



Natural Disorder

Gallery-Going

By STEPHEN MAINE
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For a romantic expressionist at heart Per Kirkeby likes to keep the viewer guessing. Born in 1938, the Danish artist became visible in America during the neo-expressionist 1980s with moody, brushy canvases that eschewed the human figure and traded in motifs grounded in the natural world, developed through a process that alluded to geological forces. With Abstract Expressionism completely out of fashion, Kirkeby was obstinate (or perverse) enough to embrace its influence on his work. For many years, he has resisted a slide down the slippery slope to landscape, complicating that genre by any means necessary. In a bracing show of new, smallish paintings at Michael Werner, the artist attempts to defy pictorial gravity by disorienting the viewer's conceptions of figure and ground, abstraction and representation, up and down.

The exhibition consists of 10 paintings, roughly 4 by 3 feet, in oil and tempera. All are "Untitled," dated 2007, and constitute a series. (Also on hand is a larger, horizontal, far less interesting canvas from 2005 in which two or three lumpy objects, roughly brushed and dimly seen, hunker down on an expansive tabletop busy with wood grain. The elephant in the room, this painting lays to rest any doubt that the smaller works have their roots in the classic, formulaic foreground, middle ground, and background.) The tempera underpainting, in lazily applied, neutral earth tones, acts as a foil for the chromatically saturated oils scraped and scribbled over them. In the past, Mr. Kirkeby has relied on layering as a procedural device, sometimes clogging his surfaces with multiple coats of pigment, insisting on a studio narrative that defies the basic tenet of Action Painting: the organic, spontaneous response to the painting's own trajectory as it unfolds in the present moment. Surprisingly, these new paintings are allowed to breathe.

Each is structured around a vertical band occupying the center section. The left and right sides are handled differently, with conspicuously distinct visual characteristics that yield a dynamic asymmetry. Eventually it dawns that they are upended landscapes, begging to be viewed

sideways. In one such work, snaggly calligraphic marks encroach from the left on the anchoring, orange shaft, streaked with violet and white drawn with uncapped paint tubes. To the right, a crusty, aggressive swath of pigments prevails, assiduously casual slatherings of green, blackish blue, and magenta. A rightward tilt of the head sends this shadowy wood back into the pictorial distance, beyond a fiery orange lake and foreground foliage.

Another canvas features a patchily painted column of dense and loamy greens, with alizarin and metallic gold marginalia. Viewed sideways, it readily transforms into a furrowed field backed by purplish hills under a glowering sky. Others hold their own balance, and while they tolerate being seen horizontally as landscape, they don't necessitate it. They do just fine on their own vertical, frontal terms. In these, the central band suggests the trunk of a tree, and the flanking areas are in much closer spatial relation, containing elements that may be read as branches. Among the most somber (and more within the emotional range familiar from Mr. Kirkeby's earlier work) is one in which a dense blue swath through the center, stolid and secretive as a phone booth, sprouts framing streaks in red and black, and flurries of spotty green that translate readily into foliage. The busily striped ground contributes to the all-over quality of the painting, and allies it to familiar, spatially flat abstraction.

Preventing these paintings from becoming a parlor game is their earnest sense of investigation. Repeatedly, the viewer's attention is returned to the pictorial mechanics of the representation of form and of space. The nature of the image is inconclusive, even evasive, since the mark of Mr. Kirkeby's brush can suggest crinkly bark, or a rippling river, or ruts in a dirt road. They don't try too hard to please. They have a take-it-or-leave-it insouciance. Mr Kirkeby prefers not to sew things up, but lets rough marks stand alongside each other unfinished and unresolved. He compensates the viewer for this hurried, harried facture with a newly expanded, darkly radiant palette.

Though the paintings are presented as a series, the show avoids the tedium of "seriality" for its own sake, engaging a wide expressive range that brings to mind the efforts of other painters to come to grips with a particular motif. In the early 1890s, Monet painted numerous views of a stand of poplar trees along the bank of the river Epte and there found a rigid but satisfyingly contrapuntal compositional structure with which he experimented, in his epochal manner, with the optically dematerializing effects of variously filtered light. Mr. Kirkeby is not Monet, nor even a Monet for our time. He doesn't use much white, and dirt, not light, is his thing. So he digs, with an admirably workmanlike focus and self-criticality.

Until January 19 (4 E. 77th St., between Fifth and Madison avenues, 212-988-1623).