

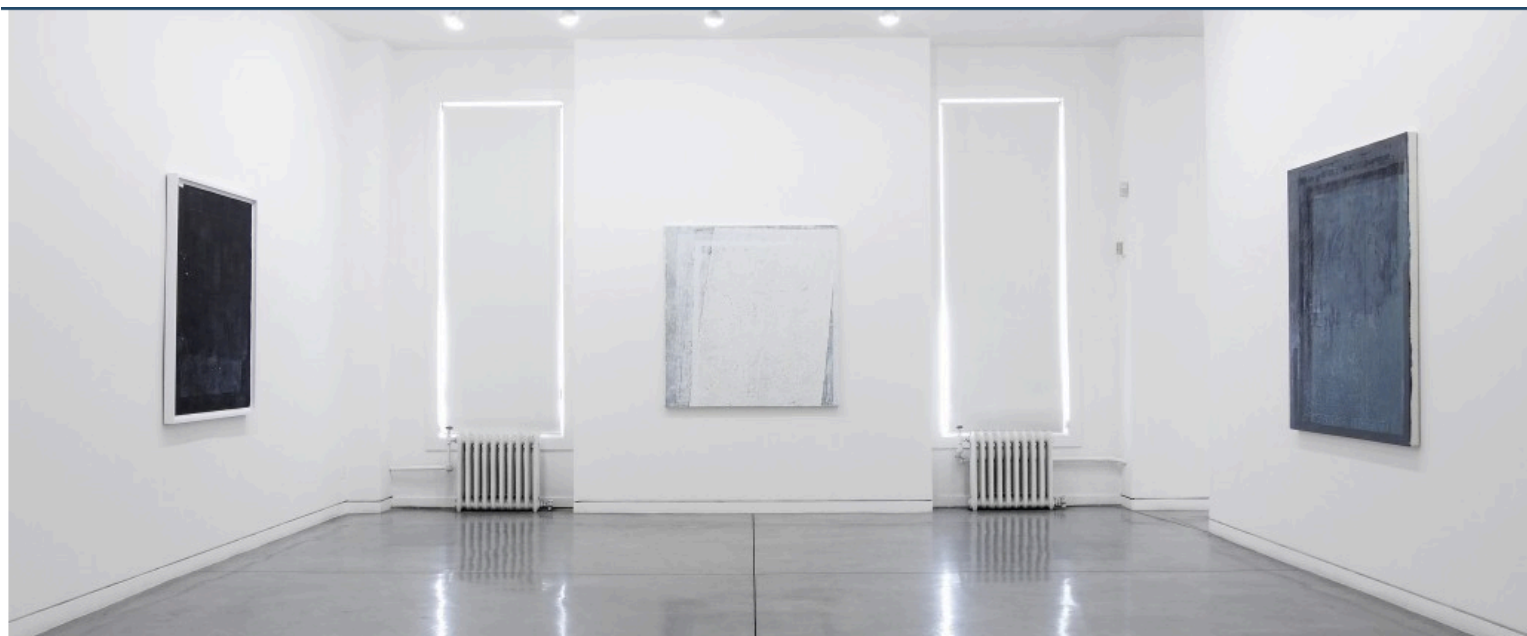
Art Practical:

Review

Are:

By Zachary Royer Scholz

June 7, 2016



Jessica Dickinson: Are:; installation view, Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Jessica Dickinson's exhibition at Altman Siegel offers a contemplative space in which to reflect on the deep resonances and accumulated impacts of seemingly incidental actions. The show, entitled *Are:*, includes three different types of work: evanescent notebook drawings, densely worked paper pieces, and slowly developed, deeply textured paintings on panel. The exhibition is also accompanied by a small catalog of Dickinson's *Remainders* works, graphite rubbings of the surfaces of her paintings made at various points during their slow evolution. Despite distinct material differences, these varied bodies of work form a cohesive whole that reciprocally feeds into, and off of, itself.

