



Pat Steir: *Dark Green, Red and Silver*, 2009-11, oil on canvas, 131 5/8 by 132 inches; at Cheim & Read.

PAT STEIR CHEIM & READ

There is a moving new intensity to the seven huge paintings, produced over the past three years, in Pat Steir's recent exhibition. Through years of working with what is essentially a simple idea—that of pouring layers of paint (either from a container or off the edge of a brush) directly onto the canvas—Steir has acquired not only a certain sagacity but also a palpable poetic conviction. Having early on internalized John Cage's chance operations and Sol LeWitt's procedural rigor, Steir has progressed steadily with her own vision and innovations.

For years, Steir gave us many expansive "Waterfall" paintings evoking mist and rain, moody and always beautiful. Now the proof is in the pudding, so to speak: she seems to have made a breakthrough in her recipe. Though she still follows the notion of a *laissez-faire* procedure in composing her paintings, she constantly tweaks the proportion of pigment to medium. Her skeins of oil paint are now possessed of a relaxed simplicity, while coloristically they have grown more complicated. Just as an expert chef will "add some salt," Steir's exact recipe cannot be pinned down—but it does matter. She might use a layer of thin green paint, but the exact green and degree of thinness (which she has learned to intuit) makes all the difference between a masterful move and just dumping some thin stuff on. Steir exemplifies the old rule that

the best painters are always engaged in a learning process, at which they almost always get better.

Each of the paintings in this exhibition, save one, is composed on a single canvas panel around 11 feet square, and generally presents a central vertical division that gives the impression of a diptych. *Dark Green, Red and Silver* compiles a very dark green (perhaps viridian) on the left side and a rising metallic curtain of silver over a lighter green (perhaps sap) on the right. The red of the title is felt more than seen and lies beneath some of the green layers and perhaps a thin layer of silver. Mysteries in the layering are sometimes decoded at the central division, where the colors come together to form the compositional bifurcation, or at the edges in shadows and slivers. Dark and light play off each other again in *Red, Green, Blue and Gold*, which appears to be almost black on the left and a rich and varied gold on the right. The titular red and blue are intoned rather than explicit. The exception among the paintings was *Valentine*, a slightly smaller (approx. 10-by-9-foot), solid and complex red inflected with a darker red at the left edge and orange at the right. The complementary and contrasting colors in all the works produce in them a strong physical and seemingly magical power. This is painting in a grand tradition.

—Stephen Mueller