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GALLERY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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## REBECCA PURDUM and MATTHEW FISCHER

*by Corina Larkin*

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At first glance, the work in the concurrent shows of Rebecca Purdum and Matthew Fischer is diametrically opposed in vision and temperament. Purdum's paintings are vast, seemingly monochromatic color fields and Fischer's are colorful jumbles of bold strokes. It might be tempting to re-open that old debate about color field and action painting but the thoughtful juxtaposition of these two artists makes that distinction irrelevant. A better metaphor for these paintings might be yin and yang—the seemingly opposite creative impulses of these artists are in fact deeply rooted in similar concerns.

Purdum approaches the canvas gently, carefully massaging a rich palette of colors into place with gloved hand. Pigments are sometimes layered, sometimes blended to create subtle fields of color. At times the colors shift across the canvas to create a sense of space, like a landscape in "Ripton 87" (2008). Other times they are more monolithic and commanding, such as "Hourglass Yellow" (2011). A million tiny gestures and calligraphic strokes accrue slowly over time to make a bold statement. Think of it as a *micro-action painting*. In contrast, Fischer steps up to the canvas with bravado, like a tenor preparing for his big solo. He mixes his colors and makes only a few expansive strokes across the canvas. In the wittily titled "Lapis Lazulust" (2011), rich blue, ocean green, and cold brown meld into one evocative whole. For all intents and purposes, the mega-strokes become color fields.

It's the nature of yin and yang that when one quality reaches its complete natural state, it will inevitably transform into the opposite quality. In the case of these finely executed paintings, it becomes quite difficult (and unnecessary) to separate the use of color from the physical act of painting. Rather, we should observe how the artists use the medium of paint to explore how humans experience the natural world. Both share deep concerns for gesture, light, and conveying a sense of energy.

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Both artists have extremely physical approaches to gesture and are fully attuned to scale. Purdum paints with her hands, maintaining an intimate relationship with the canvas. She understands that an inch-long stroke of manganese blue in the upper right quadrant of a five-foot long canvas can enliven an entire painting and that calligraphic flecks of black become figures dancing across a field of green. Fischer uses squeegees and large paintbrushes, but he must use his entire body to attain the full breadth of a stroke. And size does matter. One stroke can run the depth or the breadth of the canvas. He can deliver a punch of color or a delicate spray of paint, depending on what is required of the situation. A tiny speck of color can have as much force as an entire brushstroke if applied correctly.

Each is interested in creating very specific atmospheric light. Bright, translucent pinks and yellows explode from behind dark forms in many of Fischer's paintings. The viewer basks in the reflected light of the canvas. He is recreating the physical experience of warm sunlight or the pulsing glow of neon. You'll want to pack your bags and head to Miami. Purdum hints at the more elusive pleasures of her northern New England location with her search for modulated light. Her process of layering pigment over pigment makes it apparent that these paintings are undoubtedly the product of prolonged observation of time and place. The effect is as sublime as instructive. We are shown the calm of the gloam, the mystery of a fog-covered field, or the quiet thrill of a dark night lit only intermittently by fleeting reflections of moonlight.

Conveying a sense of energy is also crucial to these paintings. Purdum's canvases vibrate quietly like a gently singing field. As the energy builds, it becomes quite powerful and moving. Fischer's paintings, however, are like a blast from a full force gale. Only after sustained viewing is the calm and sensitive moment in the storm apparent (the delicate splash of paint on a larger stroke, the errant drip that perfectly breaks a swath of color). Such exposure to the elements inevitably triggers emotional associations, whether it is a special memory of listening to crickets at night or the powerful force of a summer thunderstorm.

The paint connects the viewer to the natural world on multiple levels. It suggests a single blade of grass or a heaving ocean wave. It conjures up the glow at dawn or the blaze of a tropical sunset and it enlivens like a gentle breeze or a strong wind. We are given a complete sense of the universe. Nothing can be experienced completely without understanding its opposite.