

# HYPERALLERGIC

## David Reed's Panorama

by John Yau on May 1, 2016



David Reed, "Painting #650" (2003–13/2014–15/2015–16), acrylic, alkyd on polyester, 35 x 84 1/2 inches (88.9 x 214.63 cm) (all images courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York)

The last time David Reed showed paintings in New York was in 2007, nearly a decade ago. In 2010, he exhibited working drawings and color studies at Peter Blum, when the gallery was located in Soho. Since then, he has had two museum shows in Germany: *David Reed – Heart of Glass: Paintings and Drawings 1967–2012* at the Bonn Kunstmuseum (June 28–October 10, 2012) and *David Reed: The Mirror and the Pool* at Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld (March 22–August 23, 2015).

This is how the press release for Reed's show at Museum Haus Lange described the exhibition:

Reed has conceived a site-specific work for Museum Haus Lange centered on one single painting that encompasses all of the rooms.

I mention this because his exhibition, *David Reed: New Paintings* at Peter Blum, which is now on 57th Street (April 21–June 25, 2016), is clearly related to the idea of painting as a site-specific installation made up of abutting panels, all of which can stand on their own. It is a single entity made up of multiple, distinct panels. Reed's interest in the relationship

between continuous seeing (what in film is called a “tracking shot”) and fragmented or episodic seeing (what in painting might be called the a multipaneled work) has preoccupied him for much of his career.



Installation view of “*Painting #650 - #656*”

Reed began exhibiting in New York in 1975, gaining attention for his “Brushstroke” paintings, which were done on narrow panels measuring 76 by 11 inches. After initially working in oil, he switched to acrylic and limited his palette to black and white or red and white, painting wet into wet. I was reminded of these early works, which I first saw shortly after moving to New York in the mid ’70s, when I came upon a work on paper dating from 1975 in his current exhibition at Peter Blum. “D-1” measures 17 by 109 inches: two narrow horizontal rectangles delineated in pencil, within which Reed has laid down long, single strokes of black acrylic paint.



David Reed, “*D-1*” (1975), acrylic and pencil on photographic backdrop paper, 17 x 108 inches (43.18 x 274.32 cm)

Reed, who was born in 1946, belongs to the generation of abstract artists who began exhibiting their work in the last five years of the 1970s, after Abstract Expressionism, Pop

art, Color Field painting, and Minimalism had occupied center stage. At this time, some of his contemporaries were looking back toward Albert Pinkham Ryder, Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove as models, but Reed did not reach into the past in order to bypass the styles and concerns that emerged in the 1950s and '60s. Instead, he found a way to embrace these divergent and even antagonistic impulses and build upon them; this was his way of going forward. Since then, he has incorporated aspects of installation art and film into his work, all as way to underscore painting's flexibility, its ability to be part of its time. I think that these moves have been far more influential than has been acknowledged, particularly in America.

Reed took the gestural brushstroke — regarded by one group (whose heroes were Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline) as the mark of subjective sincerity, while another group saw the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg as proof that the brushstroke had lost its power, serviceable only as a mechanically made, reproducible mark or as a sign to be repeated (a ready-made) — as the subject of his investigation. In this regard, he was closer to Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg, particularly the latter's "Factum 1" and "Factum II" (both 1957), than he was to de Kooning or Kline. However, in contrast to Lichtenstein, Reed was not being ironic, which these days seems like a fallback position.



David Reed, "Color study #3-#8" (2016), for "painting #650-#656, study A," acrylic, alkyd and oil on Dibond, overall dimensions 16 x 109 1/4 inches (40.64 x 277.5 cm)

Reed's exploration of the brushstroke has inspired him to bring together the mechanical and the handmade, as well as to incorporate aspects of Baroque art, installation art, film and photography. He has infused his paintings with a saturated light, choreographed sudden shifts of light and color, and separated the corporeal from the spectral. No one else came close to attaining the divergent effects of light that he could juxtapose in a single painting. In his work from the '90s, Reed somehow managed to bring together a two-dimensional surface with a transparent, film-like space. The surfaces had a glow that evoked Caravaggio and Alfred Hitchcock.

There are seven panels in Reed's installation at Peter Blum. Six span the gallery's longest wall, which faces east. The seventh panel, which is part of the installation, is on the other side of the doorway separating the main gallery from a smaller gallery-office space. With this gesture, Reed acknowledges that painting is contained by architecture, even as the artist attempts to extend it beyond its confines.

Reed's brushstrokes — the ones that seem to have been painted with an actual brush, the ones that could have been made with a foot long baker's knife (the kind used to spread and fold over cake frosting), and the ones that were done with a stencil — are applied



across a cold white ground. Isolated from each other, the various forms of brushstrokes and photographic facsimiles drift across the smooth white surface like survivors of an unknown cataclysm.



David Reed, "*Painting #653*" (2015–16), acrylic, alkyd on polyester, 35 x 84 1/2 inches (88.9 x 214.63 cm)

Edges of brushstrokes are echoed by the hard edges of blue, film-like forms. Elsewhere, two horizontal brushstrokes of different lengths are suspended side by side, near the panel's top edge, echoing the black bars in the drawing from 1975. The longer brushstroke on the painting's left side extends into the next panel. In fact, there is a form in every panel that extends into the one adjacent to it. The hard edges of the stenciled configurations come off as severed, embedded within the white panel and the wall on which the painting is displayed. Reed's isolated marks — each different from those adjacent to it — are distinct fragments working in tandem with the palette of blacks, grays, scarlet, lilac, and pale blues, a domain of mournful fragments.

There are four studies in the small gallery-office, with lots of neatly written notes. Highly conscious of sources and inspiration, the artist cites Rauschenberg's "Factum I" and "Factum II" as being influences, a statement that gives the two suspended brushstrokes another context. Despite his use of stencil and other mechanical means to embed his brushstrokes into his paintings, there is nothing ironic, cynical or smug about Reed's work. This challenges that view that the brushstroke died and the best we can do is be ironic about it. Moreover, Reed's mechanical strokes never devolve into citation or appropriation, challenging the long-held convention that postmodern abstract painters have no choice other than to be ironic appropriationists. Ever since he emerged in the mid '70s, Reed has been pursuing a course that rejects the literalism of the '80s. For more than 40 years, he has made ambitious work that is as fresh and as challenging as anything else being done by his generation. His current exhibition is the latest proof of his refusal to look back in nostalgia for the old days of painting.

*David Reed: New Paintings* continues at Peter Blum Gallery (20 West 57th Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through June 25.