

# ANN PIBAL: SWIMMING IN THE OCEAN AT NIGHT

ART NEW  
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By Craig Stockwell

I first saw Ann Pibal's work at Mark Protetch gallery in NY in 2008. She has, since, been showing widely in NY and internationally and her work was included in the DeCordova Biennial last year. I am always drawn to minimalism, challenged by the issue of formalism, and seduced/repulsed by gorgeous color and craftsmanship and these paintings delivered all of the above and left me knowing that I was seeing it all presented in some new way.

An new way that touched on issues of formalism, minimalism and quiet/intelligent/modest painting but somehow presented something more. I visited Ann in her North Bennington, Vermont studio in late August and the question I brought was about her ability to make something new of these concerns. The answer I got totally surprised my expectations and deeply satisfied my sense of how good art happens, when it does. Ann came to these paintings after she stopped painting, around 1998.

Ann stopped painting because there was too much of everything. First, the oil paint and mediums she was using were toxic, the streets outside her Brooklyn studio were full of huge trucks hauling toxic waste, and the paintings she, were making were laden with thick accumulations of crap. She had come to a point where she could not answer basic questions such as: what are you doing, why are you doing it, why is it justified? She says she no longer wanted to have to, "apologize for being superfluous." In reflecting on this Ann also now realizes that this was, perhaps, a necessary and even predictable developmental moment. She was done with graduate school and a few years out in NY making her way as an artist, the time of institutional context had passed and she was forming a relationship now as an adult artist and needed to figure out, "what I wanted to get to, rather than what I was trying to avoid." She set out to do that, almost at a crawl.

Out with the oil paint, she began working with only Color-Aid paper and acrylic paint. She reduced her gestures to blocks of color. She set constraints and posed questions. She developed very simple procedural processes based on such moves as doubling images, doing the same study twice at a different scale, and mirroring images.

How the paintings are made offers important insight into the apparent but contrary relationship to formalism. Formalist painting traditionally follows a rigorous idea and methodology through in a serial manner. An idea is proposed and worked through, relationships of color, line, and form are carefully examined through many iterations. These paintings take a different path. They are painted on beautifully crafted honey-comb aluminum panels that are prepared in Massachusetts. All panels are slightly different in size (thus avoiding continuity) within a range that is mostly under 30" in any measurement, although at the time of my visit there were also several new mid-sized panels in process. The panels are first painted in a starter color and several panels are worked on at once. Ann deliberately counters any direct efforts at having the paintings become serial, and the painting process is distinctly direct, improvisational and non-compositional. There is little or no editing or painting over once the base coats are developed and the lines and shapes are introduced. The use of color is also intuitive and improvisational, choices are made spontaneously. Initially, with this work, Ann was determined to avoid spatial reference and worked entirely with flat paint and colors. Recently she has allowed herself to perform brushy paint handling and spatial illusion. She has largely ceased to worry about many of the political and referential concerns that sometimes tied up her earlier work. This, too, might be understood as a developmental step. We are, in a sense, required to wrestle with the context of our efforts during a significant formative stage. At some point one hopes for the burdens of self-conscious worry to lift and the work to obtain its own momentum.

When asked about formalism, Ann replies that, "the idea of formalism is often poorly and narrowly understood." When asked what her paintings are really about she answers, "swimming in the ocean at night." This response initially baffles me, but once I think it out, it makes sense. This response offers the clearest explanation for why it is that these apparently sparse and formal paintings offer something so fresh and sensuous.