

Art in America

Jim Lee

NEW YORK,

at **Nicelle Beauchene**
by Nora Griffin



“Jim Lee and the Cream Tones,” the artist’s third solo show of abstract paintings at Nicelle Beauchene, demonstrated the almost musical way in which Lee riffs on colors, forms and materials from one work to the next. Music has long been a touchstone for Lee, as evident in his exhibition titles and in the sway between dissonance and harmony in his work’s formal qualities. Lee’s 2007 exhibition “Altamont,” at Freight & Volume, explicitly referenced the 1969 rock-and-roll festival and its anarchic spirit with painting-

Jim Lee: *Untitled (Cream Tone #6)*, 2015, flashe paint on linen over wood, 69 by 48 by 8 inches; at Nicelle Beauchene.

object hybrids that had a commanding architectural presence. A gentler approach, signaled by the artist's deepening commitment to the two-dimensional, was introduced with this show's title, which called to mind the bouncy soulfulness of a Motown group.

The exhibition featured 14 large paintings (all 2015), and 23 small works (2014-15). One wall of the gallery was dominated by 10 paintings on linen (each 69 by 48 inches), divided into two rows. Composed of discrete sections of white, cream, gray, black and raw linen, the surfaces have simple divisions that form rectangles, triangles and more indeterminate shapes. The neutral palette was offset in certain works by areas of silver or red. In their scale and imagery, they seemed boldly semiotic, like flags, but also laboriously handmade. Among the materials used in various combinations are oil paint, acrylic, spray enamel, chalk, staples, rubber and collaged fabric. Attention flickers between surface and support, sides and edges.

Three of these canvases have distinctive armatures, which cause the paintings to bulge out in long, smooth curves on the left. Viewed from the side, *Untitled (Cream Tone #1)* reveals its hand-sawed skeleton. The painting's surface is divided vertically into bright white and cream white, a slight difference highlighted by a cluster of staples that create lines edging upward from the bottom to where the two tones meet. Unlike Ron Gorchov's shieldlike paintings that have symmetrical, finely crafted stretchers, these works eschew the sublime in favor of an irreverent humor.

Unconventional installation is a hallmark of Lee's practice. *Untitled (Cream Tone #13)* rests against the wall on top of two small, hand-sewn pillows. The presentation recalls Chris Ofili's use of hardened balls of elephant dung to support some of his paintings. Lee's canvas is also notable for its loosely stretched corners, giving the impression that the painting has thrown itself together in the

heat of the moment.

Toward the back of the gallery was a salon-style arrangement of small works on paper, card stock or wood. Most are contained in three-toned frames, which Lee had fabricated from his own designs, in black, white and light-colored wood, mirroring a color scheme employed in several of the large paintings. These works teeter between the formless and the biomorphic and are as seductively tactile as the paintings. They are usually one color, featuring brushy swatches of bubblegum pink (a color Lee favors), pale yellow, turquoise or dark green; sometimes paint obscures pencil lines and oily residues. One piece makes the personal nature of these abstractions explicit: *Untitled (Formal Issues)*, composed in oil, graphite and collage, features the artist's name in thick white script on a black background.

Jim Lee's work is a mongrel mix of American and European sensibilities in abstraction, evoking Minimalism and the gritty romanticism of Art Informel. There is an appealing material equality in paintings that merge the roughness of stitched and stapled fabric with delicate passages of oil paint and attention to support structures. The result is a punkish mindfulness that is entirely his own.