The most physically substantial works are the paintings, which are made with oil paint and limestone polymer on panel. Dickinson typically produces three to four of these paintings at a time and works on them slowly over a period of a year or more, periodically making her graphite-rubbed *Remainders* works from their surfaces. This gradual process invests each piece with intense, layered consideration, and gives the works an immensely satisfying, though diffuse, heft. The three paintings in the exhibition are all in cool, deftly modulated shades of gray, white, and blue. The two pieces hung

on adjacent walls in the main gallery are almost a diptych, sharing nearly identical formal structures in which the edges of the panels are echoed by offset and tilted planes as well as frames of different densities, pigments, and marks. The techniques and materials used in the paintings are aggressive and sculptural. Gouges and chips, scratches and scrapings have left the surfaces pitted and abraded like rough-hewn stone. However, the cumulative effect is diaphanous, the hacked fields of marks overlaying each other like muslin veils and drifting planes of shadow. The third painting, tucked furthest into the gallery, takes this unexpected textile quality in a heavier direction, its grid-like chipped expanse reading almost like heavy burlap or a woven rug.



Jessica Dickinson. *Are.*, 2015-2016; oil on limestone polymer on panel; 53 x 51 in.
Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Nearly as large as the works on panel are three commanding framed works on paper, one black, one red, and one blue. These pieces are less physically massive and temporally dense than the panel paintings, but exhibit similar logics. Each has been so heavily worked with pastels and other material such as wax crayon, graphite, and gouache that in places the heavy paper has given way. Even where the paper has held, the pigment application has left physical marks: stuttering stripes, glancing dents, and chisel-like gouges. Though all three pieces are worked similarly, the results diverge dramatically. The red piece is unexpectedly light. Its matte blood-red expanse is broken by dents and rents scattered across it like dropped straw. The white flecks glimpsed through the tears in its surface float delicately in the red expanse like constellations. The blue work that hangs opposite is by contrast inaccessibly menacing. The white flecks glimpsed through its torn holes set up a harsh, staccato rhythm that bounces the eye over its hard, flinty surface and icy depths. The black work, hung away from the other two on the long wall of the main gallery, is enigmatically indistinct. The hazy shapes and dim structures that lurk within it are sensed as much as seen. The ridges, rips, abrasions, and

bumps that softly mottle its surface are as much found as made. Their artless inevitability make the piece seem as much an artifact as an artwork.

The slightest and most problematic works in the show are Dickinson's notebook drawings in lightly scribbled colored pencil. Each individual drawing has been torn from facing pages of a bound sketchbook and framed along with seven others in a vertical column of eight. Three of these columns have been included in the show and are hung so close to each other that they read as a single, larger work. The exhibition's press release reveals that each vertical set of drawings relate to a specific painting, and their organization is how Dickinson ordered them in her studio to inform the successive actions and layers in those paintings. It is fascinating to see this aspect of Dickinson's output, but the sequenced presentation is overly didactic and diminishes the drawings by binding them to a specific painting and aligning them with the traditional role that drawings have played as preparatory materials. The press release notes that this is the first time these works have been exhibited, and I hope that in the future these drawings will be shown individually, so viewers can give these delicately bittersweet pieces the same measured, focused attention that Dickinson's other works invite and reward.

Taken on their own, Dickinson's works look vaguely like many other artists'. Her compositional tendencies, particularly her interest in edges and frames, are reminiscent of Richard Diebenkorn. Her scraped and torn surfaces obviously bring to mind Gerhard Richter's squeegee works and Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings, but also look remarkably like the chipped non-finito expanses in Michelangelo's stone *Slaves*. Her pieces' deep emotional palate resonates with the paintings of John Zurier. And the stillness of her work brings to mind Agnes Martin. Dickinson can variously be connected to all sorts of other artists too, such as Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Tuttle, and even Jules Olitski, but there is something critical to understanding Dickinson's practice that eludes the reach of these direct aesthetic comparisons.

What sets Dickinson apart from many of the artists to whom she can be formally compared is the interwoven relationship between the different aspects of her practice. Her drawings structure her paintings, which are rubbed to produce her *Reminders* works, which echo in her large paper pieces. This set of outputs cycles ceaselessly, cross-influencing and pollinating at all points as works seamlessly become sources and sources become finished works. This entangled contingency allows incidental slippages to amplify and accidents to become codified. It is a system whose reflexive generation of meaning over time leads to interesting, unforeseen ends, mirroring the way each of us authors and makes sense of our own lives, progressively, bit by bit, as we live them.