



PERCEPTION



JOHN M. ADAMS

BY ALICE ROSS

There's prolific and then there's *prolific*. Artist John M. Adams, who has thirty-some acrylic-and-oil works in various stages of completion, gives new meaning to the notion of productivity.

"I keep as many paintings going as I can," he says. "It makes sense to work on multiples." Lined up on shelves in his Reston studio, John's eight-by-ten paintings from his ever-expanding *Sitting Still* series reveal his fascination with medium, layer and texture.

"I'm a 'medium' freak," he says. "In grad school, I spent time researching and developing my own mediums. There have been technical advances since then. I find that, with acrylics, I can build up transparent layers that actually have a physicality to them."

The multiple layers and dimensions are intentional, says John: "I don't want a painting to be a one-liner. I want it to change over time. A piece can look different in different spaces. And it can look different as the light changes over the course of a day."

Although John is methodical when it comes to exploring mediums, he takes a different approach to the actual application of color on his hardwood surfaces: "I work very intuitively as opposed to mapping out specific steps. I end up doing what the painting tells me to do." In

creating one of his larger works, "Obscured Vantage," he began by laying down one very dark layer. "Then," he says, "I allowed the result to tell me where the light colors would go."

Despite the unpredictability of the images, most of them incorporate horizontal lines, a signature of John's work. "For me, the horizontal lines form a structure that allows you to keep track of the chaotic marks," he says. "It's natural to want to slap a grid on the overall piece so that you have a reference point. This allows you to see interactions between the reference points. To some extent, the lines represent our perception and memory—I'm trying to compartmentalize it."

John recognizes that his paintings are partly objects—rectangular sculptures, perhaps. (One of his artistic influences is minimalist sculptor Donald Judd.) Indeed, the marks he makes can be either

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OPPOSITE: "FATHOM," OIL AND ACRYLIC ON BIRCH PANEL, 48" x 37"



additive or subtractive. “Sense of Presence” seems to “teeter between object and image,” he says. “You start to see depth; it’s part window and part door.”

Enigmatic titles, such as “Breach,” “Fathom” and “Saturation Point,” offer few clues for interpretation. “My titles are obscure enough,” says John. “I want viewers to bring their own experiences to a piece, not just relate to something representational. The works have an ambiguous familiarity—a memory you can’t quite remember, a dream you can’t quite recall. They start to resemble abstracted landscapes, but I would never call them that. They’re compositions that are almost mental snapshots. They contain elements of a kind of flash—a transition that has been frozen.”

In describing his creative approach, John maintains that he looks at painting as “a poetic process,” a way to absorb what’s going on at a particular moment. “I move paint around and then look at relationships,” he says.

John is currently working on a long-distance collaboration with minimalist composer Matt Sargent of Hartford, Connecticut. The project will culminate with John’s creation of a painting on a large surface in response to a live performance of “Ghost Music,” a percussive piece by Matt.

“Matt thought his composition was about making marks—using space; it seems to fit in with my work,” says John. “The spaces between the musical marks seem to mirror spaces in my paintings.”

The installation will also feature an exhibit of works by John and Reston artist J.T. Kirkland. “We’re still solidifying our ideas,” says John. “J.T. and I are starting with identical pieces of wood. He will create companion pieces that are reactions to my pieces, and I will react to pieces that he creates.”

Now in his fifth year as visual arts chair at Chantilly High School, John teaches upper-level studio classes and finds that his interaction with his students occasionally affects his own work, he says: “Sometimes I’ll be teaching a design concept, creating contrast and value, for example. And then I’ll stop and ask myself, ‘Am I doing that? Why or why not?’”

John sees his smaller pieces as a suite of work that can be viewed on their own or hung in groups. He created these intimate images as a way to focus while working on larger pieces. “Painting is the one thing that slows me down,” he says. “I try to create paintings that slow other people down. There is something to be discovered there. If someone looks at a painting for more than thirty seconds, it’s a success.”

Beginning on April 25, John’s work from his *Sitting Still* series, along with several larger pieces, will be on view at the Greater Reston Arts Center (GRACE). He and two other participating artists will take part in a gallery talk during an opening reception on May 2, from six to eight p.m. GRACE exhibitions director Joanne Bauer describes John’s small-scale paintings as “meditations on the cosmos, thoughtfully composed but made out of chaos. It is difficult for an artist today to create something dynamic and fresh with abstraction, but he shows that it can be done in these complex, highly finished pieces.”

For more information about John’s exhibition at GRACE, visit www.restonarts.org. Additional examples of his work can be viewed at www.thefullempy.com.



THIS PAGE, TOP: “BREACH,” 48” x 37”; AND “OBSCURED VANTAGE,” 48” x 37”; OPPOSITE: “BREAK,” 20” x 17”. ALL ARE OIL AND ACRYLIC ON BIRCH PANEL.

