

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Esteban Vicente

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Made up of eight works on canvas, Miles McEnery's "Esteban Vicente" is a compact survey that spans four decades of the titular artist's career, beginning with his 1961 *No. 7* and ending with his 1998 *Experience*. The show clarifies Vicente's sustained interest in mixing primary colors and his uptake of highly saturated close tones, with this culminating in his eventual introduction of neon-phosphorescent chartreuse. From the cyan-red flanks of *Water Mill* (1963) to the springing citrus and warm canary plateaus of *Experience*, Vicente's vivid abstract forms are both unbounded—meaning that they are bereft of line-based demarcation—and, as he himself observed, "austere." The latter mark betrays Vicente's deeply held view that an artist's palette choices ought to be unwavering and dense. Despite his opposition to circumscribing his passages of paint (as we might expect from Joan Miró, for instance), Vicente sought to coalesce his brushstrokes into unified forms rather than gesture-dashed tracts, distinguishing his contained color fields by way of tonal contrast. This, alongside his principled opposition to translucence, makes Vicente, as compared to many of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, primarily a colorist.



*Experience*, 1998, Oil on canvas, 52 × 42 inches.  
Courtesy of the Harriet and Esteban Vicente Foundation  
and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.

Abstract Expressionism can broadly be divided into two painterly tendencies. On the one hand we find a biomorphic approach to abstraction that draws on Surrealist automatism, an approach, inaugurated by Roberto Matta and developed by artists like William Baziotes, Peter Busa, Gerome Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock, that hews towards outlined painterly structures. On the other hand is a tendency exemplified by Willem de Kooning, in which forms are separated by way of pure, unbounded passages of paint. As Irving Sandler put it in *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970), de Kooning "was contemptuous of purist aesthetics for its rejection of subject matter," but defined the latter vis-à-vis palette choices. In his 1951 *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* article, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," de Kooning made this apparent by clarifying that his approach to painting privileged an "abstract and indefinable sensation" that emerged from the regimented use of color.

Like de Kooning, Vicente's paintings are directed by an interest in "a sense of the physicality of the world," as he remarked to Robert Cordier in an undated interview. Unlike Breton and his followers, Vicente, as he explained in his treatise on painting, was "against automatism." Vicente was, instead, "after the sensuousness of the material." Miles McEnery's chronological curation makes this clear although viewers could have benefitted

from the inclusion of Vicente's early collages, which were formative for Vicente's consequent segmentation of space in his paintings. This interest in dividing the pictorial field is nascent in Vicente's earliest works. For instance, *No. 7's* composition includes scalloped and scabrous verdant green furrows, offset by a fogged block of orange-clay. To the left is a similar set of amber and mud-hued elements, the greenery and mounded brown connected by ocean-blue vessels. Viewed from a sufficient distance, these topographic elements suggest a bird's eye view of a foreign wetland. Intimately considered, the cream-impasto surface gloss shimmers, its glow unifying the scabbed mounds of paint.



*No. 7*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 27 × 36 inches. Courtesy of the Harriet and Esteban Vicente Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.

*No. 7*, coated with a thick, encrusted plane, is the only work in this exhibition endowed with a dimensional surface texture. Although this suggests the granular complexity of the natural world, it compromises Vicente's ability to blend tones, a skill which he progressively honed over subsequent years. Vicente's paintings, including his abstracted landscapes, grew flatter as he introduced semi-rectangular segments of variable sizes, their contoured edges deliquescing in and out of the foreground. Never do these enveloping edges reveal underpainting. That Vicente achieves this without resorting to hard edges is laudable. In his 1964 essay, "Painting Should be Poor," Vicente wrote that he aimed "to achieve luminosity through opaque color" before noting that he rejected "the idea of transparent color." Vicente makes good on this, as his heavy segments either overtake other passages or are undercut by them, but are never diaphanous.

Some works, like *Sideways* (1983), are weighted along the upper segments of the picture plane with soft forms that, by dint of tonal contrast, provide the viewer's eyes with an optical starting point. In *Sideways*, the visual anchor is a frenetic cadet blue bluff that is interrupted by a thick, taupe brown film which is in turn gingerly cut by cinereous, moss, and terracotta horizontal furrows. These lines, painted unevenly, partially undrape the russet background. Contra Barnett Newman's "zips," they complement rather than sharply interrupt that which they abut. In *The Road* (1994) and *Untitled* (1996), Vicente also deploys vertical forms that, like their horizontal antecedents, coalesce with the recessionary visual plane.

The strongest works on view, such as Vicente's untitled oil-on-canvas (1996) and *Sideways*, segment space, demonstrating not only the artist's commitment to colorism but, perhaps unwittingly, to form as well. Painter

Tom McGlynn, in his 2022 catalogue essay “Atmospheric Disturbances,” describes Vicente’s vernacular as “lyrical,” distinguishing his “ultimate format” from “[Mark] Rothko’s and Barnett Newman’s paintings, which imbued composition ... via symbolically reductive schema.” According to McGlynn, “Vicente opted for the quiet truth of ... inbuilt structures that emerge when adequately coaxed” through “close attention to color, form, and compositional structure.” I would submit that, in fact, Vicente’s works demonstrate the inescapability of form, even where it is putatively secondary to coloristic emphasis. In “Painting Should be Poor,” Vicente remarked that “no painting is completely separated from the others that came before or come after. The artist has to be part of something.” For Vicente, this “something” belongs to color qua color, a phenomenon which, at its best, amounts to color qua form.



*Sideways*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 42 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the Harriet and Esteban Vicente Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.