

DENSE PACK

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These are small paintings, compact paintings, paintings with no spare parts and no extra room for anything, least of all unfulfilled promises. These paintings are very much of their time, but as such, a corrective to its excesses.

That time, our time, is a protracted period of spasmodic expansions and contractions, inflations and deflations in virtually every domain of culture, politics and the economy, spasms which have propelled us toward exaggerated, never disinterested aesthetic expectations, preposterous, inherently compromised critical rhetoric and the jaded regrets of too many cotton-mouthing “mornings after.” Buffeting us, bamboozling us, nearly drowning us only to leave us high and dry, these waves of excitation have hit the shores of collective consciousness with the regularity of magazine publication, exhibition cycles, and lecture series and the disorienting, demoralizing effects of equally predictable inundations along the Mississippi down into the hurricane-prone Delta.

Summer storms are brewing as I write, and tempests seem inevitable this fall; however, in the interest of following the lead of the work I am addressing, terseness is the order of the day. So having briefly noted the imperiled flood plane where Ann Pibal has dug herself in and built levees against prevailing currents, I will abandon the broader themes introduced above to concentrate on the work itself, work that, image by image, is concentration incarnate.

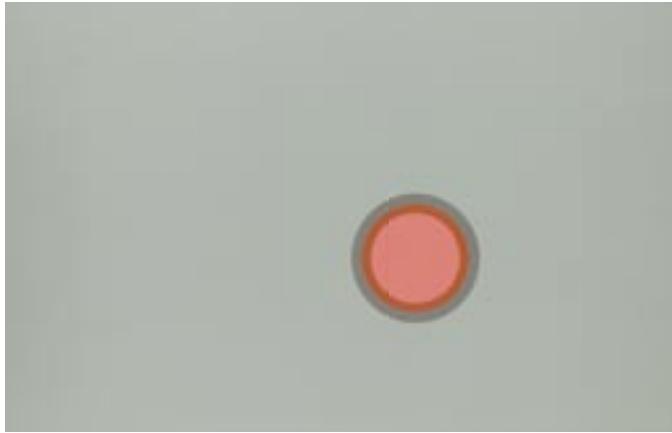
The strength of Pibal’s paintings—I cannot call them canvases since they are executed on metal panels—resides first and foremost in their self-containment. That insularity is in part a function of their modest proportions. So saying, I am again invoking the feeling they give of being bastion islands in the flux of fashion, knowing full well that their own consummate stylishness is one of the reasons they so successfully resist

external pressures. For proof of this, go to the Brooklyn Museum and witness the inviolate presence of the Pibal that hangs there in galleries crammed with much bigger works—though few are as taut—and notice on the label that it is a gift of Alex Katz, the quintessential New York School stylist who would not waste his time on art that cannot compete in wall power with his own generally expansive pictures. But then Katz—who composes small and then enlarges—knows that the dynamic sturdiness of an image is wholly a product of the rigor of its internal armatures in tension with its outer boundaries.

Pibal’s spare pictorial structures strictly observe that rule, whether they consist of visibly locked-in matrices or of frameworks whose joinery is incompletely articulated but palpably considered throughout. That is, grids in which sections may suddenly drop without viewers ever losing their bearings or the overall framework of the composition imploding into disjunctive fragments. Pibal is a modern if not latter-day modernist constructivist rather than a post-modernist deconstructionist. In that regard she is, like Katz’s contemporary Al Held, a spatial engineer. Moreover, consistent with her otherwise divergent purpose—albeit like a machine tool designer rather than a bridge builder—she is just as muscular, and the capacity to absorb counter-forces imbues every dexterous line she traces.

Unlike Held, though, she locates the sublime not in vast baroque volumes and polychrome plateaus but in zones that are close to hand, intimate zones where predominantly close valued hues are lit up by flashes of saturated color as lightening bolts illuminate the desert at dusk or neon signage sparks in the rain along vacant thoroughfares at the urban margins of the American landscape. Am I going too far in making such analogies? If so, then the artist can safely disown the comparisons when it comes her turn to speak. For me they serve to identify sensations I have had in the “real world” that are evoked by my experience of Pibal’s made up, abstract world. For in the final analysis

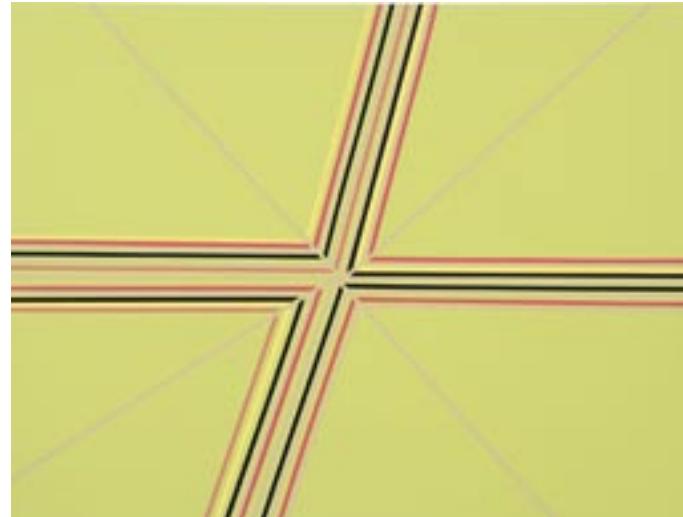
Drifter 2004, 26.75" x 42"



such “correspondences,” as Charles Baudelaire labeled these associations, are what draw us to otherwise unfamiliar images and they continually discharge their poetic stimulus long after we have absorbed all that is fresh and distinctive about them.

