecked abstract composition in the smoothed-out center. *Sluglimo (Art of the Stomach Version)* is structurally similar, but sludgier at the edges and more dense and murky inside the deliberately unlovely frame. Paint seems churned up, then evened out.

Such works appear to prioritize material density over compositional design. An extraordinary compacting of components calls to mind the phenomenon of dynamic range compression in present-day music production: The signal-processing operation guarantees super-loud impact at the expense of sonic nuance. The effects of Allen's painterly compressions are often more delicate—the flat inner space of *Austin Midnight*, for example, has the finely patterned intricacy of polished terrazzo—but the frequent sense of urgent aesthetic simultaneity, of too much happening all at once, certainly has a contemporary feel. The larger “Deepdrippings” paintings, 2016—, were comparably intense in their kaleidoscopic complexity: busy, warped spaces, with wavy vertical bands of gray or creamy white alternating as an unsteady ground, over which countless little strips of zesty color are frenetically scattered. These are dizzying works, sending our eyes in a dozen directions at once. Stand close, though, and you discover their extreme density, too: They are as hectically distracting as the world we live in, but as substantial as the ground we stand on.