

# The New York Times

## Review: Ryan Nord Kitchen: Small Abstracts, Big Impact

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APRIL 28, 2016



An installation view of Ryan Nord Kitchen's paintings in the show "Winter Paintings" at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery  
Credit Ryan Nord Kitchen, Maggie Shannon, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

Modernism has a substantial tradition of small abstract paintings — paintings that normal people, those lacking private museums or vast real-estate acreage — can live with. This tradition includes many artists, among them, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky (late), Alice Trumbull Mason and Myron Stout. The painter Bill Jensen revived it in New York in the early 1970s, as did, it seems, the Belgian Raoul De Keyser in Europe. Some current practitioners include Tomma Abts, Ann Pibal, E. J. Hauser and Etel Adnan.

Now the field has a brilliant newcomer: Ryan Nord Kitchen, 28, born in Minnesota; educated in Iowa and Baltimore; and making his New York solo debut at Nicelle Beauchene with "Winter Paintings," a show of 25 works measuring either 15 inches by 12 inches or 24 inches by 21 inches. As I've said before: Art you can take home in a taxi dissents from the big scale and site specificity that, regardless of medium,

are so highly favored if not fetishized by the current system of huge spaces, museum commissions and sprawling international exhibitions.

Mr. Kitchen works fast and loose on tablet-size canvases, reducing painting's proclivity for grand gesture to a series of intimate scribbles, lines, dots, notional marks and hints of

initials and artists' signatures, as well as landscape studies and textile design. They have wonderful palettes and exude an effortless, tossed-off charm that is easy to underestimate.

Seeing them in a group, however, emphasizes a careful system that accommodates a startling amount of variety.

First of all no more than three or four colors per canvas are used, and in noticeably different quantities, with the background color almost always being the most plentiful. In "Garden View," for example, a red field touched with bits of orange is alive with lines and scribbles of dark green; contains less frequent purple marks; and has just four incidents of yellow, including a sphere that resembles the sun and a scattering of dots.

"Winter Night 2" is black with mostly red marks, a few pink ones, minor touches of burnt umber, and four additions of white.

Second, the colors and strokes rarely overlap, creating a kind of democratic transparency. Whether in the background or foreground, nearly every brush stroke or scumble reads as an independent entity, often against bits of the raw linen — the ground behind the background color — that always glimmers through. And by some method many marks are negative, almost nothing but silhouettes of bare linen, ghosts of gestures, defined by the surrounding hues. Altogether we sense painting as a performance, an act of personal inscription (like poetry) and a system.

We also sense it as history there for the taking, a past with plenty to offer the present. For Mr. Kitchen that past includes not just the artists mentioned above, but also Pierre Bonnard (the French painter's vegetal lushness), Jackson Pollock (his mark-by-mark etchings) and even late Monet. That would be Mr. Kitchen's "Early Memory," which features a series of red lines suggestive of a Japanese footbridge surrounded by nature. Mr. Kitchen also evokes the larger pictorial history beyond painting and beyond the West, including wallpaper design and calligraphy.

The variety of formal effects raise the possibility that the hand and mind can devise endless interactions of colors and materials. Paint is numerous degrees of thick, thin or barely there; the numerous ways the linen shows through the background colors attest to a wide-ranging understanding of touch.

Usually the marks, background color and raw linen balance one another, especially in "Winter," where white accommodates black and green and bits of blue and the linen suggests the sleeping land. Sometimes the linen vies for dominance ("Warm Memory 2"). Sometimes the marks jump out, like the red ones against the aqua-blue of "Nature Walk."

When the titles' references to landscape prevail, the marks imply trees, hills, paths, undergrowth, mountains and even birds, indicating attention to American modernists like John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Charles Burchfield and the eccentric and undersung Abraham Walkowitz. And in the end, we interpret these colors suspended in another color however we want to, as an act of seeing, performing, writing or conceptualizing.

The works in this quietly stunning show have a kind of perfection that can make you wonder where Mr. Kitchen will go next. Yet he also asserts that there is plenty of unexplored land in those familiar modernist territories of the monochrome, all-over composition, painting-as-process and figure-ground relationships, in part by playing them against one another, in part by coaxing them to team up anew.