Now, if I insist a little more on these “edge-city” correlations it is to further distance Pibal’s work from precedents it may superficially resemble and is undoubtedly indebted to. Obviously, for an artist who nests slivers of finely calibrated, rarely primary colors, these include the work of Josef Albers. There is no denying that Albers, the pedagogue, wrote the indispensable manual of chromatic manipulation, *On the Interaction of Color*. But he did not write a recipe book for art, any more than Arnold Schoenberg foresaw, much less dictated, all the expressive uses of the twelve-tone scale. Over the course of time Schoenberg’s example has inspired everything from John Cage’s silence to dissonant hybrids involving every imaginable musical genre and idiom, from those developed by Milton Babbitt to the improvisations of post-Bebop jazz. “Different strokes for different folks / And so on, and so on, and scooby doobie doobie,” as the Über-aesthete Sly Stone would have it. Pibal, it strikes me, is as much a product of Stone’s America as of Albers’s, as much or more a creature of strip malls as of pure Utopian geometries. Anyway, I am, and much of the public for painting is, and it is likely they will see in

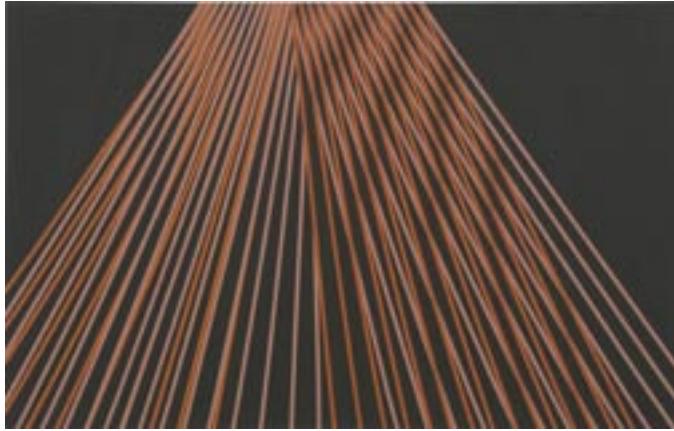
TuffStuff 2005, 20" x 22"



the shimmer and glare of her interactive palette more of what they know than of what the Bauhaus master theorized. And that is as it should be, since painting that really turns on the lights is never about lessons learned and systems applied but about intuitions enhanced by knowledge and explored to the limits of that knowledge—and beyond.

Pibal does all of this within the physical confines of her chosen formats, grasping that those voluntary physical constraints release rather than bottle up her gift for invention. Initially her work hewed toward severe, arguably “minimalist” strains of American abstraction, though everyone has an argument with that rubric, above all those to whom it is customarily assigned. No matter, Pibal is not an ism-obsessed artist at any level. Then came a phase of subdued but recognizably Op-Art dazzle in which the oblique was pitted against the squared-off, and cool acid greens and blues were flickeringly juxtaposed to off-key oranges and pinks or to earth or flesh tones masquerading as tints of a more aggressive decorative or cosmetic order. In both bodies of work, pigment went down matte and flat. Lately there have been disturbances in that once uniformly inflected painterly field while

PetitRoi 2005, 13" x 21"



AERIE 2008, 44" x 66"



shades of gray, slate blue, moss green, deep pumpkin, maroon and brown have become more common. In broad expanses brush marks have started to show, agitating everything in their vicinity or reinforcing our sense of the relative fixity of those elements in which brush strokes have been entirely subordinated—like tides washing up on breakwaters, if I may return to the aquatic metaphors with which I began. With these developments Pibal reminds us that she issues from a long tradition of American gesturalism and that even her taped, die-cut bars of pigment should be read in terms of how they thrust into and configure the comparative emptiness surrounding them, although seldom have monochrome “backgrounds” felt so solid or looked so much like criss-crossed “foregrounds.”

It is with respect to this ability to give subtle moves dramatic accents and to make little pictures register with the impact of large ones that Pibal’s work bears an affinity to that of another master of deceptive modesty, Thomas Nozkowski. To be sure Nozkowski, who came of age aesthetically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has approached this proposition from a different generational point of departure and in the course of a four-decade career has charted alternative tributaries of “mainstream” New York painting. That Pibal’s work betrays no nostalgia for previous eras—of the first half of the twentieth century or the second—

suggests that she is equally at home with her generational cohort, that of the 1990s, which also includes Tomma Abts, with whom striking, reciprocally informative contrasts can be noted.

Still, to the degree that I am right in thinking that this is the moment for both of them, such a conviction derives from something intrinsically similar in their work. That something, contrary to first impressions, is an immodest ambition—specifically the drive to create uniquely memorable images rather than consistent products—but one that nevertheless recognizes the dangers of over-statement and values the virtues of what may seem to be understatement until viewers have had a chance to re-gauge absurdly dilated sensibilities and bring them back into the sharp focus required by thoroughly considered, completely realized painting of every scale. Right now doing the right thing favors compression and decisiveness over grandiosity and approximation, over the supersized and the generic but excessively finished. Pibal has come down on the side of making things that could be no other size and no other way. Nor need they be to satisfy those who care to pay attention. Her paintings are promises made with full understanding of the stakes and the competition—and they are promises kept, one by one by one.