

Noughts and Crosses: David Row at Loretta Howard

September 6 to October 20, 2018

by Peter Malone



David Row, Counter Clockwise, 2018. Oil on canvas, 65 x 110 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Loretta Howard Gallery

Much of David Row's earlier abstraction was predicated on dark, often curved bands that meandered over textured monochromatic fields. Curves have also appeared with frequency in his subsequent development, though with each iteration they are put to surprisingly different use. Like many abstract painters, Row works in series. And this latest, of relatively small paintings, continues with the irregularly shaped canvases he has contended with for several years now, but with a few notable changes typical of his restive approach

Unlike the chromatically rich selection shown at the Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, in 2017, Row limits his palette here to a mid-range cobalt blue combined with black and white. From this narrow medley he manages to coax compelling variations by applying two interdependent rubrics: the first is the commonplace method of controlling a color's intensity by adjusting the amount of surface each occupies; the other involves cropping painted forms—reclining Os and Xs—with multiple diagonal edges. The Os in particular, when interrupted diagonally suggest a larger shape that amplifies each painting's scale and pictorial depth. Illusions of deep space thwart emphasis on surface, but never entirely. Between barely contained expanse and concentrated interlocking geometry these images exude a complexity one would not expect from such small panels.

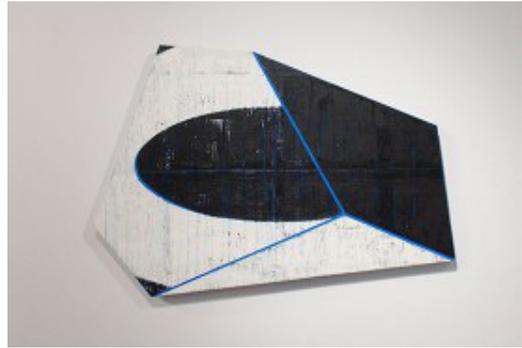
Most of the nine pieces in the main gallery are less than two feet in any direction. Their compression induces a viewer to seek answers that may explicate their elaborate construction. Axis 2 (2018), for instance, teeters between resolution and near chaos depending on which spatial illusion catches a momentary optical bias.

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Searching for patterns within the series, one discovers that five of the nine paintings, including *Axis 2*, are made of components consisting of shapes formed of three, four and five sides respectively. It's not a hard and fast rule but occurs often enough to hook the viewer into a heightened awareness of how the shapes fit together. Such casual consistency is typical of Row's approach to composition, as he seems willing to follow a formula so long as it produces a desired visual effect. Though his canvas shapes seem to revisit issues tackled in the 1970s by Kenneth Noland, the analytical depth to which they are subjected, particularly in this series, indicates a willingness to investigate many aspects of abstraction simultaneously. He avoids ideological traps. Pitting one abstract element against another suggests a permanent restlessness. The search itself seems to be the point.

Selectively distressed surfaces are introduced into otherwise largely hard-edged compositions without looking arbitrary or directed toward novelty. Whites are slightly dulled with embedded gray newspaper text, too small to read and often reversed or upside-down, but visible enough as body text to suggest a faint gray tone. Though unreadable, they add a temporal aspect. The speed one brings to scanning the lines produces a braking effect on one's sensitivity to the scraping, which is gestural and thus implies quick, assertive movement. A dynamic counterpoint develops. The crater-like gouges left by granules of sand embedded in the wet paint act against the text, while the text acts against the sweep of the painted curves.



David Row, *Axis 2*, 2018. Oil on Panel, 16 x 23 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist and Loretta Howard Gallery

Xs and Os are not just cropped but overlapped and occasionally split. *Counterclockwise*, (2018) the one large piece in the show and the source of the show's enigmatic title, imposes a black ellipse on a blue background with a large keystone-like section severed and pulled slightly out of alignment. This partial amputation forces a change in scale that might be more discovered than planned. Either way, it remains impossible to decipher which section was pulled from the other—which was the fixed element, and which has been moved. There is no way to resolve it but to recognize that Row is not after gestalt. The dynamic born of his intuitive method becomes the primary element with which a viewer engages the work. One is drawn visually into his thought processes.

Considering much of current abstract painting's focus on spontaneity and one-off effects, Row's tendency to revisit abstract elements embraced by earlier painters—not just Noland but Ellsworth Kelly, Dorothea Rockburne and Al Held, with whom Row shared a close friendship—may seem retrograde. But Row evidently depends on viewers willing to look beyond the superficial recognition of a style's elements. He's interested in how the elements function in a single painting. His aesthetic hangs off slender threads tying abstract painting to both feeling and intellect.

David Row is accessible in the best sense of the word. The way each painting in this show begs for engagement, first with itself and then with the whole series, recalls the provocative hang quotes in a magazine article that begs a full reading.