

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

DAVID REED / THORNTON WILLIS

by [David Carrier](#)

June 3rd, 2016

DAVID REED *New Paintings*

PETER BLUM GALLERY

APRIL 21 – JUNE 25, 2016

THORNTON WILLIS *Step Up*

ELIZABETH HARRIS GALLERY

MARCH 31 – MAY 7, 2016

Half a lifetime ago, around 1980, I started doing art criticism under the spell of Joseph Masheck, who was then the editor of *Artforum*. Inspired by Masheck's remarkable essays on the relationships between modernist painting and icons and other pre-Old Master sacred art—what he dubbed “hard-core” painting—I wrote almost exclusively in support of abstract painting. I was fascinated by two artists who have become famous, Thomas Nozkowski and Sean Scully, and I supported Sharon Gold, Stewart Hitch, David Reed, and Thornton Willis, who have had more difficult careers. Masheck offered a visionary theory of the meanings of abstraction, but had less to say about how abstract painting might develop. In truth, as recent history has shown, that question was never easy to answer. Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko didn't develop; Agnes Martin did. So, too, in very diverse ways, did Al Held and Brice Marden. But none of these artists seemed to offer viable models for the emerging figures I knew in the 1980s.



David Reed, *Painting #655* and *Painting #656*, 2003 – 16. Acrylic, alkyd, and oil on polyester. 35 × 58 1/2 and 35 × 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard

Two exhibitions this spring demonstrate how two veteran abstractionists have developed. David Reed's show consists of a long, horizontally mounted seven-part painting, numbered sequentially, *Painting #650 to #656* (2003 – 2016), with six panels in the main gallery and one part in the back room; one early work, *D-1* (1975), a long black line drawn using acrylic and pencil, on photographic backdrop paper; and, also in the back gallery, a group of color studies for the recent paintings. *Paintings #650 to #656*, made with acrylic, alkyd, and oil on polyester, display gestural paint strokes in unearthly pale colors, mostly on a white background. One section, *Painting #654* (2015 – 16), is reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy.

But mostly, Reed creates an oddly original, completely artificial visual reality, a product of contemporary painting materials, which has a strangely compelling beauty. By setting them alongside *D-1*, he effectively demonstrates how he has come to understand color. Reed and his many commentators (I once was one of them) have linked his pictures to details from Italian baroque painting and Alfred Hitchcock's films, and also to fabrics. In truth, I now think, all of these comparisons are reductive, and unhelpful. It is hard to cite plausible precedents for these recent paintings, which, because they are an assemblage of fragments, speak to our contemporary fascination with rejections of traditional preconceptions of visual harmony. For this reason, displaying the drawings here was a mistake; it would be better, I think, for viewers to *see* how these paintings work than to be told what the artist intended. I know of no other artist, in America or in Europe, who has pursued Reed's interest in visual fragmentation—his deconstruction of gestural figurative and abstract painting—in this radical way.

Thornton Willis's show presents frontal images of narrow, vertically oriented rectangles—*Three Soldiers* (2015) is a good example; heavy-looking, horizontally and vertically situated rectangles, as in *Step In* (2015); and, sometimes, zigzag geometric forms, like in *Lockstep* (2015). Thirty-five years ago, he was making pyramidal shapes, rising wedges of color set against a monochromatic fields. Those earlier paintings were visually aggressive; now his handsome pictures, which owe something to Hans Hofmann's late art, soothe the restless eye. Willis's recent paintings are decorative in the best sense of that word.

For a long time it's been clear that abstraction is merely one contemporary art form, not intrinsically superior to any other. As these two shows demonstrate, it's impossible to offer any plausible general rules about how abstract artists develop. And yet, acknowledging that abstraction is not the only, or the most significant, art form, says nothing about its visual interest or its ultimate viability. What's needed still, I think, is a fuller understanding of the history and present status of abstraction. In thinking about this important issue, I hope that now younger writers will take an interest in Masheck's exalted essays, which remain strange enough—and puzzling enough—to be usefully challenging.

CONTRIBUTOR

David Carrier

DAVID CARRIER is co-author with Joachim Pissarro of *Wild Art* (Phaidon, 2013). His next book is *The Contemporary Art Gallery*.